

Jeanine Diller
Asa Kasher *Editors*

Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities

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Jeanine Diller • Asa Kasher
Editors

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Springer

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*To my parents, James and Jean,
for a lifetime of encouragement
and love.*

Jeanine Diller

*To the deepest, clearest and most
beloved sources of inspiration:
My late son, Yehoraz, my late
father, Shimeon, and my late
forefathers, as well as my wife,
Naomi, and my children Shirith
and Avshalom.*

Asa Kasher

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- Kraay, Klaas. “Divine Unsurpassability.” 293–300.
- Peters, Ted. “Models of God.” 273–288.
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Introduction

Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher

This volume is a collection of recent, and in most cases previously unpublished, essays about the philosophical exploration, critique and comparison of (a) the major philosophical models of God, gods and alternative ultimate realities implicit in the world's religions and philosophical schools, and of (b) the ideas of such models and doing such modeling *per se*. The book is divided into three major sections. Parts II–X are the bulk of the volume, since they present the major models. Part I prepares the reader to encounter these models by exploring foundational questions regarding the whole project of creating and using models, such as what God, ultimate reality, and models of them are, the logically possible range of such models, and whether humans, in the end, can acquire knowledge of God or ultimate reality. Parts XI–XIII explore responses to the models – including the negative theologians' stance against them based on the idea that God and ultimate reality are beyond description, as well as reflections on the enormous diversity of the models and their practical impact for personal and social issues of spirituality, gender equity, war and peace, and global warming.

We want to counter expectations here at the start that this book is global in scope. Christian perspectives on ultimate reality unduly predominate here, owing to the state of current Western philosophy of religion and our own contacts within it. Still, we hope our earnest attempt to collect essays from multiple religious and philosophical perspectives is a contribution to the ongoing process of broadening the focus of the field – a process that is taking many years and many hands. We also hope that the volume, incomplete as it is, reminds us all, whatever our perspectives, of the tremendous

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variety of approaches to the ultimate beyond our own. We intend to come closer to a global picture in an additional volume that is currently planned.

Motivations

Readers can use the three parts of the volume together as a tool for answering a profoundly difficult question: what is the philosophically and practically most satisfying way or ways to conceive the nature of ultimate reality? The volume is addressed to three kinds of readers. First, it is addressed to professionals and serious students in the fields of philosophy, religious studies, and theology; they will find here new presentations and discussions of concepts, views and arguments related to major issues in philosophy of religion and theology. Second, this volume is for members of the general, educated public who are intrigued by talk of God, gods or other ultimate realities and would like to shed new light on their own positions and practices. Last but not least, we hope it may be of use to those working to build peace in the face of global religious difference, since some of the discord is over models: some people think their devotion to God, gods or ultimate reality, as they understand it, puts them at odds with those devoted to God, gods or ultimate reality, understood differently. Perhaps a fuller display of the conceptual landscape could be used to enhance respect for models other than one's own, or engender fresh ideas for resolution. The process of editing this volume prompted reflection along these lines which is explained in an Epilogue.

This volume can help address a major problem about talk of God, gods or other ultimate realities occurring in three different types of contexts in which our readers may be engaged. The first context is a religious framework, where talk of God or gods or ultimate realities surfaces in the ordinary practices of many religions and denominations. The simplest example is that of prayer, during a service or some other ritual. A similar, not less important example is that of sacred scriptures, such as the Hebrew Bible, the Qur'an, or the Dao de jing, or again in less sacred but still religious presentations such as sermons or denominational textbooks used in religious education. The second context is public forums about what some people take to be a major element of their religious or theological worldview, as in debates over war, abortion, euthanasia or prayer in schools. Sometimes talk of God, gods, or other ultimate realities is at the center of such public discussions, as in debates over whether "in God we trust" belongs on American currency, and sometimes it surfaces in more off-hand (though revealing) ways, such as when, after diplomatic measures failed to stop the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the United Nations Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuellar said "War is now in God's hands" and President Gerald Ford replied "I wish it were; I'd feel a lot better about it" (Sanders 1998, p. 10). The third context is philosophical or popular attempts "to prove the existence of God" or "to refute the existence of God" (this context is, carefully speaking, almost always about a monotheistic God in particular, not about gods or other ultimate realities). The recent decades have seen a number of popular books of this type, written by scientists in addition to theologians or philosophers.

The fundamental problem besetting talk of God, gods and ultimate realities in all three contexts is lack of clarity. Most discussants do not even recognize that they are assuming a substantive conception of God, gods or other ultimate realities, much less do they clearly characterize it, either in the context itself or in its background. Grounds for making a certain statement or putting forward a certain argument with respect to such a notion seem not to be at one's disposal, even when one is firmly and deeply committed to the background religion or denomination, and its generally held views and common practices. As a result, when people argue for the existence of God, from a certain religious perspective, or for the non-existence of God, from a certain non-religious perspective, it is not clear whether their arguments remain valid if one shifts from their implicit conception of God to another similar, let alone quite distinct, conception of God. Moreover, in the first kind of context, it is not clear to what extent different persons who participate, say, in the same service share a conception of God, gods or ultimate reality, nor even what one's own conception is. This can be pressingly important. As recent research in the Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life project at Boston University shows, the model of God, gods or ultimate reality one assumes can impact the practice, tenor and viability of a faithful life – from how one interprets everyday experiences, to whether one continues to engage in a spiritual life at all during and after times of severe stress.

The present volume uses philosophical tools that can or even should be put to work to alleviate ambiguity in contexts of all three types. Philosophical tools are not necessarily fully-fledged theories of divinity or proposed solutions of theological problems, such as the seeming incompatibility of God's omniscience and human freedom. The philosophical tools in question are a couple of standards at work in all the essays in the present volume: lucidity and responsibility. As simple as these standards seem to be, they are more difficult to meet than one is inclined to assume. Many discussions that surface in all three contexts do not meet them. With lucidity and responsibility at work, the essays in this volume are exemplifying the kind of clarity that can make debate in all three contexts more fruitful. Their authors are aware of the implicit assumptions they make about the notions of God, gods, or ultimate realities they use, and they clearly characterize these notions, in a way that manifests the precision and context dependence of their statements and arguments. If the scientists, theologians or philosophers writing books in the third type of context, for instance, followed their example, their proofs and refutations would be rendered quite narrow and much less interesting and compelling than they seem to be in the eyes of their beholders. This result is discussed in more detail in the section on Naturalistic Models of the Ultimate.

Basic Methodology and Terminology

We had to take some preliminary methodological stances to frame the preparation for this volume, even though it is part of the burden of the volume to address such topics. Noteworthy among our decisions was (1) to use talk of 'models' and (2) to

invite contributions from across the range of philosophical and religious traditions. A few words about each, as well as about (3) the meanings of ‘God’ and ‘ultimate reality’, before we turn to the structure of the volume.

We deliberately chose the term ‘model’ for its flexibility. It denotes the broad genus of accounts of the nature of ultimate reality in the literature – from specific metaphysical proposals (such as ‘that thing than which nothing greater can be conceived’) to sustained metaphors (such as ‘God as Mother, Lover and Friend’ in Sallie McFague’s (1987) *Models of God*; see also Vincent Brümmer’s (1993) *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology*) to “schematic prototypes... that explain, and in some degree condition, the characteristic theses of the theologians who rely on [them]” (Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., (1983) *Models of Revelation*), to what Robert C. Neville calls in his paper included here “indexical signs” to an indeterminate Ultimate. ‘Model’ also connotes a conceptual distance between *what is modeled* and *the model*; as Dulles, inspired by Ian Barbour’s account of models in science, says, a model’s “purpose is not to present replicas of God or of the divine action, but to suggest ways to account for theologically relevant data....” That distance makes it intelligible to talk of the limits of human language and understanding affecting the modeling, and makes room for the reality modeled to go beyond both. This is crucial for permitting an attitude of epistemic humility about modeling, for understanding disagreement among models, and for inviting negative theologians and others questioning such modeling altogether to the discussion.

The reason for inviting contributions from across the wide range of major philosophical and religious traditions is straightforward. If one is interested in understanding ultimate reality, it makes sense to begin by asking: what *are* the major ways in which philosophers, theologians and religious scholars have interpreted and are interpreting the nature of such a being? We cast our net wide in order to produce a comprehensive answer to this question, reflecting how the most prominent thinkers across time and discipline have understood ultimate reality. We wanted to include in the present volume the much-discussed models, and hoped for surprising new additions to this list. We worked under the assumption that the fuller the range of models under consideration, the more informed our readers’ final analysis of philosophically and practically satisfying ways of conceiving ultimate reality would be.

Finally, a word about the terms ‘God’, ‘gods’, and ‘ultimate reality’, which are, of course, discussed in greater depth by others in the volume, especially in the Conceptual Foundations section. In its first incarnation (more on the volume’s history below), this project was framed in terms of “models of God” full stop, and aptly so, since contributions to it then were, with one exception, monotheistic instances of classical theism, open theism, process theology and panentheism. But this framing left out three important kinds of extant views on ultimate reality: (1) those that have *multiple* objects of ultimate devotion, as in some forms of Hinduism, Daoism, and African religions, to name a few; (2) those that have *non-theistic objects of ultimate devotion*, visible in some forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and more, and (3) those with *non-theistic* pictures of what is fundamentally real, whether these constitute objects of devotion or not, visible in non-religiously affiliated philosophical and scientific sources. To invite all these parties to the

project, we added “alternative ultimate realities” to our title. We initially took ultimate reality to be a genus of which God is one famous species, the Yoruba orishas another, Peirce’s “Reasonableness working itself out through cosmic history” a third, etc. This genus-species relation between the terms ‘Ultimate Reality’ and e.g. ‘God’ or ‘gods’ is one of their uses, in this volume and elsewhere (see e.g. Elliott N. Dorff’s essay in the Classical Theism section). But we have since encountered other uses that take ‘Ultimate Reality’ and e.g. ‘God’ to refer, not to one thing described at different levels of abstraction, but to two ontologically distinct things. To name just one instance, Neville in his paper here forcefully distinguishes between Ultimate Reality as the indeterminate “ontological act of creation” and a determinate, personal God as one of several models that point to Ultimate Reality. Be aware of the ambiguity of these key terms as you read.

Structure

The three sections of the volume referenced above – Part I on conceptual foundations, Parts II–X on the models, and Parts XI–XIII on responses to the models – are each divided into sections on a given theme related to that part, with each section in turn containing several papers on the theme. Each section begins with an introduction to the theme and the papers about it, written by an expert in the field. There are, of course, differences in emphasis between the various introductions – some focus more on the theme itself, others more on the papers, some offer more explication, others more critical analysis or original contribution, etc. – but all provide a tremendously helpful resource for readers encountering the theme and the papers about it, especially for the first time. Each section also ends with a suggested reading list designed to supplement the bibliographies appended to the articles for readers interested in exploring the conversation further. The lists are of course limited; many additional worthy books and papers could have been mentioned.

Parts II–X, the major section of the volume on the models, needs more introduction than the other sections because we made several important choices in structuring it. First and most important, unlike most other volumes on the nature of God and other ultimate realities, we chose to categorize the particular notions of God, gods or ultimate reality by their *conceptual structure*, versus by *their source or genesis* in a particular religious or philosophical tradition. That is, instead of sorting the views into the Hindu models, the Jewish models, etc., we sorted them into philosophical models – the multiplicity models, the monistic models, the monotheistic models (which go by many names, more in a moment), and the naturalistic models. We were inspired to categorize the views in this way by Charles Hartshorne and William Reese who did the same in their 1953 classic, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Hartshorne and Reese 1953). Our aim, and we suspect theirs, was to capture part of the essence of the views, and thus to make the disagreement *between* the parts of the volume embody real disagreement about the nature of ultimate reality, and the agreement *within* the parts embody real agreement about the nature of ultimate reality, at least

on key features. This way of sorting the views would also enable the sighting of conceptual family resemblances of ultimate realities across the traditions, if there were any to be seen. The news from both collections, perhaps obvious to most of us in the field but not trumpeted loudly enough by us or Hartshorne and Reese or their alert readers since 1953, is that there are indeed such family resemblances across the traditions to be seen. This result is explored more fully in the Epilogue.

The specific conceptual models we chose to use in Parts II–X are, for the most part, well-known categories of ultimate reality. One can arrive at them by asking questions that distinguish views about ultimate reality from each other. For instance, one might ask about the number of a given view: how many gods does it conceive ultimate reality to be? The essays collected in the Divine Multiplicity section answer many; the atheistic and non-theistic approaches in the Naturalistic Models section answer none; the remaining seven sections answer one, in some way or other. To distinguish the views that answer one from each other, one might ask again of a view: Does it conceive of ultimate reality as one with the world, or separate from it in some way? The essays in the Ultimate Unity section answer one with the world (expressed specifically by a biequivalence that ultimate reality is the world, and the world is ultimate reality); the rest say separate from the world, and owing to this separation, begin to call the ultimate reality at issue ‘God’, for the most part (given the qualification above regarding the terms). Those that answer “separate in some way” constitute the array of monotheistic notions – classical theism, neo-classical theism, open theism, process theology, panentheism, and ground, start and end of being theologies. These monotheisms are distinguished from each other by largely unconnected issues which the introductions to each section explain well. One of the key distinctions is ontological dependence, of the world on God or vice versa. Classical theists and others, for instance, conceive of God as totally separate from the world, so deny both directions of the monist’s biequivalence (God is not the world and the world is not God, as entailed by creation *ex nihilo*). Panentheists, in contrast, retain just one direction of the biequivalence by suggesting that, though the world is God, God is more than the world, while Bishop’s end of being theology, for example, retains just the other direction by saying that, though God is the world, the world is more than God, since the world existed first and then God as Love came to exist within it.

We ordered Parts II–X with the monotheisms first, to let the readers begin with views that are probably most familiar to them, followed by the monisms, which are other ways of thinking of one ultimate, and then the ultimate multiplicities, which suggest that the kind of ultimacy in the monotheisms and monisms is instantiated not once but a number of times. Last are the naturalistic models – those that insist the ultimate is found right here in the natural world, if only we can see right – placed last because naturalism is a cross-cutting category: a naturalistic model can in principle be anything else just covered (monotheistic, monistic, multiply divine) as well as atheistic or non-theistic.

As Philip Clayton implies in his introduction to the Panentheism section, all these philosophical models are, carefully speaking, philosophical model *types*, with the different substantive views relayed in each essay as *instances* or *tokens*

of the type, e.g., Anselm's theology is a token of the classical theism type, Hartshorne's, a token of the process theology type, etc. Moreover, and crucially, the differences between the model types might be less stark than they first appear. For instance, as George Mavrodes says regarding the monotheistic vs. multiplicity types in his introduction to the Divine Multiplicity section: "there are monotheisms that seem to include an element of multiplicity – e.g., Christianity with its puzzling idea of the divine trinity – and views of divine multiplicity – such as the African religions included in this volume – that seem to posit some sort of unity composed of a large number of individual divine entities." The types thus function as a good way in to what might be an otherwise overwhelming array of conceptions of ultimate reality, but it is the tokens which readers should focus on in the end, with the aim of grasping the views of ultimate reality they convey.

As intimated at the start of this introduction, given the limits of space in the volume and the current state of philosophy of religion in the West, there are numerous model tokens and types missing here. In terms of tokens, the volume lacks essays written about the perspective of several important thinkers, including Berkeley, Confucius, Emerson, Leibniz, Laozi and Plato. It also does not discuss indigenous religious traditions or Sikhism at all, and covers several traditions less robustly than we would have liked, including Asian, African and Chinese religions, and other traditions such as Jewish Kabboleh. There are also several different model types we might have used instead of those we chose, e.g., distinction between personal vs. impersonal models. We favored more fine-grained types over such larger ones.

We also hit a persistent problem regarding categorization, that our model types did not capture well the essence of some of the views from Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian sources. We ended by filing these views into model types which were, although technically apt, not very revealing – such as divine multiplicity and naturalistic models. Both these model types are conceptually enormous; notice we have seven model types to relay the varieties of the answer "one" to the "how many gods" question, compared to one each (divine multiplicity and atheistic/non-theistic species of naturalistic types) for the answers "many" and "none," respectively. Surely we are missing extant variations on these themes. Erecting new categories that relay more of the subtleties, and more generally capture the heart of such views, should be a high priority for future work in this area. Though the task is difficult, Jordan Paper, who wrote a piece contained here on the Jewish-Daoist-Confucian theology of the Kaifeng Jews, suggested in recent correspondence one example of such a category, which we relay here to get the project started: "If I were to characterize Chinese ultimacy in general, I would consider it a sub-group of Familism: a set of religious practices which focuses on family (past, present and future) as the most important numinous and that which is most meaningful to understanding existence." In his paper here, Neville also mentioned what can be taken as two more possibilities: Consciousness, which has "manifestations in various Hindu, Jain and Buddhist schools," and Emergence, "as in the flow of the Dao," which he indicates is visible in forms of both Daoism and Confucianism.

Contributions

For all its oversights, this volume is unique in a few ways. To our knowledge, it is the first collection since Hartshorne and Reese's 1953 classic to explore – from a philosophical perspective, and in one volume – the philosophical models of God and alternative ultimate realities, thus bringing the reader up to date on newer models, recent retrievals of lost models, and current debates on modeling *per se*. It is also the only collection on this theme that we know of from multiple philosophers specializing in the various models (Hartshorne and Reese's volume contained analysis only by them and favored their model type, panentheism), thus offering the reader many voices on each topic, as well as an insider's appreciation of each model type. Finally, Parts II–X cover model types extant in over ten major philosophical traditions, as well as eight living religions that together represent over 90% of current religious commitment worldwide, thus assembling for the reader a broad-ranging picture of currently live models of ultimate reality.

This volume has been years in the making. It began with a mini-conference (organized by the first editor) on Models of God in 2007 at the annual meeting of the Pacific Division of American Philosophical Association (APA), which featured proponents of major models of God and gods – classical and neo-classical theists, open theists, process theists, panentheists, communotheists and others. When the bulk of the proceedings of the mini-conference, published in a double issue of *Philosophia* (edited by the second editor) in December 2007, was well-received, we decided to begin the work of creating this volume, and purposefully set out to seek papers about models implicit in a wider variety of the world's religious and philosophical traditions to add to those we had already collected. Accordingly, we sent out a call for such papers through the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the APA, juried many fine submissions, invited a host of contributions from renowned scholars of philosophy, religion and theology, and held two more events, a paper session at the AAR's 2010 Mid-Atlantic Meeting, and a day-long conference at the AAR's 2010 Annual Meeting venue (both organized by the first editor), to share and begin to digest the treasure trove of new work we had collected. The volume you hold in your hand is the fruit of all these labors combined, and is, as far as we know, one of the few works that has emerged from discussions at both the APA and the AAR.

We wish to extend our wholehearted thanks to the many people who over the years have contributed to producing this volume. We are grateful first and foremost to the volume's contributors and introducers, whose names appear throughout it, and without whom it would not exist. We count ourselves lucky, in each of your cases, that you opted to publish with us. Thank you for the benefit of your knowledge and insight, the hard work of conveying it in writing, and for advising the project in many other ways. We also want to recognize those who began this work at the 2007 mini-conference, much of whose proceedings are published here, especially Philip Clayton who helped start and shape the mini-conference, John Bishop and Wesley Wildman for serving as keynote speakers, the APA's Pacific Division and the Metanexus Institute for their generous financial and other forms of support, and all the members of the mini-conference's

organizing committee, including John Cobb, Edwin Curley, Andrew Dell'Olio, C. Stephen Layman, Samuel Ruhmkorff, and Charles Taliaferro. We are grateful to the APA and the AAR generally, as well as to their relevant section heads, for distributing our call for papers for this volume and providing leads to contributors, and to the AAR for its support of our 2010 events. Our thanks also go to those who juried several submissions each from the call and in many cases gave copious comments to move the writers' work forward; we continue to keep your names anonymous, but we could not have made these selections without you and are truly indebted to you. Regarding our 2010 events at the AAR: our deep thanks to Jerry Martin, for encouraging us to hold the session at the Mid-Atlantic Meeting, to John Davenport for presenting there on short notice, and to all the presenters and attendees at our conference at the Annual Meeting venue, for incredibly helpful exchanges and the good energy in the room, with special gratitude to Robert C. Neville, Francis X. Clooney, S.J., and Wesley Wildman for serving as keynote speakers, to Michelle Coleman Marhofer for making the event run smoothly, and to an anonymous donor for funding and believing in it.

Dr. Diller personally wishes to thank her Models of Ultimate Reality class in the fall of 2009 at the University of Toledo, who confirmed the need for this volume and clarified what it should look like; her research assistants, Zachary Dehm and Adam Young, for collaborating with contributors, for their assistance on many other details of this work, and for their abidingly positive spirits that propelled the work forward; Alexandra Scarborough and Bryce Roberts, for typing and for several excellent conversations about the substance of the pieces here; and all those who offered advice and general support as this project took shape and blossomed, especially Samuel Ruhmkorff, Jerry Martin, James Waddell, John Sarnecki, Lawrence, James and Grant Diller Murphy, and James and Jean Diller. She also wishes to extend her heartfelt thanks to Dr. Kasher for his unfailing enthusiasm for this topic, for sharing his extensive knowledge of current work in the field and of editing, and for bringing this work to publication both the first and now a second time. Dr. Kasher is extremely grateful to Dr. Diller for her original ideas, deep commitment, hard work and fascinating views with respect to the present volume and for the fortunate privilege of sharing with her the project of producing the present volume.

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Part I

Conceptual Foundations

Introduction to Conceptual Foundations

James E. Taylor

As the title of this book makes clear, the essays contained in it are unified by their focus on models of God and alternative ultimate realities. But what is ultimate reality, what does ‘God’ mean, and what would count as a *model* of ultimate reality or God? These are just the sorts of questions that ought to be addressed in the first section of a volume like this. They are questions the answers to which are presupposed by the majority of articles in the ensuing sections. They are foundational questions about the core concepts employed in the anthology as a whole. The first two essays in this section focus on these sorts of questions. These two discussions also concentrate on other basic questions that belong at the beginning of this sort of inquiry: What purposes are models of God or ultimate reality intended to serve? Is it possible for us to achieve the goals we have for them? If so, how, and if not, why not? If these models cannot do everything we might want them to do, can they have some more limited uses for us nonetheless? And whether they can be maximally or only minimally beneficial relative to our designs for them, how are we to use them and how can we tell whether our employment of them has been successful?

Once we have at least provisional answers to very general and abstract conceptual questions such as these about models of God and other ultimate realities, we can turn to inquiries about the possible number of distinct models and the different ways of organizing them in relationship to each other. Then with various taxonomies of models in hand, we can begin to compare and contrast the models in ways that can facilitate our evaluation of them. The third and fourth pieces in this section are primarily concerned with these sorts of issues. One important evaluative goal is to determine which model of God is most likely to be *true*. To the extent that one is justified in believing both that it is possible to model God or ultimate reality and that one’s God-model classification scheme is *exhaustive*, one can have a reason to be confident that at least one of the categorized models corresponds to (or at least partially

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represents or points reliably to) the way things really are ultimately. To the extent that one has good grounds for thinking that the entries in one's theological conceptual taxonomy are *mutually exclusive*, one can reasonably conclude that only one of the models in one's scheme is true. Consequently, if one is interested in coming to know which model of God or ultimate reality provides the most faithful portrayal of the way things ultimately are, then one would benefit from being able to construct a conceptual map of models that are both jointly exhaustive and individually mutually exclusive.

But it is one thing to populate a conceptual space with a comprehensive range of alternative logical possibilities. It is another thing altogether to be in a position to know (or at least be justified in believing), which one of these possibilities is also actually the case. Consequently, there is a third kind of preliminary philosophical question that needs to be raised at this early stage of inquiry: Is it even possible for us to acquire knowledge of ultimate reality? Could a human being ever be in a position to know (or be justified in believing) that a particular model of ultimate reality is the correct one? The fifth essay in this section pursues the answer to that epistemological question. If we have good reason for thinking that this answer is “yes,” then we have one good reason to continue discussing models of God and other ultimate realities. But even if we come to believe that no human will ever know which model comes closest to representing what is ultimately real, it could still make sense for us to persist in thinking and talking about models of God and other ultimate realities. There is some satisfaction in knowing what the possibilities are even if our desire to know what is actually the case is frustrated.

In light of these general comments about this section of the anthology and the essays in it, let us now look more carefully at each of these five essays. Robert Cummings Neville's essay, “Modeling Ultimate Reality: God, Consciousness, and Emergence,” provides answers to three questions: (1) What is ultimate reality? (2) Can we model ultimate reality? And (3) What purposes can be served by the models we construct that purport to be models of ultimate reality? Neville's answer to the first question is that ultimate reality is “an ontological act of creation the terminus of which is everything determinate.” He argues that this ontological act cannot itself be determinate, since if it were determinate, there would need to be something even more ultimate that would make it determinate, but then it would not be ultimate reality after all. But if ultimate reality is not determinate, then it cannot be modeled, since it is possible to model something only if it is determinate. That is the reply Neville gives to the second question he addresses. If ultimate reality cannot be modeled, does it follow that models of the sort discussed in this volume are useless? No. Neville thinks that alleged models of ultimate reality are actually models of elements within the world such as persons, states of consciousness, and emergence. Neville holds that models of non-ultimate realities such as these can nonetheless be signs of or pointers to ultimate reality. Such “signs of ultimacy” are “usefully intimate” in that they employ aspects of familiar experience as a means of referring to what is transcendent. Neville ends his essay by discussing ways we can “tell whether such models indexically refer to ultimate reality in true ways.”

In “Symmetry and Asymmetry: Problems and Prospects for Modeling,” Lawrence A. Whitney discusses the implications of Neville’s view that ultimate reality is completely indeterminate. Whitney agrees with Neville that it is impossible to model an indeterminate reality. He explains this impossibility in terms of the concepts of symmetry and asymmetry. He states that the purpose of a model is to facilitate our understanding of what is modeled by providing an explanation of it in familiar terms. But explanations can play this role only if they involve a comparison of equivalent or similar features. That is, a model can contribute to an explanation of what it purports to model only if the model and its object have something in common, and they have something in common only if they are symmetrical in some respect. But if ultimate reality is completely indeterminate, then ultimate reality and the world of determinate things are not symmetrical in any respect, because a completely indeterminate reality has nothing in common with the world of determinate things. As Whitney puts it, “there is nothing of ultimate reality carried over into the world.” It is because of the asymmetry between ultimate reality and the world that ultimate reality cannot be modeled. Whitney concludes, however, that what purport to be models of God or ultimate reality can nonetheless be models of *ultimacy*. Whitney says that ultimacy is the relation between ultimate reality and the world. It is “not ultimate reality in itself...but ultimate reality as it is ultimate for the world.” It is “the boundary between indeterminate ultimate reality and the determinate world.” Whitney ends his essay by pointing out the importance of keeping the distinction between modeling ultimate reality and modeling ultimacy in mind when comparing and evaluating models of the sort discussed in this volume.

Ted Peters presupposes in his essay, “Models of God,” that it *is* possible to construct a satisfactory model of God. He discusses the methodological commitments he adopts for this purpose, the biblical and theological resources he employs, and nine specific models of God. He recommends one of these, which he calls “eschatological panentheism,” as “the most satisfying model...for Christian constructive theology.” Peters’ methodology involves (1) constructing a model of God on the basis of symbolic language about God and (2) evaluating models of God in terms of their “explanatory adequacy.” He adopts a critical realist approach to models of God; an adequate model will refer to objective reality and yet fail to provide a description of God that is either literally true or complete. Symbolic language about God can be drawn from the Bible. Peters argues that the language of the Christian scriptures provides good grounds for modeling God as – at least – one self-existent, transcendent, and immanent being. These and other attributes of God Peters adds (such as God’s being personal) enable him to evaluate some alternative models as not being satisfactory for the Christian theologian. After concluding that atheism, agnosticism, deism, pantheism, polytheism, henotheism, and pantheism are unacceptable from a Christian standpoint, Peters argues that monotheism provides a more satisfactory model of the nature of God and God’s relation to the world than these other models do. He thinks, however, that though monotheism can provide an adequate conceptualization of divine transcendence, monotheists find it more challenging to accommodate divine immanence, which is captured more easily by a

panentheist model. It is for that reason that Peters ends his discussion with “an experimental model of God that combines some of the best features of theism with some of the best features of panentheism.” He calls this experimental model “eschatological panentheism” because, though it affirms a monotheistic God who created the universe *ex nihilo*, it also affirms that God’s redemptive plan is to make creation a permanent part of the divine life in the future: “We may be theists today, but panentheists tomorrow.”

Donald Wayne Viney is also interested in developing a taxonomy of models of God. In “Relativizing the Classical Tradition: Hartshorne’s History of God,” he builds on the work of Charles Hartshorne in an attempt to construct the most comprehensive and complete system of alternative varieties of theism possible (in the broadest possible sense of the word ‘theism’). Viney follows Hartshorne in drawing on both historical and purely conceptual resources for this purpose. He also agrees with Hartshorne that the question “Does God exist?” can be answered only by first answering the question, “What do you mean by ‘God’?” So Viney considers the conceptual task he and Hartshorne have engaged in to be essential to a resolution of the debate between theists and atheists. Viney reminds us that, from an historical point of view, the classical monotheistic model of God had set the terms for this debate until Hartshorne and others relativized the classical tradition to a broader set of theistic alternatives. Hartshorne and a colleague of his generated these alternatives initially by means of five questions concerning whether God is eternal or not, temporal or not, conscious or not, knowledgeable about the world or not, and inclusive of the world or not. Viney explains how the sum total of possible combinations of answers to these five questions can be shown to constitute 32 distinct doctrinal positions, some of which Hartshorne and his colleague did not consider. Viney illustrates how this classification scheme can be employed not only to categorize significant historical models of God but also to identify neglected or marginalized conceptions. Viney then discusses how Hartshorne’s later more conceptual thinking about models of God was an attempt to think of all the logically possible varieties of theism. Viney indicates that in this later work, Hartshorne distinguishes between respects in which God is absolutely perfect and respects in which God is relatively perfect. Viney outlines how Hartshorne supplements this distinction with a number of others in such a way as eventually to make possible a matrix of 256 formal alternative models of God. Viney closes his essay by discussing both limitations and advantages of such an ordered range of options for theological dialogue.

In “Can We Acquire Knowledge of Ultimate Reality?,” Michael V. Antony argues that, for all we know, humans are capable of acquiring significant and even comprehensive knowledge of the nature of ultimate reality – whether or not ultimate reality is divine. He also contends that it is rational to hope that humans will eventually achieve this epistemological goal. Antony’s case for these claims begins with his adoption of Peter Van Inwagen’s characterization of ultimate reality as “the most general features of the reality behind appearances.” He then clarifies that the question he poses in the title of his essay concerns the possibility of shared, public knowledge (rather than private, individual knowledge). Antony subsequently proceeds to provide reasons for thinking that, given the relevant sense of ‘can’ (which concerns the

practical psychological possibility of human knowledge given the “laws of nature, the actual history of our universe, and conditions more or less conducive to knowledge acquisition”), we are ignorant about whether humans can ever come to have knowledge of ultimate reality. He supports this claim by arguing that we currently have no idea what the psychological distance is along the psychological route between our current state of knowledge and a full knowledge of ultimate reality. In speculating about this route and the psychological transitions we would need to make along it in order to acquire such knowledge, Antony considers that it is likely that unmodified human brains would not have the capacity to reach that epistemological goal. Consequently, he introduces the possibility of eventual enhancements to the human brain that would make the achievement of this desired result more likely. But Antony argues that given our current intellectual abilities, we do not and even cannot know either what the psychological distance is to our need for these improvements or what the psychological distance is from these alterations to the understanding of ultimate reality toward which we are striving. Having argued that we are currently epistemologically deficient in this way, Antony goes on to reason that this ignorance allows for the epistemic possibility that humans will eventually acquire comprehensive knowledge of ultimate reality. And if the realization of this goal is epistemically possible, it is rational to hope that we will attain it at some point. Antony ends his essay by defending his claim against what he takes to be a common skeptical response involving an inability to imagine how humans could ever understand ultimate reality (especially if it is divine).

These five essays jointly provide an introduction to some of the key foundational philosophical issues that arise in conversations about models of God and alternative conceptions of ultimate reality; they deal with conceptual, methodological, metaphysical, and epistemological questions. These discussions also illustrate the importance, scope, and controversial nature of these questions and their possible answers. In their varied admirable attempts to provide some of these answers, the five authors whose essays appear in this section show themselves to be good models of careful and creative attempts to think about God and other ultimate realities.

Modeling Ultimate Reality: God, Consciousness, and Emergence

Robert Cummings Neville

Philosophers of religion and religious thinkers in every tradition refer to what they take to be ultimate by means of models. These models range from careful metaphysical constructs to wild symbols and the manners of articulation and justification of the models exhibit astonishing variation. Sometimes the models are referred literally, or nearly literally, and sometimes even the best models are affirmed to be false because the ultimate cannot be modeled. This essay and at least one other in this collection, Whitney's, argue that ultimacy cannot be modeled and that this is the more profound truth than is to be found in any apophatically-denied model. The overall question of models of ultimate reality is highly illuminating, however, because it provides a context for deep comparative, critical, and imaginative thinking. So this essay should be read in the context of all the other essays in this volume, a contribution to the larger exploration.

This introduction states in abstract terms the hypothesis to be developed here. The explication of these terms follows in the body of the essay. The hypothesis is that the primary ultimate reality is an ontological act of creation, the terminus of which is everything determinate, constituting and unfolding in space/time. This ontological creative act cannot be "modeled" in any sense of *isomorphism* because anything with a form or *morphe* is in the endpoint or terminus of the act, not the act of creation itself. Anything that can be modeled cannot be the ultimate reality of the ontological creative act. Nevertheless, religious engagement of this ultimate reality, which is ancient and multifarious, requires "signs," if not exactly models. At least some of these signs need to be intimate to human life so as to provide orientation to ultimacy.

Among the signs that have been used in the history of religion for this ultimate reality are models of persons, as in some personifying monotheisms, models of pure consciousness, as in some Hinduisms and Buddhist schools, and models of process

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and emergence, as in some Daoist and Confucian schools. These models are not stable, however, being pushed at once in transcendent directions toward the unmodelable ontological act and in intimate directions toward human experience. Reaching for experiential intimacy, for instance, are models of anthropomorphic Gods, consciousness of the sort experienced in meditation, or emergence and flow in nature. The philosophical and religious moral of this is that ultimate reality can well be engaged with these models but that the object engaged, the ontological creative act, never should be confused with what is modeled.

Symbolic engagement with the models needs always to be understood as indexical, not iconic in the sense of construing the model to model the object. Rather, the model models an analogue in human experience that is turned into a sign referring indexically to ultimate reality, distinctions that will be explained in the section “[Semiotics of Symbolic Engagement](#)” here.

The hypothesis also says that there are four cosmological ultimates that derive from the transcendental traits of anything determinate—all created things are determinate to some extent. These are form, components formed, location in an existential field, and achieved value. Relative to human life, these constitute four ultimate conditions: being under obligation, needing wholeness, engaging others with due care, and finding ultimate meaning. These will be explained in more detail in the section “[The Ontological Creative Act](#)”.

So there are three parts of the argument for this hypothesis: (1) a brief analysis of some intimate models of ultimate reality that are or can be legitimate signs of ultimate reality but that model something other than ultimate reality, (2) a defense of the philosophical hypothesis that ultimate reality is the ontological creative act that creates anything determinate, and (3) an explanation of the process of symbolic engagement and its consequences for thinking about ultimate reality. Readers who doubt that the ultimate is an ontological creative act and hence find the analysis of “broken” models too labored and tortuous to get through might read the section “[The Ontological Creative Act](#)” first.

Personhood, Consciousness, and Emergence

As will be argued in detail in the next section, ultimate reality is an ontological act of creation that cannot be modeled, because only determinate things can be modeled. The determinate world and its parts can be modeled, but not the world’s status as the terminus of the ontological creative act. The determinate world is the terminus of the creative act, and thus part of the act, not a product that might be separated from the act.

Nevertheless, models for ultimate reality have been taken from elements within the world and carefully cultivated within reflective religious traditions to serve as signs for engaging the finite/infinite ultimate realities, ontological and cosmological. In most cases, these models have been subjected to qualifications that, on the one hand, indicate the highly transcendent, abstract, and unmodelable aspects of the

ultimate and, on the other hand, function as intimate signs to which human life can be related in ultimate matters.¹ The three models for ultimate reality to be discussed here are those of the person, of pure consciousness, and of emergence. Persons, consciousness, and emergence are all determinate things within the world, and can be developed into theological models. They also can be used as signs of ontological ultimate reality. Historically they obviously have been used as such signs, and the section “[Semiotics of Symbolic Engagement](#)” will explain a bit of how this has worked.

Many kinds of theism build models of human personhood to use as signs of ontological ultimate reality. Gods are not ordinary persons, of course, and perhaps the history of the development of ideas of personified gods should start with the common belief in many early cultures that there are supernatural agents as part of the world, deified ancestors, trees with intentionality, spirits of weather or war. Most models of personhood for ultimate reality have a range of levels of personification. For instance, Vishnu and Shiva are conceived to have very human avatars, such as Krishna who was Arjuna’s charioteer in the Bhagavad Gita and like any other man except for his divine knowledge. Vishnu and Shiva themselves are thought to be able to manifest themselves to human sensibilities, as Vishnu does in the Bhagavad Gita, but also have forms that transcend ordinary or even miraculous human knowing. In the Abrahamic monotheisms God is conceived to be something like a person with a proper name, Yahweh or Allah, with intentions, who both creates the world and intervenes within it as an actor in human narratives. Moses speaks with God and sees his backside, and Isaiah sees the hem of his robe in the throne-room; Allah speaks or thinks in Arabic. Sometimes the anthropomorphisms are plainly intended to be metaphors, as when the 23rd Psalm likens God to a shepherd (and people to sheep). Other times the signs are taken to refer without much qualification to ultimate reality. And yet in these theistic traditions the personifications are linked within certain systems of thought to understandings of the transcendent indeterminacy of the ultimate, as Vishnu and Shiva are reflectively understood really to be Brahman who is beyond qualities. The author of Colossians says (in Chap. 1) that Jesus is the first image of the invisible, that is, beyond determination, God. Christianity, Islam, and Cabballistic Judaism have been much influenced by the Neo-Platonic idea of the One that is beyond any determinate differentiation. How are these highly transcendent symbols of God as beyond determination linked to the personifying symbols?

Thomas Aquinas had perhaps the most explicit answer. God is the pure Act of To Be, he thought, and as such is simple, without determination, unable to think intentionally about anything outside the pure fullness of Actuality, knowing things in the world only by knowing their causes within the divine actuality, not knowing anything in a way that is different from simply being that thing in infinite fullness,

¹ The problem of the tension in religious symbolism between needs for transcendence and needs for intimacy is very complicated and will not be addressed in this paper. The point can be taken informally here.

not being a thing in a genus (such as a god, or person), or even a genus itself. Yet Thomas said that this pure Act of To Be also is the personal God of the Bible. He was able to say this because he claimed that finite personhood in ordinary people is a good, positive thing and as such is a finite derivative from the infinite actuality of God. So, God is an infinite person as people are finite persons and personhood can be attributed to God by analogy. There are difficulties with his theory of analogy, because it is problematic to compare the finite and infinite.² But he clearly recognized the problem of conceiving of God on a scale from very anthropomorphic personifications to philosophically acceptable transcendent ones. The Neo-Platonic theory of levels of reality addressed a similar concern.

The advantage of the symbols at the personifying end of the spectrum is that people can imagine themselves relating to ultimate reality as a person, praying to it, hoping to be known and loved, conceiving it to be in a narrative in which they also play roles, finding an identity as a subject to a ruler, and loving God like loving a person. Another advantage is that the caprice of the world, the fact its main powers are not scaled to human affairs, and alleged divine promises are not kept, can be imagined in terms of a capricious personal God.³ Yet another advantage is that the personified signs for ultimacy can articulate religious connections with the four cosmological ultimate realities. Obligations to shape one's life with the right *form* can be understood as divine personal commands. The brokenness of life, manifested in mal-adjustments to life's *components*, can be understood in terms of divine powers of making whole. Engagements with others in the *existential field* can be understood in terms of divine intentions to love, or fight, or preserve. *Achieved value-identity* can be understood as standing under the judgment of a personal God.

Different religious traditions parse these symbols differently, and often with contradictions within a single named religion. But building a model of ultimate reality based on human personhood allows for many ways of intimate connection with ultimacy. At the same time, the reflective thinkers of many of the traditions have known that the personal model does not work iconically. God is not really a person with intentions and agency within the world, but thinking of God that way does pick up on something important about ultimate reality that is metaphysically beyond personification.

A deep motif in South Asian religious thought is that “true reality” is something like consciousness without objects. This motif has had many manifestations in various Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist schools. Roughly put, where there is diversity in experience, especially change, there must be a deeper substratum of experience. The Samkhya tradition distinguishes the self, which is pure consciousness, from nature which constitutes the objects of consciousness. Most people confuse their true selves with the self in which consciousness has passing objects, and need to learn to abstract from those objects to consciousness itself. This tradition was closely

² See the detailed argument in Neville (1968), chapter 1.

³ See the elaborate discussion in Goldstein (2002), chapter 1, of the devices used by the authors of the Hebrew Bible to explain how God is both predicted and unpredictable, especially in times of apparent abandonment of His people by the One who promises protection.

allied with the yoga tradition which has been developed in many schools of Hinduism and also Buddhism, but the emphasis on clarifying consciousness of its objects was taken by a variety of traditions to constitute a kind of metaphysical move to deeper reality. Advaita Vedanta, for instance, rejects the reality of diverse nature entirely and identifies consciousness as the true self, which in turn is identical with Brahman which is imagined as something like consciousness.

The intimacy in the model of consciousness is that everyone can experience it, and can practice meditative techniques such as those in Buddhisms and Hinduisms to purify consciousness. Some Buddhist schools, usually associated with Yogacara Buddhisms, say that reality is “consciousness only.” Others, associated with Madhyamika Buddhisms, say that even a substratum of consciousness is too ontologically oriented, and the only real things are the risings and ceasings of conscious contents or “dharmas.” For most Buddhist schools, “Buddha-mind” is a state of perfected consciousness that does not make mistakes about what is real and what is not, with the result that a person who attains or uncovers Buddha-mind is never attached to anything in a way that causes suffering. For most Buddhist schools also, meditative techniques can bring people into some kind of experience of this Buddha-mind, if not abiding in it fully. In a vague sense, differently specified by different South Asian and some East Asian traditions (such as Chan or Zen Buddhism), consciousness is something that is intimately accessible and yet can be interpreted in highly transcendent, indeterminate ways as the reality that lies behind and is the source of the suchness of the world.

To continue with this highly abstract characterization of models derived from finite determinate reality to be used as signs of the ontological creative act, a deep motif in East Asian thought is the model of emergence, as in the flow of the Dao. Themes of novelty and spontaneity, as well as continuity and inertia, have been developed around emergence. Both Confucianism and Daoism, in different ways, teach living according to the Dao so as to conform to the inertial situations of the past and to act to accomplish things that emerge with novelty. This can be understood in intimate ways. But both also say, as the Daodejing does, that the Dao that can be named, that is, the emergent flow, is not the true Dao, which rather is the source or mother of the flow. In some special sense, the flow emerges from something deeper that cannot be named. For the Confucians the emergent flow is to be understood as the harmonizing of the unruly forces of various processes by the patterns of harmony that come from Heaven or Principle. But underneath that is a deeper emergence that the great Neo-Confucian philosopher, Zhou Dunyi, describes as follows:

The Ultimate of Non-being and also the Great Ultimate! The Great Ultimate through movement generates yang. When its activity reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil. Through tranquility the Great Ultimate generates yin. When tranquility reaches its limit, activity begins again. So movement and tranquility alternate and become the root of each other, giving rise to the distinction of yin and yang, and the two modes are thus established. By the transformation of yang and its union with yin, the Five Agents of Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, and Earth arise. When these five material forces are distributed in harmonious order, the four seasons run their course.⁴

⁴ Zhou (1963), p. 463.

So there is a kind of double emergence, the emergence of temporal flow involving the temporal emergence through yin and yang, from something more basic than flow, beginning with the Ultimate of Non-Being, which has no qualities. Thus in any temporal emerging there is also a non-temporal or eternal emerging of flow from nothing. The relation between the Ultimate of Non-Being and the Great Ultimate is a symbolic way of speaking of the ontological creative act whereby something determinate comes to be.

Personification, consciousness, and emergence are not the only models drawn from modeling finite determinations and used as signs by religious traditions, and they themselves are only broad motifs that have been elaborated in many, often contradictory ways. But they illustrate how reflective religious traditions have responded to the task of developing signs of ultimacy that are usefully intimate on the one hand by virtue of modeling something known in the world and that can be pushed or broken into the transcendent kind of reference appropriate for engaging the ultimate reality of the ontological act of creation which, apart from the creation, is not determinate and that make the creation gratuitous, arbitrary, undeserving, and surprising. One push in the development of signs for ultimacy is that toward intimacy, for which intimately known and experienced things can be symbolically transformed into models for referring to ontological ultimate reality. A contrary push also is in contention, namely, toward signs that indicate the reality of the ontological creative act that transcends any model.

The Ontological Creative Act

To make the point about the push for transcendence in the models of ultimate reality, a metaphysical argument is necessary. This argument stands on its own and is not an induction from a comparative survey of models of ultimacy. But it is reinforced by the intellectual dialectic in so many traditions that moves from the determinacy of personhood, consciousness, and emergence to something that is beyond determinacy, as, for instance, Brahman with qualities is really a presentation of Brahman without qualities. The metaphysical argument provides the framework for the preceding discussion of models of ultimate reality. The argument begins with an analysis of determinateness, the most universal trait of things.

To be determinate is to be something rather than something else.⁵ The “rather than” indicates that determinateness in one thing is always with respect to some other thing. A is determinate with respect to x , y , and z , for instance, but perhaps not determinate with respect to p and q . If a is not determinate with respect to anything at all, it is not determinate at all, not something rather than something else. Therefore,

⁵This argument about determinateness and the conclusion drawn from it about ontological creation was first made in Neville (1968).

a determinate thing has to have “conditional features” by virtue of which it relates to those things with respect to which it is determinate so as to be different from them, for instance causal conditions. The things with respect to which a thing is determinate might also, but might not, have conditional features from the thing so that they all are mutually determinate, constituting a field of determinate connections.

But a thing cannot be only conditional features, that is, only the influences from other things. It also needs to have “essential features” by virtue of which it integrates the conditional features into its own being. Without essential features, a thing would be only the conditional influences of other things, but those would be influences on nothing: a thing without essential features could not be a term in any of its conditional relations. Without conditional features, a thing would be only an atom with no internal relations to other things, and thus indeterminate with respect to them. A thing could not have only external relations because it would have no capacity on its own to enter into any relations, internal or external.

A determinate thing is a harmony of essential and conditional features. That it is a harmony means that its features just fit together.⁶ If one thing is a determinate harmony, there must be other harmonies with respect to which it is determinate. Therefore determinateness requires a plurality of determinate things (which may also be indeterminate in some respects, as the present is partly indeterminate with respect to the future).

The plurality of harmonies is such that each exhibits four transcendental traits merely by virtue of being harmonies.⁷ One is the trait of form: every harmony has a pattern by virtue of which its features just fit together. Some harmonies are discursive, that is, play out their parts through time, so that their pattern is an unfolding of temporal development and fit. From the standpoint of a present moment, the future has form under the aspects of possibilities, sometimes with alternative possibilities of differing value. For human beings, facing a future with possibilities of differing value places people under obligation to choose the better rather than the worse insofar as they can act to affect which possibilities are actualized and which excluded. A second transcendental trait of all harmonies is having components or features that are formed in the harmony’s pattern. The components themselves must also be harmonies. A third transcendental trait of all harmonies is having existential location with respect to other harmonies. The conditional features that harmonies have from one another and by virtue of which they are determinate with respect to one another constitute an existential field within which the mutually determinate harmonies are located. A fourth transcendental trait of all harmonies is that they achieve the value-identity of getting these components together with this form in this existential location. That harmonies have value, by the very definition of determinateness, is a controversial point that will not be pursued further here, but assumed.⁸

⁶ Whitehead called this “just fit” a “contrast.” See Whitehead (1978), p. 22.

⁷ This point summarizes an elaborate theory of harmonies in Neville (1989).

⁸ But see the argument in Neville (1989).

A plurality of harmonies is such that each has both essential and conditional features. The harmonies could not be determinate with respect to one another without their mutual conditional features, which constitute collectively their “cosmological togetherness,” their field of relations. But the harmonies also could not be determinate with respect to one another without each having its own essential features, which are required for the harmonies to be terms on their own in relation to one another. Therefore, their cosmological togetherness, accounting for their relations, cannot account for their ontological togetherness that allows them to be together with their own essential features. There must be an ontological context of mutual relevance within which harmonies are together with their essential as well as conditional features. Within the cosmological togetherness alone, one harmony grasps another only in terms of its conditional features. That it does not grasp the other’s essential features is what gives the other the status of being other and external, and capable of being determinate on its own. The existence of a plurality of determinate harmonies supposes that they exist within an ontological context of mutual relevance.

What can the ontological context of mutual relevance be? If it is another determinate thing, then for it to be determinate with respect to the other determinate things so as to hold them together, an even deeper ontological context of mutual relevance would be required for the first ontological context to be together with the other determinate things. This would result in an impossible infinite regress of assumptions so that no determinate things would have the possibility of being ontologically together, and hence would be impossible themselves. The ontological context of mutual relevance thus must in itself be indeterminate.

What can in itself be indeterminate and yet constitute the context within which determinate things can be together, each with its own essential as well as conditional features? The answer is, an ontological act of creation that simply makes the determinate things together with their essential and conditioning features. The act is indeterminate except in giving itself the nature of being creator of the world of determinate things created. The act is a sheer making, a creating, terminating in determinate things. The determinate things are what they are, with their determinate natures with respect to each other. The kinds of relations and unities they constitute are various; we seem to live in a cosmos with islands of intense connection and order in an ocean, as it were, of minimal connections. What the determinate things are is a matter of empirical determination. The determinate things are also the elements of the terminus of the ontological creative act, which they have in common and which constitutes them as together in the ontological context of mutual relevance. Thus they are determinate with respect to one another, and are determinate together instead of being nothing at all. Each bears its part of the dynamism of the ontological act of creating.

Some people find it difficult to imagine an act creating something new. They cite the old adage that “out of nothing, nothing comes.” But this supposes that all the reality in an effect is contained in its cause, an Aristotelian principle. If all the reality in the effect were in the cause, however, how would it be possible for the effect to differ from the cause? It could not, except by the creation of limitations or negations

by the cause so as to produce an effect that differs from it by virtue of being less than it. The creation of negations is more obscure than the creation of positive things. Process philosophies of many types have argued that within finite things is some spontaneous capacity to create novel things, often by rearranging old things but also necessarily by the addition of something new that makes a difference to the old things. In the case of the ontological act of creation, there are no old things, only the sheer creation of determinate (and partially indeterminate) harmonies.

The ontological creative act, then, is eternal and immense in the sense of creating things that are temporal and that constitute a spatio-temporal field as they unfold.⁹ Eternity is the togetherness of the modes of times and the places of space, a togetherness that modern physics is only beginning to allow us to imagine. The ontological creative act, creating all times, does not take place at a time, not at the Big Bang, if that is how the cosmos started in time, nor now, nor in some consummatory future. It simply creates and the product of creation includes the accoutrements of temporal and spatial things. And the ontological creative act has no nature apart from being the creator of the determinate things. If it did, it would be determinate and therefore could not be the ontological context of mutual relevance.

Given the ontological act of creation, the ontological ultimate reality has a distinguishable tri-partite nature. First is the act itself, the making. Second is the world as the terminus of the act, the made. And third is the nothingness that would be the case if there were no ontological act creating the world. In West Asian religions, this has been called creation *ex nihilo*, meaning that the act of creation arises from absolutely nothing. It is not the case that there is absolutely nothing: there is in fact the world as created, and in this sense the ontological act of creation is determinate as the act creating this determinate world. The ontological act is not determinate in any sense apart from the world, however, and so does not need a deeper ontological context of mutual relevance. Creation *ex nihilo* in this sense does not mean that a determinate God creates a world out of no stuff rather than out of a divine stuff, as in Thomas Aquinas' philosophical claim that finite actualities are delimitations of infinite divine actuality (Pure Act of To Be). Rather, it means that the ontological creative act is gratuitous, arbitrary, undeserving, and utterly surprising. There is no reason why the world is created—any “reason” would itself have to be created. But the determinate world exists, and it could not exist unless it be created by an otherwise indeterminate ontological creative act. This is my complex hypothesis about primary or *ontological* ultimate reality.

The discussion of the four transcendental traits of harmony, however, exhibits four other ultimate realities that can be called “cosmological” in contrast to the “ontological” ultimate reality. They would not exist unless the ontological ultimate reality created a world of determinate things, and thus are secondary to the ontological creative act. Nor could the ontological ultimate reality create a world that did not have determinate, or at least partially determinate, things in it.

⁹ See Neville (1993).

But given a determinate world consisting of harmonies, which is what determinate things consist in according to this hypothesis, having form is an ultimate reality. Having components formed within that pattern is an ultimate reality. Having location relative to other harmonies through conditional features is an ultimate reality. And achieving some value-identity by having these components in this location with this pattern is an ultimate reality. So, according to this hypothesis there is one ontological ultimate reality, the ontological act of creation by virtue of which every determinate harmony exists relative to others in an ontological context of mutual relevance. And there are four cosmological ultimate realities, form, components, existential location, and value-identity that are necessary if there is to be anything determinate; these cosmological ultimate realities come to be with the ontological creation of determinate things. Any created world whatsoever, so long as it has some determinacy, exhibits these cosmological ultimate realities.

“Ultimacy,” or the “ultimate” in ultimate reality can now be defined more precisely. Of course, it means a final condition beyond which there is nothing more. Relative to human life it means those final or boundary conditions that define the world. These can now be characterized as finite/infinite contrasts. The finite side of a finite/infinite contrast is some finite thing that defines the world. In the ontological ultimate reality, the act of creation including the determinate world as its terminus is the finite side. The infinite side of a finite/infinite contrast is the counterfactual condition of what would be the case if the finite side were not real. In the case of the ontological ultimate reality, there would be absolutely nothing if it were not for the ontological creative act creating the determinate world. In the case of the ultimate reality of form, form itself is the finite side, and pure unformed chaos would be the infinite side. In the case of the ultimate reality of components, having components to be harmonized is the finite side, and a pure, empty lack of anything to be formed would be the infinite side. In the case of the ultimate reality of existential location, having an existential field of things with respect to which to be determinate is the finite side, having nothing else to be determinate with respect to, with the resulting impossibility of being determinate, would be the infinite side. In the case of the ultimate reality of value-identity, having such an identity is the finite side, having no determinate identity would be the infinite side.

It is possible, of course, to experience the existing world without wondering about how it exists, just as it is possible to experience forms, components, place, and value-identities, and think about how they might be different, without wondering about what would be if there were no forms, components, places, and value identities. This would be experience of only the finite side. But these ultimate realities in fact are the boundary conditions of the world and sometimes the significance of this is grasped in religious and philosophical thought. Sometimes people have signs that express the finite/infinite contrast. They feel the finite side as well as its radical contingency or what-if-there-were-no-finite-side. These are religious engagements of the ultimate. Precisely because the ultimate conditions are finite/infinite contrasts, religious cultures develop signs for addressing and engaging the radical contingency of the ontological act of creation and the transcendental traits of anything determinate. The concrete feeling of the ultimate realities includes a sense

of their mystery as expressed in the felt infinite side. Some experiences of the ontological ultimate in terms of personhood, consciousness, and emergence include also the feel of their counterfactual absence. This raises again the question of experience.

Semiotics of Symbolic Engagement

By what semiotic theory of engaging ultimate reality, understood philosophically as the ontological act of creation, can we understand how these models can be signs of ultimate reality? The theory I propose arises from the pragmatic tradition which concerning this point turns on the problem of reference.¹⁰ A model is a conceptual tool whose elements are supposed to be in some kind of isomorphic relation to the object modeled, a mode of reference that Peirce called “iconic.”¹¹ Early modern Western science modeled nature as a machine: knowing how to construct the “machine of nature,” meant that nature’s own workings were known.¹² Mathematical physics models certain natural processes with the mathematical expressions. Poets model realities with their imagery, so that even when the images are obviously metaphoric, there is a sense in which reality is like what the images project.

Only determinate things can be in iconic or isomorphic relation to a model. Ultimate reality is not only determinate things—it is also a making of the Dao itself. Therefore any model of ultimate reality has to be false insofar as it is understood to refer iconically. The ultimate reality of the ontological creative act cannot really be in iconic relation to the model of a person, or of human consciousness, or of the emergent flow within time. So if those models are taken to be signs for the engagement of ultimate reality, they are necessarily false in their iconic reference.

Another form of reference, however, is indexical, by which is meant the establishment of some kind of real connection between the object engaged and the signs of engagement so that something true is picked up in the engagement. Pointing with the index finger causes the interpreter to look and see something that otherwise would be missed. All interpretations that engage real things have some indexical characters in their references. So the question is whether models of ultimacy such as personhood, consciousness, and emergence might point to ultimate reality, establish some kind of real connection with it, and allow for what is important in ultimate reality to be carried across in the symbolic engagement. They might do this even though, iconically, the ultimate reality of the ontological creative act cannot be personal, conscious, or emergent.

¹⁰This argument summarizes the more elaborate analysis in Neville (2006).

¹¹For a closer analysis of Peirce’s terminology in semiotics, see Corrington (1993); see also Corrington (2000). My treatment of Peirce’s semiotics is in Neville (2009), chapters 6–7.

¹²For a sophisticated recent defense of this sense of modeling nature see Gallistel (1980).

How can we tell whether such models indexically refer to ultimate reality in true ways? To answer this question, several observations need to be made about symbolic engagement. First, the signs in an interpretation are neither true nor false unless the interpretation actually engages its object. An interpretation takes the signs to stand for the object in a certain respect. The engagement intends the object by means of the sign. And the interpretation itself is a third thing that relates the object and sign intentionally; it is part of the experience of the interpreter. Second, interpretive engagements are always particular and contextual, depending on actual people making them. Signs that are used to interpret truly in one context might be false in another, true for one person but false for another. Therefore, third, some external way needs to be found to discern whether for this person in this context this sign of ultimacy as a personal being, pure consciousness, emergence, or some other, carries over what is important about the ontological act of creation.¹³ The great religions have profound traditions of spiritual discernment and direction, aimed to determine just what difference the engagement of ultimacy with this sign or other makes to a person's experience.

Such individualism in the discernment process is unwieldy for the cultural processes of religion, however. So, religious traditions have evolved to focus on the symbols that engage truly for the most part, for most people, in most contexts which then are taken by the culture to be the normative contexts for engaging ultimate reality, usually ritualized contexts. This remark vastly oversimplifies the complex character of the cultural embodiment of religion, but it can serve its purpose in the present argument. Pragmatically effective markers for habitual engagements of ultimacy with certain signs are developed in religious cultures. St. Paul, for instance, talked about “living in the Spirit,” by which he meant, at least partly, living in a community of people who think of themselves as “belonging to Christ Jesus” and who interpret ultimate reality in terms of Jesus and his teachings about the God of the Hebrew Bible. The fruit of living with these signs in their particular lives, he said, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”¹⁴ In the case of individuals who live in this community but who are conspicuously lacking in these fruits of the Spirit, the signs are not engaging them with ultimate reality truly. What is true for many of the others is not true for them.

Paul’s point can be generalized in terms of the metaphysics of ultimacy. The ontological creative act whose terminus is the determinate world unfolding through space-time was described above as gratuitous, arbitrary, undeserved, and surprising. The act is gratuitous because there can be no reason in any reality prior to the act for the act to happen. The act is arbitrary because there can be no reason prior to the act for it to be one way rather than another. The act is undeserved from the human

¹³ An elaborate defense of the claim that truth is the carryover of value or importance from the object into the experience of the interpreter in the respects in which the signs stand for the object is to be found in Neville (1989), part 1.

¹⁴ Galatians 5:22–23, NRSV translation.

perspective because whatever good is found in the determinate world does not justify or fulfill some prior need. The act is surprising from the human perspective because everything in the world just is what it is, contrary to expectations.

Now, the fruits of getting these points, these values, in the ontological act of creation are something like the following. You can tell if people have grasped the point about the gratuity of the ontological creative act if they have a deep acceptance of being, of the field of existence, of their own lives; most people are ambivalent about this. Whether the symbols for ultimacy are personifying ones, matters of pure consciousness, or emergence, they are true if engaging the ultimate with them produces what Jonathan Edwards called “consent to being in general.”¹⁵ With respect to arbitrariness, you can tell that their symbols are indexically true if they result in acknowledgment and acceptance of the singularity of the world, especially people’s own singular position, rich or poor, educated or not, belonging to a powerful group or not, and so forth. With respect to the undeservedness of the ontological creative act, you can tell that people’s symbols are indexically true if they produce a kind of ontological humility, a profound feeling of not deserving to be what one is. With respect to the surprisingness of the world created, you can tell that people’s symbols are indexically true if they spark self-transcending awe and astonishment. Acceptance of being, and of singularity, ontological humility, and self-transcending astonishment and awe, are all modes of gratitude toward the ontological creative act.

These last remarks have focused on signs for engaging the ontological ultimate reality. There are also the four cosmological ultimates mentioned earlier, of form, components, existential location, and value-identity, all engaged as finite/infinite contrasts. The same signs, or systems of signs, that engage the ontological creative act also engage the transcendental traits of anything determinate. From the human perspective, engaging form is a matter of choosing among alternative possibilities of different values, in respect to which people live under obligation. If people’s signs of ultimacy give them discernment of justice and mercy with regard to human failings, they are indexically true of the ultimate reality of form. If people’s signs of ultimacy give them increasing wholeness and personal integrity, they are indexically true of the ultimate reality of having components in their life with respect to which they should comport themselves appropriately. If people’s signs of ultimacy lead them to engage others with care and respect, including nature and institutions as well as other people among the others, then they are indexically true with respect to the ultimate reality of having existential location in a field with others. If people’s signs of ultimacy lead them to achieve the best value-identity they can and to accept that achievement as what they really are, those signs are indexically true of the ultimate reality of having value-identity.

A thousand qualifications need to be added to what has just been said. Every time the signs are said to be indexically true, the statement should be amended to say they are true to a certain extent, in some respects but not others, and so forth.

¹⁵ See Edwards (1989).

Those limitations should be tied to the particulars of the ways the signs are used and the intentionality behind them.

But enough has been said to indicate how it is possible to use models of ultimate reality, such as personhood, consciousness, and emergence, to engage the ultimate reality of the ontological act of creating the world in ways that might be indexically true. By implication, enough has been said to indicate when those very same symbols are false in their engagements of ultimacy, namely when they reinforce injustice, an arrogant sense of self, bigotry towards others, despair and ontological ingratitude.

The philosophical theology that advocates judging the truth of signs in symbolic engagements of ultimacy by their fruits needs to stay in close touch with the metaphysics that shows that ultimate reality is the ontological creative act and that this cannot be modeled because it is not wholly determinate. In practice this means constant vigilance against any serious claim that the models such as personhood, consciousness, and emergence might be ironically or literally true. First naiveté in cultural religion is dangerous and second naiveté is difficult to attain. The skepticism that rejects the first without attempting the second is simply a withdrawal from attempts to engage the ultimate matters of life. The other kind of skepticism that negotiates between first and second naiveté is where most reflective people are on ultimate matters. In this day, when so many people are not simply located within any one rich religious tradition but instead are moving through several with ambivalence for all, the simple pragmatic tests mentioned above might be too vague to be helpful. In the short run, at least, most reflective people are more like individuals seeking personal spiritual discernment than like congregants finding meaning in common rituals. This is all the more reason to pay attention to the metaphysical arguments about ultimate reality, arguments that build in the denial that ultimate reality can be modeled with anything determinate, such as a person, consciousness, or emergence.

This essay has taken three very different approaches to the question of modeling ultimate reality. The first section has examined three very common models, that of the person, resulting in some form or other of theism, that of consciousness, resulting in some ontology of mind and its purification, and emergence, resulting in an ontology of change with both continuity and novelty. These models provide experientially intimate ways of referring to ultimate reality. And yet ultimate reality cannot be captured by a model that supposes that its object is isomorphic with the model. So the traditions associated with personification, consciousness, and emergence also include transcending impulses that say that the ultimate is “beyond” anything registered in the respective models.

The second section has directly argued for the claim that ultimate reality is an ontological creative act and therefore cannot be modeled. This argument is highly metaphysical (and therefore unpopular in the current intellectual climate), but it shows how ultimacy can be defined in terms of the most abstract of all notions, determinateness. That definition of ultimacy is ontological, in accounting for the possibility of determinateness, and cosmological, in accounting for the ultimate

conditions of all determinate things. However unpopular such metaphysical arguments are, they must be dealt with by anyone who would like to say that ultimate reality can be modeled in isomorphic ways.

The third section shifted gears to reflect on the semiotic theory according to which models and other signs might refer to ultimacy. It claims that people engage ultimate realities by means of interpretations with signs, which can refer iconically and indexically, among other ways. Models aim to refer iconically, but they cannot in the case of ultimate reality because of the arguments of the section “[The Ontological Creative Act](#)”. Yet they can refer indexically if there are means for determining whether they carry over what is important in ultimate reality into the experience of the interpreters. Some religiously common and powerful tests for carryover were discussed, albeit briefly.

These three approaches triangulate in on an hypothesis about modeling ultimate reality.

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Symmetry and Asymmetry: Problems and Prospects for Modeling

Lawrence A. Whitney, LC+

Introduction

The self-conscious development of models of God or ultimate reality¹ is one of the most popular methodologies employed in constructive theology today.² One of the reasons for this is that models of God are especially well-suited for the process of comparison necessitated by the radical pluralism of modern societies. Another is that modeling is a credible methodology in contexts heavily influenced by modern science and its accompanying worldview (Wildman 2007; Peters 2007). For the purposes of this essay, the most philosophically interesting aspect of modeling is that it takes as its goal explanation of the phenomenon being modeled. This is to say that models are approaches to their objects that discriminate the object as one thing over against another. The implications of modeling as explanation, to be explicated in this essay, raise questions as to the adequacy of modeling as an approach to ultimate reality.

The answer to the adequacy question with regards to modeling ultimate reality turns on the nature of the intersection between the nature of ultimate reality and the types of knowing that correlate with it; the intersection of ontology and epistemology. Helpful to engage in conversation in this regard is contemporary philosopher-theologian Robert C. Neville and the correlated ontology and epistemology developed in his *God the Creator* (1992). Neville posits an asymmetric relation between God as ultimate reality and the world that takes God to be ultimate. It will be argued that

¹ Agreeing wholeheartedly with the reasons given for employing the terminology of “ultimate reality” as opposed to “God” given in Wildman (2007), the main interlocutor in this essay still employs the language of “God,” at least in the work primarily under consideration. “God” and “ultimate reality” will therefore be used interchangeably.

² Many of these are noted in Peters (2007). It is important also to acknowledge the foundational work in the development of typologies found in Troeltsch (1960), and with regard to models of God or ultimate reality the important methodological development worked out in McFague (1982, 1987).

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positing an asymmetric relation between ultimate reality and the reality out of which knowledge arises sets up a situation in which modeling methodologies are inadequate. Finally, this inadequacy signals and necessitates a distinction between models of ultimate reality and models of ultimacy.

Ontology and Epistemology of Ultimate Reality

Ontology, the question of being, of why there is something rather than nothing, the problem of the one and the many, is the oldest and one of the most prevalent questions in all of world philosophy and theology (Scharfstein 1998: 56). It is certainly taken to be so by Neville in *God the Creator*, “one of the most sustained dialectical arguments in the history of philosophy” (Dorrien 2006: 373). In fact, for Neville the ontological question delineates ultimacy; that which answers the question is ultimate reality. Later in his career, and arising from the work done by the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, Neville defines ultimate reality vaguely as “that which is most important to religious life because of the nature of reality” (Neville and Wildman 2001: 151). With regard to Neville’s *God the Creator*, God is ultimate reality because all of existence and the nature of reality results from the creative act of God, which is therefore most important to religious life.

In *God the Creator*, Neville argues that God is being-itself, the one for the many, and that being so God is the indeterminate and transcendent creator of all of the determinations of being. For present purposes it is not of interest to rehearse the arguments behind this conclusion but instead to explore the implications of this conclusion for modeling. To say that God is indeterminate is to say that God is not determinate. For Neville, “to be determinate is, minimally, to have some identity over against or in difference from what is other than that identity” (Neville 1992: 44), to be ‘this’ rather than ‘that.’ To be indeterminate, then, is not to be different from something, not to be ‘this’ rather than ‘that.’ Furthermore, God as being-itself is not only indeterminate with respect to some things, but is completely indeterminate; God is not ‘this’ rather than *anything*; God is not over against *anything*. This complete indeterminacy therefore requires transcendence, in the sense of “being outside of” (Neville 1992: 61). The indeterminate God is necessarily excluded from the realm of determinations. Finally, the indeterminate and transcendent God is the creator of the determinations from which God is transcendent, and is therefore also immanent. To be the creator is to be the one who creates all of the “determinations in a *de facto* unity that allows for their mutual conditioning and determinateness with respect to each other” (Neville 1992: 69). This is to say that being the creator is the act of being the one for the many, the solution to the ontological question.

Giving the answer that being-itself, the answer to the question of the one and the many, God, is completely indeterminate with respect to and utterly transcendent of the world of determinations, and yet is the creator of that world, sets Neville up for a serious epistemological problem, of which he is profoundly aware from the outset (Neville 1992: 14). The problem is that answering the question of the nature of

being-itself this way is itself a determinate answer; “indeterminate” as an answer is determinate with respect to the question of determinacy; “indeterminate” is ‘this’ (indeterminate) rather than ‘that’ (determinate), and is therefore determinate. Indeterminacy, transcendence, “creator,” and even “God” are determinate qualities of what is supposed to be indeterminate.

To solve this problem, Neville spends the second part of the volume explaining what kind of argument he is making in the first part. Neville acknowledges a shared problem with Paul Tillich, “the task of justifying a constitutive ontological dialectic that shows that the determinate role of being creator presupposes a transcendent God who is indeterminate without at the same time showing that the transcendent God is essentially determinate” (Neville 1992: 147). To do so, he makes the claim that “the elements of the creator that relate him [*sic*] functionally (and as an explanation) to the determinations are themselves created determinations” (Neville 1992: 134). This is to say that the act of creating the world simultaneously creates the identity of indeterminate ultimate reality as the *creator* with indeterminacy and transcendence as constitutive qualities. Furthermore, “though we approach the supradeterminate reality through the determination of being *creator*, we never get beyond that determination, for our approach is bound to the terms of the function of creating” (Neville 1992: 167). This is to say that ultimate reality is utterly unknowable in itself, but only through its self-determination in the act of creation as the *creator* of determinate reality. The relationship between ultimate reality in itself, then, and the world to which ultimate reality is ultimate, is utterly asymmetric.

Symmetry and Asymmetry

The concept of symmetry is borrowed from the discipline of mathematics. Two objects can be symmetric to one another with respect to a given operation or transformation. If the first object, under the conditions of the operation or transformation, produces a second object that is equivalent to the first, then the objects exhibit symmetry (Rosen 2008: 1). It is important to note that the relation is one of equivalence, not of identity. An identity relation would mean that both objects are equivalent regardless of the operation executed upon the first object to achieve the second. An equivalence relation, in contrast, maintains the objects as equivalent under particular transformations or operations, but equivalence may not apply under alternate operations. This is to say that symmetry is equivalence between objects in some respect (Petitjean 2007).

In symmetric relation between ultimate reality and that for which ultimate reality is ultimate (the world), there would be equivalence between ultimate reality and the world in some respect. This is the medieval scholastic theory of analogy, according to which two objects are analogous when they have similar proportions. Neville points to the fact that Thomas Aquinas advocated a particular form of analogy to be employed in the case of being or God, namely the analogy of proportionality. In the case of proportionality, there are two terms each in the analogue and the analogate,

respectively. The claim to analogy is not that the determinate distance between analogue and analogate is known, but that the distance between the two terms each of the analogue and the analogate is what makes them analogous. As Neville points out, however, the distances must be determinate in some respect in order to qualify as determining the analogy between the analogue and analogate (Neville 1992, 16–18). In order for there to be analogy, there must be univocity; in order for there to be equivalence, there must be identity. All of this is to say exactly what Duns Scotus asserted, namely that “every denial is intelligible only in terms of some affirmation” (Duns Scotus 1962: 15). Analogy is symmetry precisely because the respects in which something is equivalent (symmetry) is the univocal assertion of commonality (analogy). For something to be analogous or symmetric, there must be something in the analogue/first object that is carried over into the analogate/second object; for ultimate reality and the world to be analogous/symmetric, something of ultimate reality must be carried over into the world.

Asymmetry, or lack of symmetry, therefore is a denial of any respect in which the first object and the second object are equivalent. There is no equivalence, and therefore no need for identity. As applied to ultimate reality, this means that there is nothing of ultimate reality carried over into the world. This is what it means for ultimate reality to be indeterminate. It is important to remember, however, that Neville has identified ultimate reality (God) with being-itself. This is to say that ultimate reality and the world are equivalent in at least one respect, namely with respect to being, and therefore are symmetrical. If this is true, though, then ultimate reality would be determinate; ultimate reality would be ultimate reality (this) as opposed to the world (that). In order for ultimate reality to be both indeterminate and being-itself, then it must also be both transcendent of (indeterminate) and present to (being-itself) the determinations of being (the world) (Neville 1992: 59–60). To show how this can be so, Neville invokes the doctrine of creation.³

The way in which Neville conceives the doctrine of creation does a very strange thing to the notion of symmetry. Normally in symmetry there is one object that becomes an equivalent object under the conditions of a transformation. Under Neville’s doctrine of creation, however, the transformation that gives rise to the second object, the world, simultaneously gives rise to the first object, ultimate reality. Ultimate reality is only ultimate for the world with respect to which it is ultimate. The indeterminate, transcendent, present, creator God that is being-itself is only indeterminate, transcendent, present and being-itself by virtue of the relationship with the determinations of being that depend upon God being indeterminate, transcendent, present and being-itself to be (Neville 1992: 74–78). This further means that the first object and the transformation are identical; the act of creation is what makes indeterminate being-itself the creator of the determinations with respect to which it is indeterminate and being-itself. There is nothing carried over into the world from ultimate reality because ultimate reality is not ultimate except with respect to the world. The asymmetry is not simply a denial that the first and second objects are equivalent; it denies that there is a first object apart from the transformation that gives rise to the second object. This is why Neville’s doctrine of creation is

³This is no mere invocation, however, but a richly dialectical argument. see Neville (1992): 61–74.

creation *ex nihilo* (Neville 1992: 106–116), and should therefore be considered absolute asymmetry.

Symmetric Models and Asymmetric Ultimate Reality

The act of model construction is fundamentally an exercise in knowing; specifically the type of knowing that is an achievement of explanation (Peters 2007: 274–6). This is to say that a model “is an imagined mechanism or process, postulated by analogy with familiar mechanisms or processes and used to construct a theory to correlate a set of observations” (Barbour 1974: 30). Models therefore require symmetry. If the world is the set of observations, then the correlation of those observations is the unity that God, as being-itself, provides the world. The mechanism or process is the transformation or operation in the language of symmetry. This mechanism is understood analogically with respect to the relation between ultimate reality and the world. The brunt of the argument that ultimate reality is indeterminate, however, has been to demonstrate that there is no analogy between the process of God-creates-creation and any familiar sense of creation from within the world God creates. Ultimate reality is indeterminate being-itself, transcendent from and present in the world it creates, and all of these predication are univocal with no analogue in the created world except with respect to the self-determination of God in the singular act of creation (Neville 1992: 94–106). Ultimate reality in itself “is a mystery in the philosophically acceptable sense of that word … A mystery is quite proper when it means that there is nothing to understand. If the creator is indeterminate, then any alleged understanding of it in those indeterminate respects would be in error” (Neville 1992: 76). The indeterminacy of ultimate reality makes it impossible to model.

Much ink has been spilt of late in discussing the role of reductionism in the field of religious studies.⁴ This issue is of critical importance to the philosophy of religion precisely because, as Edward Slingerland rightly points out,

any truly interesting explanation of a given phenomenon is interesting precisely because it involves reduction of some sort – tracing causation from higher to lower levels or uncovering hidden correlations. We are generally not satisfied with explanations unless they answer the “why” question by means of reduction: by linking the *explanandum* to some deeper, hidden, more basic *explanans*. (Slingerland 2008: 384)

By employing the methodology of modeling, which is self-consciously explanatory, philosophers of religion are necessarily reductive. Neville fits this description in the sense that his *explanandum*, the world, is linked by means of the doctrine of creation to his *explanans*, God. However, for Neville the link and the *explanans* are identical as regards the *explanandum*. Without regard for the *explanandum*, ultimate reality slips through the fingers as irreducible mystery; there is no God. The absolute asymmetry of the relation between ultimate reality and the world makes modeling ultimate

⁴ See especially *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 2006. 74: 720–56, 2008. 76: 375–448, 2008. 76: 934–69, 2009. 77: 238–74, 2009. 77: 547–72.

reality finally impossible since it is contained entirely in the relation and not in itself. A symmetric relation between ultimate reality and the world is a necessary precondition for modeling ultimate reality. This leads directly to the important conclusion of this exploration, which must be delayed momentarily for a further clarification.

After such a deep and detailed engagement with Neville, it may be concluded that his is the only exposition of a completely asymmetric relationship between ultimate reality and the world that takes that reality to be ultimate. While it may be the case that Neville's is the most sustained dialectical development of such a relationship, at least in Western philosophy, and therefore the most useful for present purposes, such asymmetric relationships are evident in many religious and philosophical traditions, especially their mystical branches. Such relationships are what Neville's colleague and contemporary Wesley Wildman refers to when he seeks to point "beyond highly anthropomorphic" models of ultimate reality (Wildman 2007: 424–25). Something like Neville's asymmetry seems furthermore to be implied in how St. Anselm holds together God as "that than which nothing greater can be thought" and "greater than can be thought" (Hopkins and Richardson 2000: 93 and 103).⁵ More recently Paul Tillich when he says with regard to "the statement that everything we say about God is symbolic. Such a statement is an assertion about God which itself is not symbolic" (Tillich 1957: 9).

Cross cultural examples of asymmetric relations between ultimate reality and the world are also available. For example, Nagarjuna's "examination of conditions:"

Neither from itself nor from another,
Nor from both,
Nor without a cause,
Does anything whatever, anywhere arise. (Garfield 1995: 3).

Employing a common South Asian logical structure, Nagarjuna denies that existence arises from itself, from something else, or from both itself and something else, and yet insists that existence has a cause. This is to say that the cause of existence cannot be categorized according to the terms of existence; that existence and its cause are in asymmetric relation. Similarly in the opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching*:

A way that can be walked is not The Way
A name that can be named is not The Name
Tao is both Named and Nameless
As Nameless, it is the origin of all things
As Named, it is the mother of all things. (Lau Tzu 2001: 1).

Lao Tzu breaks the relationship between all determinate ways and names and the indeterminate Way and Name, establishing the asymmetry. He then goes on to acknowledge the same relationship between ontology and epistemology that Neville develops, in which the Nameless is the ontologically indeterminate creator who is creator only as Named in the birthing of creation. In all cases of asymmetric relations, there is a recognition that modeling breaks down when attempting to speak of ultimate reality in itself.

⁵ See also Viney (2007).

Conclusion: Modeling Ultimacy or Ultimate Reality?

The conclusion that classifying the relationship between ultimate reality and the world as asymmetric means that modeling of ultimate reality becomes impossible, does not therefore imply that what people who arrive at such a conclusion are doing is not modeling. Of course *God the Creator* is a model; it is just not a model of ultimate reality. What, then, are Neville and his ilk modeling? It has already been discussed why ultimate reality in itself cannot be modeled, namely due to the necessity of symmetry, but the doctrine of creation that Neville elaborates identifies ultimate reality with the transformation or operation that gives rise to the world in some respect. This respect is the relation between ultimate reality and the world; the relation may be called ultimacy. Ultimacy is not ultimate reality in itself, then, but ultimate reality as it is ultimate for the world. An asymmetric relation between ultimate reality and the world does not permit modeling of ultimate reality, but it does permit modeling of ultimacy, modeling of the relation.

It is important to state precisely what is meant by the concept of ultimacy. Ultimacy is the boundary between indeterminate ultimate reality and the determinate world. This boundary is constituted by the relationship between indeterminate ultimate reality and the determinate world, namely the relation of contingency or creator-created. Models of ultimacy, therefore, are models not of an object in itself, but of a relation. Neville goes on in *The Truth of Broken Symbols* to identify ultimacy as a “finite/infinite contrast.” “The logic of the borderline contingency conditions … is that they mark the boundary between the finite and the infinite. That is, by focusing on some finite thing as a boundary condition orienting the experiential world, they suppose a contrast with what would be the case without the boundary condition” (Neville 1996: 58). Tillich is especially instructive in this regard:

In the moment, however, in which we describe the character of this point or in which we try to formulate that for which we ask, a combination of symbolic with non-symbolic elements occurs. If we say that God is the infinite, or the unconditional, or being-itself, we speak rationally and ecstatically at the same time. These terms precisely designate the boundary line at which both the symbolic and the non-symbolic coincide (Tillich 1957: 9–10).

Ultimacy, therefore, is at the farthest reaches of the world beyond which there is no world at all, but is not yet that upon which the world is contingent for its being.

Symmetric models of ultimate reality also include within them a model of the relation between ultimate reality and the world. Distinguishing modeling ultimate reality from modeling ultimacy should not be understood as denying this, but only to say that those who posit an asymmetric relation, and therefore model ultimacy, are modeling only the relation and not ultimate reality. This has important implications for comparison among models. In fact, any comparison of models should begin by noting any discrepancy between the models as to what it is that is being modeled. Furthermore, models of ultimate reality cannot be compared directly to models of ultimacy because the models of ultimacy are missing a significant part of the comparison. Certainly, the relation between ultimate reality and the world can be teased out of a model of ultimate reality and then compared with the model of ultimacy,

which is a relation. But comparing (Whitehead's God 1979; see also Neville 1980), which is perhaps the clearest example of a symmetric God-world relation, to Tillich's ground of being would be to miss the thrust of Tillich's point about the combination of the symbolic with the non-symbolic precisely at the point of ultimacy. It is significantly due to comparative considerations, then, that the distinction between symmetric and asymmetric relations between ultimate reality and the world, and the resulting distinction between ultimate reality and ultimacy, are important. Of course, the distinction may also be helpfully employed in evaluating the truth status of ontological claims.

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Models of God

Ted Peters

What is conceptually the most satisfying way to model the divine? Such a question presumes that multiple ways of conceiving the divine are available and, further, that some are better than others. In what follows I would like to describe briefly nine conceptual models of God – atheism, agnosticism, deism, theism or monotheism, pantheism, polytheism, henotheism, and panentheism – and then I would like to proffer support for what I believe is the most satisfying model, eschatological panentheism.

As prolegomena, I will begin with a philosophical and theological justification for employing the model method in theology. Philosophical hermeneutics, philosophy of science, and reliance upon the prophetic awareness of divine transcendence each in their own way support the model method in theological reflection.

I will write as a Christian theologian trying to explicate religious symbols within the Christian tradition. Philosophical criteria are relevant for determining what is more or less satisfying, to be sure. Yet, I will turn to theology for the foundations upon which a conceptual model of God is to be constructed.

Hermeneutics, Models, and Explanatory Adequacy

Before reviewing the extant models of God, let me offer some methodological preliminaries to justify applying the idea of “model” to conceptions of the divine.

My first methodological commitment leads me to embrace a hermeneutical approach to the interpretation of religious symbols. In my judgment, theological discourse is best thought of as a conceptual reformulation of what appears at a more

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primary level of discourse, namely, the language of biblical symbols. Following the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer¹ and Paul Ricoeur,² I acknowledge that symbols are alive in tradition, and symbols provide the irreducible foundation upon which concepts are constructed. Such conceptual construction follows three stages: (1) pre-critical or naïve symbolic language; (2) critical deconstruction of symbolic language in the face of a prophetic revelation of divine transcendence; and (3) post-critical re-construction of a worldview in which all things are oriented to God.

This hermeneutical process I call “explication.” The theologian explicates the symbolic language of scripture or liturgy or history. The intellectual references of symbolic language are judged to be finite and partial and inadequate when placed before the mystery of divine transcendence. Religious discourse is rendered perspectival and historically conditioned, not absolute or literal. Naïve or literal references to God are denied. Then, upon the foundation of conceptual relativity, a worldview is constructed in light of the explicated meaning of the basic religious symbols. This means that models of God are inescapably speculative in character, not literal in reference. They appear at the level of second order discourse.³

My second methodological commitment is to the idea of model and its corollary drawn from the philosophy of science, critical realism. Models in theology follow precedents set in science. Science begins by making observations. Yet, the actual world scientists observe leads the scientific researcher through models toward theory construction, toward an explanation of what is observed. Models serve this explanatory task.⁴ A “theoretical model,” says Ian Barbour, “is an imagined mechanism or process, postulated by analogy with familiar mechanisms or processes and used to construct a theory to correlate a set of observations.”⁵ A theory consists of a conceptual model that has gained substantial supporting evidence.

Theoretical models in science are evaluated for their fertility. To be fertile, a theoretical model in science has to have three features. First, it has to provide an

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, Paul Siebeck, 2nd edn., 1965); English trans. By Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2nd rev. edn., 1994).

² “What we need is an interpretation that respects the original enigma of the symbols, that lets itself be taught by them, but that, beginning from there, promotes the meaning, forms the meaning in the full responsibility of autonomous thought.” Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, tr. by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) 349–350.

³ David Tracy describes theology as “second-order reflective language reexpressing the meanings of the originating religious event and its original religious language to and for a reflective mind.” *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 409.

⁴ “Broadly speaking, a model is a symbolic representation of selected aspects of the behaviour of a complex system for particular purposes. It is an imaginative tool for ordering experience, rather than a description of the world...[models in science] are mental constructs devised to account for observed phenomena in the natural world...such models are taken seriously but not literally.” Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (New York: Harper, 1974) 6–7.

⁵ Ibid., 30.

explanation for the observations. Second, it has to be predictive and progressive. It has to suggest further experiments that can be done to gather more data or observations – that is, it needs to promote a progressive research program. Third, it must be falsifiable, at least in principle. This means that the model must be subject to revision or even replacement by a better model. Models do not provide literal descriptions of objective reality; rather, they provide “provisional ways of imagining what is not observable.”⁶ This means scientists are typically realists. They are not naïve realists but critical realists – that is, they presume their models refer to the objective world; but these models are speculative rather than literal in their descriptions. So, science does not ask for apodictic or even literal truth; rather, it asks for the most useful – most fertile – model.⁷ “Fertility” is to the scientist what “satisfying” is to the philosopher.⁸

When theologians employ the idea of the model in similar fashion, theologians recognize the presence in tradition of parallel models which seek to explain the same thing. Gustaf Aulén’s widely read book of 1931, *Christus Victor*,⁹ which compares three historic models (types) of atonement, provides a pioneering example. H. Richard Niebuhr’s six models of how Christ relates to culture¹⁰ or Avery Dulles’ list of models of the church¹¹ have established the modeling principle within theological methodology. Key is that the model method acknowledges at the conceptual level we can construct internally coherent models that differ from one another yet explicate the same primary level of symbolic discourse.

My third methodological preliminary is use of explanatory adequacy to measure the relative merit of competing models. The question I pose to each model of the divine is this: does this model offer a more comprehensive accounting or more fruitful illumination of the basic human experience brought to articulation in the fundamental religious symbols? I exact four component criteria: (1) applicability: does this model apply to contemporary human experience? (2) comprehensiveness: can this model, in principle, cover the widest scope of reality and orient it toward the divine? (3) logic: does this model satisfy the basic principles or reason? Does it

⁶Ibid., 7.

⁷Critical realism is not actually entailed in the idea of model, even if it is a natural partner. One could employ models and still embrace a strictly utilitarian understanding of their scientific value. Something like critical realism is fitting for theology because theology’s object, God, requires non-literal referential ascriptions. Arthur Peacocke argues, “Critical realism in theology would maintain that theological concepts and models should be regarded as partial and inadequate, but necessary and, indeed, the only ways of referring to the reality that is names as ‘God’ and to God’s relation with humanity.” *Theology for a Scientific Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 14.

⁸“Fertility” most directly summarizes the second of these features, namely, evoking a progressive research program. Here, I use “fertility” to represent the composite of all three.

⁹Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, tr. by A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

¹⁰H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

¹¹Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Double Day, Image, 1978).

avoid self-contradiction and avoid fallacious reasoning? (4) coherence: do the various parts of this model fit together so that they imply each other?¹²

Due to the brevity of this paper and the necessity for keeping descriptions of each model short, I do not plan on laying this template of explanatory adequacy on each model. I will compare and contrast the various models, however, at a more general level of abstraction. My conclusion will be that the model of eschatological panentheism should be more satisfying to the theologian than competing models.

Exodus 3:14

Constructing an explanatorily adequate concept or mental model of God is like building a house. We need construction materials. We need to put them together in a reasonable way. Once we have erected the house, then we need to step back, look at it, and consider whether we will paint it a different color or put on an addition.

What are the construction materials? First, the foundation is laid with biblical symbols, and perhaps insights from the Christian tradition. Second, our conceptual house needs many windows open to the mystery of transcendence. God is mysterious. Even when God confronts us with revelation we are left with an unfathomable mystery. Yet, build we must.

Although it is difficult to rank in importance various passages within Scripture, we cannot begin thinking about God without reminding ourselves of what happened to Moses when confronted by the mystery of the burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai. This is a moment of revelation; and it provides us with both primary symbolic discourse as well as a window open to transcendent mystery.

In this account, Moses sees a burning bush which is not being consumed by the fire. He is puzzled. Out of the bush comes a voice. The voice commissions Moses to become a prophet who will lead the enslaved Hebrew people out of Egypt into liberty. This is Moses' call vision, the moment when he gets his vocation. Our word 'vocation' (like 'vocal') means literally 'a calling'. Moses' calling is to mediate the Sinai Covenant between God and the people of Israel.

Moses considers accepting his call, which includes returning to Egypt and leading the Hebrew people. But, Moses does not quite get the picture immediately. So he quizzes the strange voice in the bush, "If they ask me who sent me, what shall I reply? What is your name?"

This is a dramatic moment, far more dramatic than most modern readers of the Bible at first realize. Here is why. In the ancient world, people believed far more

¹² These criteria of explanatory adequacy are a modified version of Alfred North Whitehead's description of speculative philosophy evaluated by logic, coherence, applicability, and adequacy. Differing from Whitehead, I make adequacy the covering concept and substitute comprehensiveness for his adequacy. See: *Process and Reality*, corrected edition, ed. by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978) 3–4.

than we do today in the power of words. Words and realities belonged together. To know the name of something was to have power over it. This is why witches and sorcerers were thought to have power; they could pronounce curses and devastating results would happen.

In Moses' era, to pronounce the name of a god in a liturgy was to gain power over the god. Priests like sorcerers could make the gods do human bidding, it was assumed. So, when Moses asks the one speaking in the bush for a name, we have arrived at a threshold moment. If the voice would give Moses a name, then Moses like a sorcerer would gain power over the voice.

How does the voice in the bush respond? Very cleverly. The voice says, ‘*ehyeh asher ‘ehyeh* (Exodus 3:14). We translate this as “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” What we find here is the Hebrew verb, ‘to be’. If we stop quoting the voice and render what is said in the third person imperfect causative intensive form, we get what has been called the Tetragrammaton (four letter word) יהוה or *Yhwh*, which we today write, *Yahweh*, sometimes *Jehovah*. The point is that the word we sometimes use for God’s name, *Yahweh*, is not a name at all. It simply says, “God is” or “God will be what God will be” or “God will cause to be whatever will be.” It is a form of a name that is no name. By the term *Yahweh*, Moses will have no power over the voice. The voice will remain mysterious and elusive.

The voice goes on to tell Moses that this word is okay to use when identifying the sovereign God of Israel. “This is my name for ever, and this is my title for all generations” (Exodus 3:15). The prophet Ezekiel reports repeatedly God saying, “And they will know that I am *Yahweh*.” But, *Yahweh* is not literally a name. *Yahweh* is more like a cipher, a place holder, a title, an identifying word. In the final analysis, the God of Israel does not have a name in the same way that we have a name.¹³

In explicating this symbolic discourse, we arrive at the constructive significance: no one of us, nor any creature in creation, can get power over the mysterious Holy One of Israel. Jewish and Christian theologians in the later tradition went on to describe God with the Latin phrase, *a se*, as being-unto-itself, or totally and utterly independent. In constructive theology, this is known as God’s aseity.

Today’s theologians like to speak of God in contrasting terms, as transcendent, meaning beyond our reach or understanding, plus immanent, meaning God is present within our domain or realm as creatures. The dynamism of the God of the Bible’s symbolic speech is that the transcendent and incomprehensible God becomes an immanent partner with the covenant people.

The result of the Moses story is that we refer to the God of Israel with titles rather than names. We refer to God or address God as Lord, Father, Holy One, and such. Even our English word ‘God’ is not a name. It is a translation of the Greek word, *theos*, which simply refers to the gods of the ancient Greek pantheon. God remains

¹³ Among the divine names, none “exhausts” God or “offers the grasp or hold of a comprehension of him. The divine names have strictly no other function than to manifest this impossibility.” Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, tr. by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 106.

nameless even for modern Christians. The use of titles rather than a name preserves in our understanding the mystery and power of the God who transcends us yet calls us into covenant. It helps guard against conceptual idolatry.

Emmanuel: God with Us

With Jesus, something else dramatic happens. The mysterious God beyond all names enters time and space and takes up residence with us creatures.^{NRS} Matthew 1:23 “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’” Jesus is the name of a baby boy; yet as Emmanuel he also has a title, “God with us.” The God of the beyond has become intimate with us. Theologians call this the incarnation which means God took on flesh in the person of Jesus.

Now, the New Testament can be a bit confusing when it comes to how it uses the word ‘God’. On the one hand, ‘God’ can refer to the first person of the Trinity, sometimes spoken of as God the Father. Jesus can pray to God the Father as if he and God have distinct wills: ^{NRS} Matthew 26:39 “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” On the other hand, ‘God’ can refer to the entire Trinity, inclusive of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus can say, ^{NRS} John 10:30 “The Father and I are one.” Some systematic theologians have tried to straighten out the confusion by using ‘God’ exclusively for the Father and ‘Godhead’ for the Trinity. But, this idea has not caught on.

So, we continue to live with an ambiguity. It is a minor confusion that creates relatively few problems.

What is so important when thinking theologically is that the mysterious God of Israel has become present in the finite and personal conditions of ordinary human life. Even though Yahweh of Israel is being revealed in the person of Jesus, the mystery almost increases rather than decreases. How can an *a se* divinity whose power transcends all that is human enter into such a humble incarnate state? What is revealed is that God is not merely a spiritual or immortal entity in contrast to us physical and mortal creatures. We now speak of God on both sides of the ledger, both the divine side and the human side.¹⁴ The God of Israel is free to become human, and this only adds to the original mystery.

Built right into every healthy concept of God must be a tension between the beyond and the intimate, the sublime and the mundane, the transcendent and the

¹⁴This is a point where general philosophical descriptions of monotheism or classical theism are insufficient to account for the distinctively Christian experience with the divine. Christians experience the *a se* God of Israel as free, free even from what philosophers might dub the divine nature. God is free to become human and to take humanity up into the divine life. Karl Barth, among others, insists that the Christian understanding of God must include the “humanity of God” revealed in the Christ event. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1968).

immanent. On the one hand, the God of Israel is majestic. ^{NRS} Psalm 93:4 “More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the LORD!” On the other hand, we can find God sleeping tenderly in a Bethlehem manger. ^{NRS} Luke 2:7 “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” Without both the beyond and the intimate, we do not have the distinctively Christian idea of God.

God as Trinity

The Holy Spirit adds to God’s presence in our personal and communal life in a non-physical way. The Holy Spirit places the suffering and rising Christ within our hearts to comfort and empower us from within. As Spirit, God is Emmanuel or “God with us” just as Jesus is “God with us” in the flesh. The Trinity has become the emblem of the Christian understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent. ^{NRS} Matthew 28:19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,”

Since the work of Thomas Aquinas, systematic theologians have become accustomed to dividing discussions of the divine into the unity or oneness of God, on the one hand, and the Trinitarian nature of God, on the other. Again, for the sake of this paper’s brevity, we will follow only the first path, not the Trinitarian path. To walk that path, we now turn to the first in our series of models, atheism.

Atheism

The term atheism puts the privative ‘a’ in front of ‘theism’ to mean belief that no god exists. Although there were very few atheists in the ancient world, there were some, as the Psalmist acknowledges. ^{NRS} Psalm 14:1 “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’”

In our post-Enlightenment culture, atheism is associated with naturalism or secular humanism allegedly based on science. Marxists and Maoists are the chief examples. Science is not itself atheistic, but naturalism or secular humanism is. The essential belief is that physical nature is the only reality, and nature is self-explanatory. The only knowledge that counts as knowledge comes from science, and science makes no conceptual room for God to create the world or to act in the world. From the point of view of an atheist, what religious people believe is false knowledge or old fashioned superstition.

In analyzing prayer, philosopher Paul Kurtz denies transcendence to the object of religious devotion. “Prayers to an absent deity...merely express one’s longings. They are private or communal soliloquies. There is no one hearing our prayers who can help us. Expressions of religious piety thus are catharses of the soul, confessing

one's fears and symbolizing one's hopes. They are one-sided transactions. There is no one on the other side to hear our pleas and supplications.”¹⁵

The most aggressive form of atheism on the current scene is purveyed by Oxford's evolutionary gadfly, Richard Dawkins. Dawkins says he is not denying the existence any specific divine figure such as Yahweh, Jesus, Allah, Baal, Zeus, or Wotan. Rather, he is denying all of them at once. All belief in such divinities can be swept up into a single “God Hypothesis,” which Dawkins attempts to falsify. “I shall define the God Hypothesis more defensibly: *there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*” Dawkins advocates “*an alternative view: any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.*”¹⁶

The kind of God which Kurtz and Dawkins repudiate is a super-human being with intelligence, a god who is responsible for the world's origin and who listens to our prayers. To be an atheist is to deny the existence of such a being.

Could a Christian concede to Kurtz and Dawkins that such a being does not exist; and, with this denial in hand, could one then proceed to affirm the God of Jesus Christ? One could imagine a form of rejection of such a supernatural being while still maintaining belief in the God of Israel. One could construct a model of God without embracing a picture of reality with super-human beings, or even being itself, for that matter. Paul Tillich, for example, holds that God is being-itself; therefore, God does not “exist” in the sense of one being among others.¹⁷ Jean Luc-Marion goes further. He affirms belief in God while denying a classical metaphysics of being. God is “anterior to the Being of beings.”¹⁸

Does atheism provide an adequate model for Christian theology? No. The denial of the reality of God is impossible to reconcile with the Christian response to a divine creator and redeemer. Even though Tillich and Marion might agree with atheists such as Kurtz or Dawkins that God does not exist as one super-human being among others, the universe devoid of divinity that the atheists wish to live in is incommensurate with what a theologian would require.

Another problem with the atheist denial is that it fails to recognize the two levels of religious discourse. The primary level of symbolic discourse uses images of a super-human being, such as God as Father, while certainly denying that God is literally a father. This heavenly father hears our prayers. Any conceptual model at the second level of religious discourse – the level of theological model construction – must interpret what is said at the first level. The conceptual model must provide a way of

¹⁵Paul Kurtz, *Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (Buffalo NY: Prometheus Books, 1986) 22.

¹⁶Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006) 31, Dawkins' italics.

¹⁷Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 volumes: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963) I: 235.

¹⁸Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, tr. by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 82.

understanding that God hears prayers. Even if it uses language such as “being-itself” or that which is “anterior” to being, it cannot rightfully deny that God hears prayers. Christian theologians may reject a literal reference to a heavenly father with ears who hears prayers; nevertheless, this is not a rejection of the referent to which this symbolic language points. God is real, even if the reality of God does not literally match the image of the super-human being with intelligence.

Agnosticism

This word, agnosticism, places the privative ‘a’ in front of the Greek word for knowledge, gnosis. An agnostic is one who affirms that he or she does not know whether a god exists and, further, that it is in principle impossible to know for certain. It was Thomas Huxley, a friend of Charles Darwin, who gave the modern world this term. He associated it with evolutionary science. As a scientist, we can-not know let alone prove whether or not the God of Christianity exists.

Can a Christian theologian rightfully claim to be an agnostic? No, even though a mild sympathy for agnosticism could be mustered. As we noticed in Moses’ conversation with the voice in the burning bush, God is mysterious. Even in revelation, God is mysterious. When we get to know God, the mystery remains. So, it is not unusual for a thoughtful Christian to say “I’m agnostic” about one or another matter regarding God.¹⁹ Yet, despite the mystery, a person of faith trusts in the God who cannot be fully known. Faith is first trust, and only later does understanding or knowledge grow.

Deism

Deism is an English word based upon the Latin for God, *Deus*. It has a specific conceptual meaning. Methodologically, deism draws its belief from natural reason alone rather than supranatural revelation. Doctrinally, deism affirms a single God who created the world at the beginning out of nothing. God created matter and energy. God also established the laws of nature, the same laws of nature that scientists can discover. Once the world was established, the God of deism withdrew. God went on permanent vacation, so to speak. God no longer intervenes in the world. The laws of nature take care of everything.

Among the implications of deism are the elimination of miracles and the evaporation of petitionary prayer. Because God does not intervene in natural events, what we believe to be miracles must in fact be natural events that we only interpret as

¹⁹ Doubt can be “part of the intellectual process of religious belief.” Geddes MacGregor, “Doubt and Belief,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition, edited by Lindsay Jones (14 Volumes: New York: MacMillan, Gale, 2005) 4:2424.

extraordinary. Because God does not intervene, we cannot expect God to end a drought with rain, heal the sick, or save us from other adversity. Divine transcendence is affirmed, but the intimacy of God shared with the faithful person in prayer is sacrificed.

Deists were very influential in Great Britain, France, Germany, and colonial America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were impatient with the denominational wars in Europe; and deism became a religious position associated with reason and the Enlightenment. Freemasons openly embraced deism, as did Unitarians. The pyramid pictured on the obverse of the US dollar bill depicts the all-seeing eye of the deistic God. Mozart's *Zauberflöte* (Magic Flute) is dedicated to deism.

Can Christian theologians be deists? Some have found Christian commitments and deism compatible.²⁰ Deists affirm that God creates the world from nothing, as does most of the Christian tradition. And, thoughtful Christians can be rationalists. Yet, deism presents a problem. The God of Moses and Jesus is an active God, one who is immanent and involved. The God Christians worship comes to us as Emmanuel, God with us. Deism is unsympathetic to this emphasis within the Christian understanding.

Pantheism

Our word pantheism places ‘pan’ meaning ‘all’ in front of the Greek word for belief in God, theism.²¹ Pantheism is the belief that all things are divine. The being of God and the being of the world are co-spatial and co-temporal.

Pantheists distinguish between plurality and unity. Our everyday experience seems to indicate that the world is plural, made up of a wide diversity of things. Each one of us, as a subjective person, seems to be an individual, one person among others. However, this is an illusion. Down deep, below the level of perception, all things are only one thing. That one thing is the divine reality. The spiritual task is to get beneath the surface illusion and discover the deeper unity, to realize that even you as an apparently independent self are at one with the All, the divine whole of reality. “I am Brahman” (*aham Brahmasmi*), said the Advaita philosopher, Shankara.²²

²⁰ See: Allen W. Wood, “Deism,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 4:2251–2252.

²¹ The term ‘pantheism’ goes back to John Toland (1670–1722).

²² “I am Brahman,” *aham Brahmasmi*, points to the ultimate and essential oneness of individual self and of Supreme Self (atman), and the comprehensive reality behind them both, Brahman. Interestingly, within the Advaita tradition, two versions of Brahman have appeared; nirguna Brahman, the sublime divine reality so transcendent that it stands beyond all attributes, and saguna Brahman, a concept of the divine which includes attributes similar to the personal God of theism. Of these two, the founding exponent of Advaita, Sri Shankaracharya (788–820 CE), commonly known as Shankara, embraces only the first. Despite myriads of gods and goddesses in Hindu practice, nirguna Brahman has become the dominant Hindu concept of ultimate reality, of the truly divine.

It is sometimes difficult to tell if a pantheist believes the divine is transcendent or not. If the divine is co-extensive with the world, then the divine is finite or limited just as the world is. Yet, an element of transcendence peeks through with the idea of levels of reality. The deeper level is more real than the superficial level. Even though on the surface the world may look ordinary, down deep it is sacred. The created world is a manifestation of the underlying being of the divine reality. We creatures and all living things are actually divine. We are a part of God. Could we describe this deeper level where all separate things are united into one thing as a form of transcendence?

The Hindus in India call the All or unity of reality *Brahman*, and the illusion of multiplicity *maya*, in Sanskrit. When Hindus speak of the gods, devas, they mean intermediate entities such as Shiva or Vishnu who represent Brahman to our finite and limited human minds. Brahman is a reality that lies beyond the gods. What is transcendent for a Hindu is Brahman, more primary than the gods, so to speak.

In our own era in the Western world, pantheism is on the rise. New Age Spirituality has incorporated pantheism. The New Age emphasizes the sacredness of all things.²³ This translates into ecological ethics. By emphasizing that the planet earth is divine and hence sacred in its depths, some ecologists argue that we should leave nature alone. We should withdraw our attempts to transform nature through technology, because this is a form of profaning what is sacred. Rather, we should acknowledge that the natural world is intrinsically valuable and protect the ecosphere from further deterioration.

Can a Christian theologian be a pantheist? Certainly not, if the God of Israel is equated with Shiva or Vishnu. These Hindu gods are less than ultimate. They merely mediate Brahman, which is more ultimate. Well, then, can a Christian theologian equate God with Brahman? No, not quite. Both Brahman and God are ultimate, to be sure. Yet, there is a decisive difference. Brahman is impersonal. God, according to Christian theology, in sharp contrast, is personal. We speak of the Trinity as made up of three persons. In fact, in Western civilization our concept of a human person is in large part derived from the Christian understanding of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as persons. Our relationship with God is interactive, interpersonal. We are not manifestations or extensions of the divine life in an illusory creation. Rather, we are a separate reality being brought into the divine life through the work of redemption.

God for the Christian stands against the world while loving the world. The world is not a manifestation of the divine, for Christians. The world is a creation, something God created from nothing. God relates to the world as something other-than-God. The God who trans-scends the world loves the world; and love requires that the world be other-in-relationship to God. God does not love the world as an extension of God's own being.

²³ See Ted Peters, *The Cosmic Self: A Penetrating Look at Today's New Age Movements* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

Even so, one aspect of pantheism is attractive to Christian eyes, namely, the idea that the sacred is everywhere present, that we need only look beneath the surface to see the presence of the ultimate divine reality. Christians agree with Hindus and New Agers on this point. However, the New Age version of pantheism which renders all of nature sacred and decrees technology to be profane presents a problem. For Christian theology, nature is not sacred. Only God is sacred. God may be present everywhere in the world of nature, to be sure; but this does not make nature itself sacred.

Polytheism and Henotheism

Polytheism is belief in many gods, as the prefix ‘poly’ implies. In its most primitive or basic form, polytheists believe spirits inhabit and direct the forces of nature. Native Americans before the arrival of the Europeans believed in the manitos, spirits belonging to various species of animals they would hunt. Jesuit missionaries from France in the sixteenth century tried to convey what Christians mean by God, and found it a challenge. They invented the concept of the “Great Spirit” who is the source of all the elemental spirits. The natives resisted joining the Christian church, but they loved the idea of the Great Spirit. The concept of the single Great Spirit spread from tribe to tribe across the continent and became a major part of Native American religion.

In biblical times the polytheism of Greece and Rome framed the experience of the first Christians. The gods were associated with natural forces. Zeus in Greece, renamed Jupiter in Rome, was the sky god with the thunder bolt as his emblem. Aphrodite in Greece, renamed Venus in Rome, was the goddess of love; and her son, Eros or Cupid, is still seen on Valentine cards with an arrow aimed right at your heart.

Henotheism is polytheism with an emphasis on loyalty to only one of the gods, or in the superiority of one’s own god over the gods of foreigners. In the ancient world when one nation would conquer another, the statues of the native gods would be torn down and replaced with statues of the conquerors. Change rulers, change gods. In the biblical story of Ruth, Naomi in Moab tells Ruth she will follow her back to Israel. Naomi’s words have become the song, “Whither thou goest,” sung today at weddings.^{KJV} Ruth 1:16 “And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.” Note that when Ruth moves to Israel, she will worship the God of Israel. Change countries, change gods. This is henotheism.

The Hindus combine pantheism and polytheism. Every individual Hindu can select which god to worship, because the worship of a god is a means to a further end, namely, the acknowledgement of Brahman. The various gods are subordinate to Brahman. The plurality of gods funnels down into the unity of the one, Brahman.

Can Christian theologians rely on a polytheistic or henotheistic model to conceptualize the divine? No, not likely. Already in New Testament times the Christians realized that their belief in the one God of Moses and Jesus could not be reconciled with the nationalistic gods of the various peoples, nor with the nature gods of polytheism. Such divine figures were less than ultimate, less than transcendent; and they tended to bless the tyranny of established peoples and governments. In response, Christians steadfastly avoided ascribing symbols or pictures of God the Father for more than a 1,000 years, because they wanted to avoid any resemblance between their concept of God and that of Zeus or Jupiter. From the Christian point of view, the gods of polytheism are too ordinary, too this worldly, to match the sublime majesty of the Holy One of Israel. Only a transcendent God can stand in judgment against human tyranny as we find it in social strictures, peoplehood, or nationalism.

Theism or Monotheism

If Christians would be compelled to join a club of believers in God, they would most likely join with other monotheists such as Jews and Muslims.²⁴ The word ‘theism’ simply means belief in God; and ‘monotheism’ confirms belief in one divine reality, not many. What is distinctive to theism has to do with God’s relationship with the world. According to theists, God is *a se*, totally independent and totally free. Without God, the world would not exist.

Further, most theists claim that God created the world out of nothing. Without God, the Big Bang could not have banged. Even today, the world of nature is utterly dependent on the will of God to sustain it in existence. Should God change the divine mind and withdraw support, all of reality would suddenly drop into nonbeing and we would not even be aware of the loss. Everything, including our consciousness, would blink out of existence.

Conversely, the fact that we wake up in the morning and celebrate the singing of the birds is a gift of God’s grace through creation.

The key element in this model of God is creation out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo* in Latin. ^{NRS} Romans 4:17 God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” Because God begins with nothing and then creates the

²⁴ One problem with joining a club of monotheists is that the alleged divine nature promulgated by monotheism accounts solely for divine transcendence; and the emphasis on divine immanence revealed in the incarnation is difficult to account for conceptually. A related problem is that the club of monotheists gives precedence to the unity of God, rendering subordinate what is revelatory for Christians, namely, the Trinity. So important is this that Karl Barth places the revelation of the Trinity in the methodology section of his Church Dogmatics, prior to the section on God. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 Volumes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936–1962) I:1.

world, we have testimony that God is all-powerful. Biblical symbols such as Lord and King suggest that we construct a model of God with aseity and omnipotence.²⁵

There is more to theism. In contrast to deism, God for the theists is active. Rather than let the world just run itself, the God of theism monitors nature and history in such a way as to ensure that over the long run the divine will is done. God daily provides for the world; and theologians use the word ‘providence’ to describe God’s continued activity in the world.

Theists tend to believe in miracles and also in prayer. Miracles are rare, because God’s main way of providing for the world is through matter, energy, and the laws of nature. Theists are close to deists here. Yet, God may intervene from time to time in an act of special providence. This is a miracle. Miracles are invisible to science, because they cannot be reduced to an incident within the laws of nature as those laws are currently in effect.

On the issue of the miraculous, we may divide theists into supranaturalist and naturalist camps. The suprnatualists emphasize the interventionist quality to divine action; God’s causal activity could be distinguished from the causal nexus of the natural world. Other theists attempt to avoid suprnatualism, however, contending that divine action is compatible with the world’s causal nexus. God still acts, but divine actions are not discernible as separate efficient causes. For this latter group, “miracle” is word seldom used even when affirming that God acts.

Similarly, theists pray for rain and healing and comfort and world peace. When theists pray, they expect God to listen and to incorporate such prayers into the divine will for one’s personal life as well as for the entire creation. The language of prayer as well as the language of worship is typically personal in character, treating God as a person. Conceptual models of God which rely upon metaphysical or ontological discourse attempt to retain the personal, even if interpreting it at a level of abstraction that is suprapersonal.

Recently, some American evangelical theologians have been proposing open theism.²⁶ By ‘open’ they mean God is open to an inter-dependent relation with the

²⁵ Wesley Wildman distinguishes between determinate entity and ground-of-being theisms. “Determinate entity views assert that God is an existent entity with determinate features including intentions, plans, and capacities to act...By contrast, ground-of-being theologies challenge the very vocabulary of divine existence or non-existence. They interpret symbolically the application to ultimate realities of personal categories such as intentions and actions, and regard literalized metaphysical use of such ideas as a category mistake.” “Ground-of-Being Theologies,” in Philip Clayton and Zachary Simpson, editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 612–613. As we saw earlier, contemporary atheists reject determinate entity theism. They do not seem to address ground-of-being theism. If they did, they probably would reject this as well.

²⁶ See: Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2001) and “Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics,” *Dialog* 44:3 (Fall 2005) 237–245. Philip Clayton tries to tie open theism, process theology, and Trinitarian atheology “...kenotic trinitarian panentheism is a view that open theists can, and should, accept. Yet, at the same time it also retains the most fundamental contributions of process theology. The being of God is not identical to the events in the world...almost no process theologian actually accepts a full identity between them...there are a number of viable ways for process thinkers to be Trinitarian theologians.” “Kenotic Trinitarian Panentheism,” *Dialog*, 44:1 (Fall 2005) 254.

world. God begins with aseity and freedom; but then God sacrifices this independence. God decides freely to limit the divine self. God decides to limit the exercise of divine power. This divine self-limitation opens up freedom for the world to engage in self-organization and even to fall into sin and evil. By being open, God then abides with the fallen world and works within the world for its redemption. What open theism demonstrates is the impulse within theistic models of God to emphasize divine involvement in the world of creatures.

In summary, in contrast to deists, theists believe God acts in the world. In contrast to polytheists, theists believe there is only one divine reality. In contrast to pantheists, theists believe God is personal and that God is qualitatively different from the world; God loves the world as one person would love another. What theists or monotheists achieve is an adequate conceptualization of divine transcendence; yet, it is difficult to move coherently within this model of God toward divine immanence. Although most Christians over the centuries have been theists, this concern for immanence has led some to consider other options, such as panentheism.

Panentheism

How might we explicate what Saint Paul says in^{NRS} Acts 17:28? “For ‘In him [God] we live and move and have our being’.” Now, which model best interprets what is said here? The model of panentheism stands ready.

As the word panentheism indicates, what is affirmed here is that all things exist within God’s being.²⁷ The entire world of nature and history exist within God’s being; but they do not exhaust God’s being. There is a little bit of God left over, so to speak.²⁸

Sometimes panentheists use a human analogy. They say that God relates to the world like our mind relates to our body. Our mind is totally dependent on our body to exist, of course; yet, our thinking seems to transcend our body at certain points. Our mind can look at our body and even guide our body. The world is God’s body; and God is the mind of the world.

This means that God did not create the world out of nothing. Panentheists reject *creatio ex nihilo*. They prefer the idea of continuing creation, *creatio continua*, to emphasize the shared temporal relationship between the world and God. Continuing creation for the panentheist is similar to providence for the theist.

This further implies that the world must have existed backwards in time just as long as God has. And, the world will continue to exist into the future as long as there

²⁷ The term ‘panentheism’ goes back to K.F. Krause (1781–1832), an interpreter of Hegel and Fichte. See: Charles Hartshorne, “Pantheism and Panentheism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 10:6960–6965.

²⁸ Panentheism “differs from much traditional theism insofar as the latter stressed the mutual externality of God and the world, with God conceived as occupying another, supernatural, sphere. It differs from pantheism when pantheism is understood to be the identification of God and the world.” John B. Cobb, Jr., *God and the World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969) 80.

is a God. According to panentheism, God loses aseity, loses independence. The world and God are mutually inter-dependent. Similar to pantheists, panentheists believe that everything in the world is connected to everything else; and everything is connected to God. God's being and the being of the world are inseparable.

The God of panentheism is finite, not infinite. Big, maybe, but not infinite. The physical body of God is co-extensive with the physical make-up of the universe. Only the mind of God transcends the physical plenitude. Ontological transcendence is sacrificed.

This also means that God cannot love the world as we would love another person; rather, God must love the world as we would love our own body. God's love for the world is a form of self-love.

Process theologians and some contemporary feminist theologians find panentheism attractive. They object to the cultural connotations of theism, where God is pictured as an omnipotent King or Lord or Father. These symbols of dominance have tended to reinforce hierarchical thinking and patriarchy over the centuries. Feminists object as well to the idea of creation out of nothing, because it implies total power over the world. Panentheism provides an attractive alternative model for feminists, because it pictures God as connected, as more relational.²⁹ The love of God for the world according to the panentheist is an extension of God's love for God's own body; and feminists find this a good model for a woman. A woman should love others as an extension of her own self-esteem and self-care.

From the point of view of most theists, panentheism is an unacceptable model for explicating the biblical experience with the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ. The chief complaint is that the image of interdependence between God and the world compromises God's freedom and omnipotence, eliminating divine aseity. Yet, what is attractive to Christian sensibilities is panentheism's emphasis on divine involvement in the world of creatures.

I tend to side with the theists against the panentheists. What cannot be surrendered is God's freedom and power. God needs both freedom and power to exact redemption, to raise the dead, and to usher in the new creation. The world is more than other to God. It is estranged. Our world of creation is estranged from its creator; and the biblical promise is that this estrangement will be overcome. The death of Jesus on the cross symbolizes the distance between God and the world; and the resurrection of Jesus symbolizes the divine promise that this distance will at some point be overcome. The oneness of God and the world is today a promise, tomorrow a reality. If panentheism can become a satisfying model for interpreting the biblical language about God, then it can do so only eschatologically.

²⁹ "Theology, as the way in which we interpret existence in a world where God is for us, will be expressed in relational language," writes Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki. *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 3. She adds: "It is not theology about feminist issues, but it is feminist theology." *Ibid.*, vi, Suchocki's italics.

Eschatological Panentheism

Now, I would like to try constructing an experimental model of God that combines some of the best features of theism and the best features of panentheism. This model will side with theism in affirming that God is *a se*, independent, free, and omnipotent. It will also side with panentheism in emphasizing relationality and connectedness. This model will affirm both creation out of nothing as well as continuing creation. Then, in addition, it will fold in two characteristics of God described in the Bible but not yet built into the above models, namely, God's promise to act in the future and, further, that this future act will be redemptive.

Let us put together three passages from Scripture which are not normally associated. The first is from the creation account in Genesis 1:31: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." In this new model, "very good" will apply to the future, not the past. The second passage is Revelation 21:1, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth." The new heaven and the new earth God promises here are actually our present heaven and earth in their final and perfected form. God's future redemption will be the completion of the creation begun back in Genesis 1. The third passage reminds us that God remains mysterious even in revelation. It is 1 Corinthians 13:12, "now we see in a mirror dimly." Because we see God only in a mirror dimly now, our concept of God must be a construction, and a blurry construction at that. Still, we'll do our experimental best.

Here is the key principle of this new model: God creates from the future, not the past. God creates by giving the universe a future. More. God's creative work is also God's redemptive work.

Here is what it means. God starts with redemption and then draws all of creation toward it. Or, perhaps better said, God's ongoing creative work is also God's redeeming work. Only a redeemed creation will be worthy of the stamp of approval we read in Genesis, "very good."

The first thing God did for the creation way back at the beginning – back in Genesis or back at the moment just prior to the Big Bang – was to give the world a future. To have a future is to have being. To lack a future is to lack being. The very definition of the creation includes its future.

At creation, God gave the world a future in two senses. The first sense of the future is openness. The gift of a future builds into physical reality its dynamism, openness, contingency, self-organization, and freedom. The bestowal of this kind of future is the bestowal to reality of the possibility of becoming something it had never been before. God provided the condition that made and still makes ongoing change in our world possible. And, what God did at the beginning God is continuing to do every moment, every second. At the very moment you are reading this, God is dispensing to our world a future that is open for variation, creativity, and newness. God unlocks the present from the grip of past causation. And this frees the present for newness in the future. God is unceasing in serving the world in this manner.

The second sense of the future is fulfillment. God gave the world a promise that, in the end, everything would be “very good.” Creation is not done yet. God is still creating the world. When it is finally completed, then we can say, “very good.” Anticipating fulfillment, we want to say that future-giving is the way God both creates and redeems the world.

It should be obvious that this model does not limit the concept of creation to a single act back at the beginning, back at the Big Bang or back in Genesis 1. John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (I.XVI) that we should not limit God to being only “a momentary Creator,” but recognize “the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception.” This means both creation at the beginning and continuing creation can be affirmed. Still more. God has not yet completed his creative work. God’s creative work will be completed when the world is redeemed.

This model differs from deism, according to which God created the world once upon a time and then went on vacation to let the world run on its own. Instead, this model says that God’s creative act of imparting an open future is an ongoing one. Affirmed here is creation from nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*. Yet, also affirmed is the creative power by which God brought being out of nonbeing; this continues to sustain the world today.

Now, what about the name, eschatological panentheism? The term eschatology originates with the Greek word for ‘last things’, for the final consummation of God’s entire drama with the creation. When the New Testament mentions the Kingdom of God or new creation or resurrection, it is talking about eschatology. This is the future dimension.

As we noted above, most Christian theologians in the past have conceived of God according to the model of theism, or monotheism. This model requires that God and the world be different, separate, independent of one another. Yet, as we look forward to the future God has promised, we look forward to a world in which God dwells fully. That future world – the one God declares to be “very good” – will enter and remain within the divine life. The creation will no longer be other. It will dwell within God’s own personal and interactive life. The term ‘panentheism’ is the best one to describe what God promises. We may be theists today, but panentheists tomorrow.

Concept of God	Creator?	Active in the world?	Aseity?
Atheism	No	No	No
Agnosticism	No?	No?	No?
Deism	Yes	No	Yes
Pantheism	Yes	No	No
Polytheism	No	Yes	No
Henotheism	No	Yes	No
Theism	Yes	Yes	Yes
Panentheism	No	Yes	No
Eschatological Panentheism	Yes	Yes	Yes

Conclusion

“It is precisely the emerging threefold understanding of Israel’s God that prevents a move towards the high-and-dry ‘god’ of Deism on the one hand, and the low-and-wet ‘god’ of pantheism on the other, together with their respective half-cousins, the ‘interventionist god’ of dualist supernaturalism, and the ‘panentheist’ deity of much contemporary speculation,” writes New Testament historian N. T. Wright.³⁰ As mentioned above, in another setting we could have walked the path toward Trinitarian theology. In this essay, however, we have followed the path toward eschatological panentheism, building on the dialectic between divine transcendence and immanence. Wright’s allusion to the dry God and the wet God remind us that this dialectic must be maintained in any satisfying model.

This dialectic between transcendence and immanence is best accounted for by eschatological panentheism, in my judgment. Especially when measured by the criterion of comprehensiveness within the goal of explanatory adequacy, eschatological panentheism more fully accounts for the primary level of discourse – the biblical symbols – conveying both divine beyondness and divine intimacy. On this basis, I contend that eschatological panentheism is the most satisfying model at second level discourse for Christian constructive theology.

Much more could and should be said about God. We have provided here only the briefest description of some of the conceptual models of God articulated in the minds of Christians and some non-Christians. In the two millennia of Christian tradition, theism has become the preferred model for conceptualizing God. The reality of God in Godself, however, is not reducible to the theistic model, or any other model for that matter. God is fundamentally mysterious.^{NRS} Romans 11:33 “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” writes St. Paul. The virtue of the model approach to theology is that it allows that mystery to remain while conceptual thought rises up from primary symbolic discourse.

³⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God, Volume III of Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 735–736.

Relativizing the Classical Tradition: Hartshorne's History of God

Donald Wayne Viney

A theme iterated throughout the writings of Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000) is that philosophers and theologians have been insufficiently attentive to the historically significant and logically possible meanings of theism. The dominant tradition in Western theology, drawing on certain elements of ancient Greek philosophy, conceived God as an immutable and infinite perfection, capable of existing without the universe, but as freely creating it from no preexisting material, guaranteeing its continued existence, and governing its destiny. “Classical theism,” as Hartshorne called this view, became the paradigm; what theists and atheists considered themselves to disagree about was classical theism. Any deviation from the doctrine had to meet a burden of proof or be considered deficient. Thus, the alternatives to classical theism were characterized, and caricatured, as doctrines of a merely finite, limited, or imperfect God which could hardly be expected to command serious philosophical attention, much less religious devotion.

To a great extent, this attitude still prevails, as one can see in the contemporary movement called “the new atheism.” Victor Stenger refers to “highly abstracted concepts of a god” developed by sophisticated theologians that would be unrecognizable to typical believers (Stenger 2007: 112). Other new atheists suggest that alternate forms of theism are disguised forms of atheism. Recently, at the Claremont School of Theology, Daniel Dennett averred that the difference between atheism and the views of Philip Clayton, a Christian theologian who questions elements of the classical tradition, is a difference in name only. About the same time, a friend of mine, sympathetic to the views of Richard Dawkins, wondered how process theism is different from “sexed-up atheism.” These examples suggest that, where the theistic question is concerned one’s options are: classical theism, atheism, or a watered-down version of theism that is really a version of atheism. Hartshorne’s reflections on the varieties of theism pose a serious challenge to this trilemma. His approach to

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the theistic question engages classical theism without privileging it as the default position in philosophical theology.

Hartshorne argued that a fair assessment of theism requires an honest attempt to explore the possible meanings of the concept of God. Indeed, the question whether God exists presupposes at least a minimal understanding of what is meant by the word “God.” With the aim of finding different concepts of God, Hartshorne employed two interrelated methods: First, he studied the history of philosophy, paying special attention to theologies, both Eastern and Western, at variance with classical theism. Second, he developed conceptual tools for exploring logically exhaustive sets of options in ways of thinking about deity. Only after his ninetieth birthday was he satisfied that he had found the most perspicuous array of options for thinking about theism.

My purpose in this paper is to follow Hartshorne’s thinking about the varieties of theism, especially through his use of position matrices. I will pinpoint some of the limitations of this method but also expand upon it so as to remedy some of its drawbacks. One can prove, augmenting Hartshorne’s method, that there are far more concepts of God than he realized. Hartshorne’s method, moreover, highlights the fallacy of equating theism and supernaturalism and frees the imagination to view God in naturalistic terms without collapsing into atheism. At the very least, some version of theistic naturalism stands along classical theism and atheism as a live metaphysical option. Finally, one can apply Hartshorne’s thinking to the meta-level problem of religious language and thereby clarify options among various types of kataphatic and apophatic theologies.

The Historical Approach

Hartshorne’s interest in the variety of meanings that have been given to the concept of God is illustrated in a story that he relates about Arthur Lovejoy, the great historian of ideas.

[Lovejoy] was proposed for some community responsibility, and a political committee, interviewing him to assess his fitness for the office, asked him if he believed in God. One must know Lovejoy to take his reply in the right way. It was to the effect that, so far as he knew, a number (I think nine) of different meanings had been assigned to the word *God*. He proceeded to explicate these meanings. I don’t know if he ever got to the point of endorsing one of the conceptions, or rejecting them all, or declaring his inability to decide. He was given the responsibility. With some persons there might have been evasiveness or cynicism in such a procedure. But to a Lovejoy nothing is more true than that terms of philosophical and religious dispute are full of ambiguities, so that it is idle to take a position for or against without the most particular examination of the way in which key words are used (Hartshorne 1990: 320).

Hartshorne liked this story because it shows that Lovejoy understood that the question “Does God exist?” presupposes the question “What do you mean by ‘God?’” He, and Hartshorne, understood that, taking into account what intelligent and sensitive people the world over have believed, the second question has no simple answer.

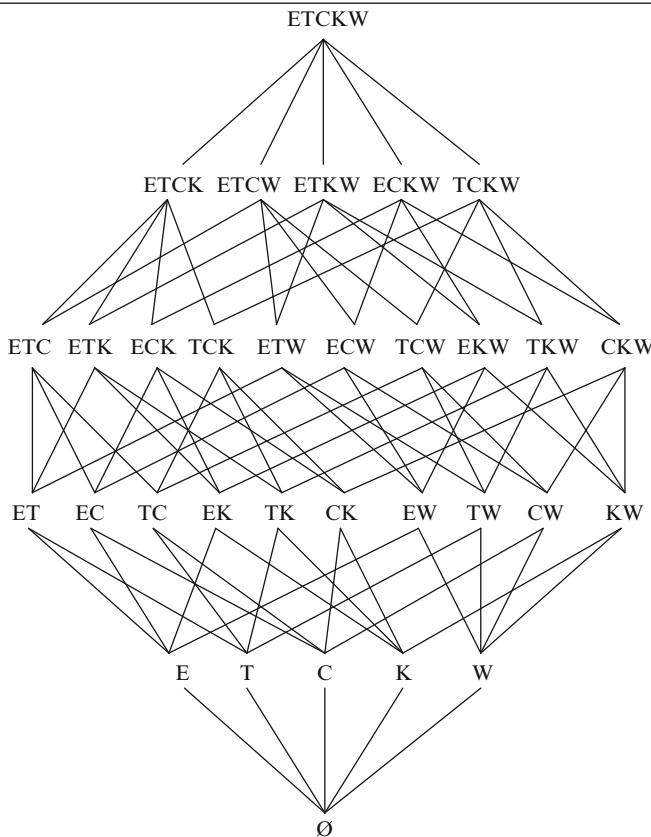
Lovejoy’s insights found popular expression in Karen Armstrong’s bestselling book *A History of God*. Armstrong canvasses a bewildering array of perspectives on

the idea of God in Western culture, from ancient Babylonian creation myths to the musings of scientists, philosophers, and theologians in the twentieth century. Despite some missteps, Armstrong's "history" is a useful reminder of the variety of forms theism has taken.¹ What is missing, however, from her narrative is any attempt, such as Lovejoy apparently made, to provide a systematic presentation of theistic doctrines.

Hartshorne, like Armstrong, was interested in the history of the idea of God (extended to include nonwestern ideas), and, following Lovejoy, he explored various ways of mapping the logically possible varieties of theism. Hartshorne treated the history of philosophy "as a laboratory of intellectual experiments in theories, and arguments for or against theories, and in judgments about theories and arguments" (1993b: 308; cf. Hahn 1991: 633). His approach to the history of philosophy is less a history of great thinkers or great systems of thought than a history of great ideas. In this way he attempted to avoid the criticism he made of others that "minor points by great philosophers are dealt with, often with loving care, but major points by minor philosophers are missed" (1970: 86). Where the concept of God is concerned, the historical approach is most clearly illustrated in *Philosophers Speak of God* (1953, 2000), edited with William L. Reese. This book presents selections from the writings of 52 philosophers and theologians as well as excerpts from the scriptures of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity. What sets this anthology apart is the inclusion of philosophers, both well-known and obscure, from both Eastern and Western traditions. For example, alongside writings of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, and Kant are selections from Ikhnaton, Channing, Ramanuja, Iqbal, and Lequyer.

Hartshorne and Reese grouped theistic doctrines in terms of five questions: Is God eternal? Is God temporal? Is God conscious? Does God know the world? and Does God include the world? Answering any of these questions in the affirmative is symbolized with a single letter: E for eternal, T for temporal, C for conscious, K for knowing the world, and W for including the world (where "including the world" means "having all things as constituents") (2000: 16). An affirmative answer to all the questions yields Hartshorne's panentheism, symbolized ETCKW; Hartshorne would eventually refer to his form of theism as "neoclassical" (1962, *passim*). Hartshorne and Reese are clear that E and T are contraries rather than contradictories. God may be both eternal and temporal, but in different respects. For example, a God that is never born and never dies could be characterized as eternal, but that same God may experience the passage of time and thus be characterized as temporal. When E and T occur together it is understood that they do not apply to God in the same respect.

¹ Armstrong speaks of Aristotle's universe as emanating from and being created by the unmoved mover (Armstrong 1993: 68–69); neither is true. Also, contrary to Armstrong, Al-Kindi's first cause argument does not proceed from the premise that *everything* has a cause to the contradictory conclusion that there is a wholly impossible deity (*Ibid.*: 174). Armstrong misreads Anselm's famous modal argument (*Ibid.*: 202) by failing to appreciate that it occurs in the context of a prayer (*fides quaerens intellectum*) and that his rationalism is balanced by the claim that God is "greater than can be conceived." A mistake relevant to the thesis of this paper is that she identifies an important but minor player as the founder of process theology, while the doyen of the movement, Charles Hartshorne, goes unnoticed (*Ibid.*: 384).

Table 1 ETCKW and its subsets

Forms of theism that diverge from ETCKW are construed by Hartshorne and Reese as partial denials, or “truncated” versions, of it (2000: 17). For example, Aristotle’s theism is EC, meaning that God is eternal and conscious, but God is *not* temporal, does *not* know the world, and does *not* include the world. Classical theism is ECK, and classical pantheism is ECKW. What Hartshorne and Reese call temporalistic theism, symbolized ETCK, is represented by Fausto Socinus and Jules Lequier. Contemporary adherents of ETCK might call it “free will theism” or “open theism” (Basinger 1996; Pinnock et al. 1994). Also included in the list of alternatives are Plotinus’ emanationism (E), extreme temporalistic theism as in Samuel Alexander’s theology (TCK), Henry Nelson Wieman’s radical temporalistic theism (T), and various forms of atheism. (Hartshorne and Reese use the expression “extreme temporalistic theism” to describe both TCK and T.)

If one assumes ETCKW as a starting point, a formal analysis reveals 32 doctrinal possibilities, 23 more than Hartshorne and Reese explicitly identify. This can be seen most clearly by considering ETCKW as a set and charting a field of sets over it—atheism is here defined as the empty set (Table 1). Hartshorne and Reese consider

some principles for eliminating alternatives. For example, if God cannot know the world without being conscious—if “ $K \rightarrow C$ ” is true—then one eliminates eight options—ETKW, ETK, EKW, TKW, EK, TK, KW, and K (2000: 17). Of course, the principle that consciousness is a necessary condition of knowledge would have to be debated before these eight alternatives could be eliminated. Another possible principle for the elimination of alternatives is that a being that includes the world and is conscious must know what it includes; if one assumes “ $(C \wedge W) \rightarrow K$ ” one eliminates ETCW, ECW, TCW, and CW. Hartshorne and Reese also argue that every combination should speak to the temporal/eternal status of God, that is, $(x)(Ex \vee Tx)$; in that case, the following options must be omitted: CKW, CK, CW, KW, C, K, and W. This still leaves seven alternatives that Hartshorne and Reese do not consider: TCKW, ETC., ETW, ET, TC, EW, TW.

If some doctrines can be eliminated other options are not addressed in the classification and some properties traditionally ascribed to God are missing. It must be admitted that the very generality of the classification scheme leaves many important issues unresolved. For example, to say that God knows the world does not specify the nature, the objects, or the mechanics of divine cognition. One finds very different views of omniscience in the works of Aquinas, Molina, and Lequyer. Or again, to say that God includes the world does not settle any disagreements among Ramanuja, Spinoza, Whitehead, Teilhard, and Hartshorne about how world-inclusion or divine embodiment is to be conceived. The subject of God’s inclusion of the world—that is to say, of panentheism—has stimulated much philosophical discussion in the twenty-first century (e.g. Clayton and Peacocke 2004; Cooper 2006).

A topic conspicuous by the scant attention paid to it in *Philosophers Speak of God* is deism. A deist, like the temporalistic theist, might adhere to ETCK. This way of stating the issue, however, does not bring out the equally important dissimilarities between the doctrines. For example, the temporalistic theism of Lequyer and the deism of Thomas Jefferson are profoundly different in the ways they conceive the world and God’s relation to it. For Lequyer, the very existence of the world makes “a spot (*tache*) in the absolute which destroys the absolute” (Hartshorne and Reese 2000: 229). Jefferson’s God, on the other hand, is said to be so “far above our power” that nothing we do has an effect on its perfection (Viney 2010: 102).

Another important lacuna in the classification system is the concept of God’s creativity. The expression *divine creativity* has different meanings, for example, for Plato, Aquinas, Jefferson, Whitehead, and Neville. These delicate issues are simply not addressed in the ETCKW classification. This is not to say that the concept of creativity is not discussed in *Philosophers Speak of God*, for it is, and extensively so. Moreover, Hartshorne and Reese noted that their classification of doctrines put stress on “consciousness and knowledge but not on volition and power” (2000: 23). They justified this emphasis as a needed corrective to the usual “tendency to put power or causality or eternity uppermost in theological speculation...” (2000: 23–24). We shall see in what follows that Hartshorne explicitly introduces the idea of creativity into his other classification schemes.

Finally, it should be noted that *divine love* is mentioned only in passing by Hartshorne and Reese. This is surprising in light of Hartshorne’s emphasis in

other writings that this is the most important characteristic of God (e.g. 1941: 396, 1997: 70, 167, 213). For Hartshorne, “God is love” was his “ultimate intuitive clue in philosophy” (Hahn 1991: 634 and 700). Early in his career he even said that he strove to show that “all concepts get their meaning from that axiom” (Auxier and Davies 2001: 14). Hartshorne and Reese maintain, in their critical comments on Al-Ghazali, that love is the essence of God (2000: 110) and, in their discussion of Sigmund Freud, they say that the injunction to love one’s neighbor as oneself is a statement of the religious ideal (2000: 482). Thus, divine love functions as something like a regulative ideal in the assessment of theistic doctrines, but it is not an explicit part of the classification system.

Despite its limitations, Hartshorne’s approach to the history of philosophy is conducive to discovering ideas about God that have been marginalized or ignored by the regnant tradition. The classificatory system of *Philosophers Speak of God*, while being incomplete, allows one a glimpse not only of some historically significant forms of theism but also alternatives not usually discussed. A noteworthy example is Hartshorne’s inclusion of an excerpt from the writings of Lequier, the first to appear in English (2000: 227–230). Harvey Brimmer, Hartshorne’s student at Emory University, wrote a dissertation on Lequier. It was, moreover, the mention of Lequier in Hartshorne’s writings that led to my own work on this much neglected French philosopher (Viney 2009; Lequier 1998, 1999).

The classification of theistic ideas in *Philosophers Speak of God* advances discussion of the concept of God by providing a new gestalt that invites a rethinking of issues in philosophical theology. Before Hartshorne and Reese, classical theism held pride of place as the normative theistic doctrine. All other views were considered inferior versions of classical theism. *Philosophers Speak of God* made a Copernican-like shift by characterizing classical theism (ECK), among others, as a “truncated” version of a more inclusive view, a “neo-classical” understanding of the concept of God (ETCKW). Hartshorne and Reese thereby proposed that neoclassical theism be considered the norm for the concept of God, of which all else is a lesser rival.

The Conceptual Approach

Hartshorne’s conceptual approach to discovering the varieties of theism complements and gives systematic structure to his study of the history of ideas, and holds the promise of remedying some of its shortcomings. From the late 1930s until the publication of *The Zero Fallacy* in 1997 Hartshorne continually refined the ways in which to think of the logically possible varieties of theism. In the early stages of his thinking Hartshorne focused on the meanings of perfection. As his thought developed he explored the ways in which polar contrasts could apply to both God and the world.

The earliest example of the conceptual approach is the 1940 essay, “Three Ideas About God.” The three ideas are:

1. God is in all respects perfect or complete.
2. God is perfect and complete in some respects, but not in all.
3. God is in no respect entirely perfect.

Table 2 God as A-perfect or R-perfect

1.	A	<i>A-perfect</i> in <i>all</i> respects.
2.	AR	<i>A-perfect</i> in <i>some</i> respects, <i>R-perfect</i> in all others.
3.	ARI	<i>A-perfect, R-perfect</i> , and imperfect, each in <i>some</i> respects.
4.	AI	<i>A-perfect</i> in <i>some</i> respects, imperfect in all others.
5.	R	<i>R-perfect</i> in <i>all</i> respects.
6.	RI	<i>R-perfect</i> in <i>some</i> respects, imperfect in all others.
7.	I	Imperfect in <i>all</i> respects.

Hartshorne argues for the merits of the second idea and rejects the other two. What is important for our purposes is that he expresses the second idea in two ways. In the first way he says that “a God *both* perfect and imperfect will be unchanging in the ways in which he is perfect, and changing in the ways in which he is not perfect” (1953: 160). In the second way, Hartshorne avers that “perfection” has different meanings and it may be incorrect to speak even of a changing God as *imperfect*. God may be, in some respects, unsurpassable by all others, but in other respects, surpassable, but only by the divine self.

The 1940 essay is the last time that Hartshorne referred to the God in whom he believed as in any way imperfect. (It was a strange oversight when in 1953, in *Reality as Social Process*, he reprinted this essay without revising it.) In 1941, in *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism*, he was much clearer about the meanings of perfection and about “The Formally Possible Doctrines” of God. He says that a God that is unsurpassable by any being, including the divine self, possesses *A-perfection*, or absolute perfection. A God that is unsurpassable by any being, excluding the divine self possesses *R-perfection*, or relative perfection. Hartshorne notes that a single being may possess both kinds of perfection provided that it does not have them in the same respect. Thus, rather than saying, as he had a year earlier, that God is perfect in some respects and imperfect in others, he says that God is both *A-perfect* and *R-perfect* in different respects.

If one adds the possibility of denying either *A-perfection* or *R-perfection* and if one assumes that all aspects of a being must be taken into account, one has an exhaustive classification (Table 2, modified from Hartshorne 1941: 9). If God is in no respect imperfect then (1), (2), and (5) are the theistic options. Ideas of a deity or deities that are merely finite, limited, or even wicked are covered by the other options. The seventh option may also be considered the atheistic alternative insofar as it includes the situation in which there is no being that is in any respect perfect.

Hartshorne's classification is an improvement upon most treatments of the theistic question before his time. By introducing the concept of *R-perfection* he demonstrates that most philosophers and theologians, including those who assume that God can in no way be imperfect, have not considered an important alternative, namely that there could be a perfect form of change in the divine being. Thus, to do justice to the theistic question—including the question whether God exists—one must place beside classical theism (1), views of God that allow for *R-perfection* as

possible ways to conceive the divine reality. Hartshorne himself makes a clean break with classical theism when he refers to God as “the self-surpassing surpasser of all” (1948: 20).²

The categories of *Man's Vision of God* are also superior to those later developed in *Philosophers Speak of God* insofar as they make explicit that *perfection* is the defining feature of deity. By speaking of perfection rather than eternity, temporality, consciousness, knowledge, or world-inclusion, Hartshorne could give a more prominent role to the idea of divine love. In *Philosophers Speak of God* he and Reese wrote, “A genuine acceptance of ‘God is love’ is not easily learned, even from Christian—or Jewish—theologians” (2000: 110). The problem is that the dominant theologies in Christian and Jewish circles emphasized God’s *A-perfection* and ignored the category of *R-perfection*. God could move the world but was unmoved by it. This involved the difficult if not impossible idea that divine love, unlike human love, is in no way affected by the beloved. By focusing on the logic of perfection (the title of one of his later works) Hartshorne could more easily develop a philosophical theology that takes love seriously as an experience of which God is capable rather than as being, as it was for the classical tradition, a mere behavior of deity. Hartshorne’s form of theism is no mere theological behaviorism. As he would later say, God not only moves others, but is moved by them in the best possible way: God is the most *and best* moved mover (Viney 2006).

Hartshorne’s next attempt at categorizing theistic doctrines was in “A Mathematical Analysis of Theism” (1943), reprinted a decade later as the epilogue of *Philosophers Speak of God*. In this article Hartshorne again used the distinction between *A-perfection* and *R-perfection*. But now he adds the distinction between God as in some sense independent and creative of the universe and God as inclusive of, and possibly identical to, the universe. This yields a ninefold classification, assuming that both contrasts are represented (AR and CW), and excluding the possibilities where either God or the universe do not exist (1943: 34; 2000: 512) (Table 3).³ This classification preserves the contrast between classical theism (1) and views that allow for *R-perfection*. The *R-perfect* options, however, now branch into the three possibilities, (2), (5), and (8). Hartshorne’s position is represented by (5).

I noted previously that the classificatory scheme of *Philosophers Speak of God* omits the concept of divine creativity. The 1943 classification includes this idea but leaves it undefined. The letter C means “God as *in some sense* independent and creative of the universe” [emphasis mine]. According to this broad interpretation, Plato, Aquinas, Jefferson, Teilhard, Whitehead, and Neville all believe in divine

²Oliva Blanchette provides an excellent exposition of Aquinas’ thoughts on the meaning of perfection as applied to God (Blanchette 1994). This article should be required reading for all parties to the debate about the concept of perfection. In my view, however, her analysis illustrates Hartshorne’s complaint that classical theists privileged the category of being over that of becoming and thus left no room for R-perfection.

³One can easily see, by charting a field of sets over ARCW, analogous to Table 1, that Hartshorne omits consideration of seven alternatives—AR, CW, A, R, C, W, and 0. One could argue that A most closely represents Aristotle’s theism in this classification.

Table 3 Hartshorne's 1943 classification

(1) A-C	(4) A-CW	(7) A-W
(2) AR-C	(5) AR-CW	(8) AR-W
(3) R-C	(6) R-CW	(9) R-W

A *A-perfect*, R *R-perfect*, C God as in some sense independent and creative of the universe, W God as inclusive of, and possibly identical to, the universe. When the contrasts appear side by side (e.g. AR or CW) God exhibits the qualities in different respects; a letter standing alone indicates that God exhibits the quality in all respects

Table 4 Ultimate contrasts: God and the World

	<i>God</i>	<i>World</i>
Ultimate contrasts as applied to God and the world according to classical theism	Immutable Necessary Eternal Simple Immaterial Impassible Creator	Mutable Contingent Temporal Complex Material Possible Creature

creativity. Thus, where divine creativity is concerned, the 1943 classification only distinguishes doctrines of God that affirm some sense of divine creativity and doctrines that deny it.

Hartshorne's attempt to think clearly about the logically possible forms of theism began to take its most perspicuous form with the publication of *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* (1970). He takes his clue from the different ways that classical theism applies metaphysical contrasts to God and the world.⁴ Classical theism (represented in the classifications considered thus far by ECK, A, and A-C) is the view that perfection precludes any principle of potency—God is *pure act*. By virtue of being pure actuality God is unchangeable in all respects (immutable), has no contingent qualities (necessity), is unqualified by time (eternal), lacks parts (simple) and is nonphysical (immaterial). Another consequence of the classical concept of deity is that God is wholly unaffected by worldly processes (impassible). Finally, according to classical theism, God creates the universe *ex nihilo*, from no pre-existing material. This creativity is categorically different from any creativity in the creatures.

According to classical theism, God and the world stand on opposite sides of the polar contrasts. For instance, if God is immutable, the world is mutable, if God is necessary, then the world is contingent, and so forth (Table 4). According to

⁴ Nancy Frankenberry has this to say about Hartshorne's analysis of ultimate contrasts: "Hartshorne has advanced a theory of the relations of categorial contrasts that challenges us to rethink the traditional valorizations of but one pole of each pair, as well as the metaphysical dualism that has been the legacy of the monopolar prejudice. Every bit as radical as the method of deconstructionism, his

Table 5 Necessity and contingency as applied to god and the world

	I God wholly necessary	II God wholly contingent	III God necessary and contingent	IV God neither necessary nor contingent
1. World wholly necessary	N.n	C.n	NC.n	O.n
2. World wholly contingent	N.c	C.c	NC.c	O.c
3. World necessary and contingent	N.cn	C.cn	NC.cn	O.cn
4. World neither necessary nor contingent	N.o	C.o	NC.o	O.o

N/C represent necessity and contingency as applied to God, *c/n* represent necessity and contingency as applied to the world, *O/o* can represent the atheistic and acosmic (no world) options respectively (Following Hartshorne 1970: 271–272)

Hartshorne, classical theism is *monopolar* in the sense that it associates God with only one pole of the pairs of contrasts; likewise, the world is characterized by only one side of the lists of contrasts. Hartshorne attributes each pair of contrasts, in different senses, to both God and the world—hence, *dipolar theism*, one of the names for Hartshorne’s view.

The seven contrasts listed in Table 4 are not the only ones Hartshorne discusses. There are also the contrasts absolute/relative, independent/dependent, infinite/finite, cause/effect, object/subject, actual/potential, being/becoming, psychical/physical, and others (1970: 100–101). Formally speaking, each member of a pair is such that it applies to God or it does not. Thus, for each pair there are four possibilities. For example, in the case of the necessity/contingency contrast, either (1) God is wholly necessary, (2) God is wholly contingent, (3) God is necessary and contingent in different respects, or (4) God is neither necessary nor contingent. A similar fourfold analysis applies to the world. The combined possibilities for any pair of contrasts as applied to both God and the world are 16 (Table 5). Each of these 16 possibilities is listed in *Creative Synthesis* (1970: 266, 271).⁵ Hartshorne says, however, that he did not discover the four-row, four-column arrangement until his ninetieth birthday, with the help of Joseph Pickle at Colorado College (Hartshorne 1997: 42, 84).

A significant difference between Hartshorne’s presentation of the 16-fold matrix in *Creative Synthesis* and in his later writings is the interpretation that he gives to the zeros. In *Creative Synthesis*, the zeros are the atheistic and acosmic positions

‘dipolar’ method subverts the entire history of metaphysical dualism—and enjoys the added advantage of being intelligible” (Frankenberry 1991: 302–303). Hartshorne’s most complete discussion of metaphysical contrasts is in chapter VI of *Creative Synthesis*, titled “A Logic of Ultimate Contrasts” (1970: 99–130).

⁵ In other places, Hartshorne omits the options involving zeros (1976: 18, 1985: 299, 231).

(1970: 271–72). In later discussions, however, he interprets the zeros more broadly as “God is impossible (or has no modal status)” and the “World is impossible (or has no modal status)” (1992: 18, 1993a: 17, 1993b: 296, 1997: 83). To illustrate the difference between these interpretations consider the position of Willard Quine. He would say that God does not exist, the world *does* exist, but the world has no modal status. This option cannot be represented as O.n, O.c, or as O.cn since each presupposes modal status for the world. Nor can it be represented as O.o without serious distortion, since Quine does not deny that the world exists. Another illustration of the problem is Robert Neville’s emphasis on apophatic theology. On Neville’s view, the necessary/contingent contrast is a product of God’s creative act; God cannot be characterized as either necessary or contingent, but only as indeterminate, at least prior to the act of creation. Hartshorne’s table, as I present it here, finesse these issues by interpreting the zeros in a strictly formal fashion to mean “neither necessary nor contingent,” leaving open the possibility of further refinement.⁶

Despite the problem in interpreting the zeros, the 16-fold matrix is a substantial advance on Hartshorne’s early attempts at listing the logically possible doctrines of God. First, the table explicitly includes both God and the world whereas his earlier views included the world only implicitly. Second, assuming that some positive statements about God are possible, the 16 positions are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. In other words, one of the alternatives is true and 15 are false. Third, Hartshorne constructs similar tables for other polar contrasts, providing even more detailed distinctions among theistic and atheistic doctrines (1985: 229, 231, 1986: 70, 1993a: 17; cf. Viney 1996: 118). Finally, Hartshorne’s matrices provide a precise method for making distinctions among various types of historically significant world-views: Parmenidean monism or classic Advaita Vedanta = N.o; early Buddhist thought = O.cn; Aristotle’s theism = N.cn; Aquinas’ theism = N.c; Stoic or Spinozistic pantheism = N.n; LaPlacean atheism = O.n; John Stuart Mill’s theism = C.n; William James’ theism = C.c; Lequyer’s theism = NC.c; Russell’s atheism = O.c; Hartshorne’s theism = NC.cn.

Philosophers who call themselves “free will theists” or “open theists” have occasionally complained that process theologians—and by implication, Hartshorne—are guilty of arguing from a false alternative between classical theism and panentheism, thus ignoring their favored alternative (Nash 1987: 21, 149; Pinnock et al. 1994: 9). Hartshorne’s matrices demonstrate that he is not guilty of this form of reasoning. Moreover, Hartshorne’s matrices provide a method for making distinctions among various types of free will theism. Consider the questions whether God is eternal and/or temporal (E/T) and whether God is immutable and/or mutable (I/M). William Alston, who David Basinger says was probably a free will theist (Basinger 1996: 140), argues that one may admit contingency in God but adhere to the divine immutability

⁶ My earlier preference was to accept the zeros as being the atheistic and acosmic options (Viney 1998: 212). For Hartshorne’s discussions of Quine see Hartshorne (1982: 28–31, 1984: 245–247). See also Goodwin (1978: 77–114). Hartshorne’s interactions with Neville can be found in Hartshorne (1980) and in Hahn (1991: 669–672). For a discussion of issues touching on Hartshorne’s rejection of apophatic theology see (Viney 2007; chapter 28 of this volume).

Table 6 Kataphatic and apophatic theologies I

	I	II	III	IV
1	K.k	A.k	KA.k	O.k
2	K.a	A.a	KA.a	O.a
3	K.ka	A.ka	KA.ka	O.ka
4	K.o	A.o	KA.o	O.o

K/A represent positive (kataphatic) and negative (apophatic) ascriptions to God, *k/a* represent the positive and negative cases of cosmology, *O/o* can represent the atheistic (no God) and acosmic (no world) options respectively

and nontemporality (Alston in Cobb and Gamwell 1984: 78–98). Expanding on Hartshorne’s notation we have for Alston’s theism NC/E/I.c/t/m, that is to say, God is necessary and contingent in different respects, wholly eternal and immutable, but the world is wholly contingent, temporal and mutable. Other free will theists, however, accept contingency, change, and time as part of the divine life: symbolically, NC/ET/IM.c/t/m.

Finally, it should be noted that the number of formally possible concepts of God and the world is far greater than Hartshorne seemed to realize. Hartshorne said that “the 16 options become 32 if each is subdivided into those accepting and those not accepting Plato’s mind-body analogy” (1997: 83). While this is correct, the number of formal alternatives leaps to 256 (16×16) if one combines any two pairs of contrasts. More generally, if m equals the number of contrasts one wishes to include in talking about God and the world, then 16^m is the number of formal alternatives available.

I noted in passing the problem in interpreting the zeros in the matrix. Before closing, I would like to note that some headway in addressing this issue might be made by means of what could be called a meta-matrix, specifically, a matrix that addresses the difference between kataphatic and apophatic theology. In keeping, however, with Hartshorne’s method of applying polar contrasts to both God and the world, let us speak not only of positive and negative theology but also of positive and negative cosmology (Table 6). A completely apophatic cosmology, analogous to an apophatic theology, denies that anything positive can be known about the world. Historically, the closest thing to a completely negative cosmology is Pyrronian skepticism.

As in Hartshorne’s position matrices, a letter standing alone means “in all respects” and two letters standing together mean “in some respects one way, in other respects another way.” Thus, KA means, in some respects God is known as having positive aspects and in other ways, God is known only negatively. Thus, column I and row 1 represent a completely positive theology or cosmology respectively; column II and row 2 represent a completely negative theology or cosmology respectively; column III and row 3 represent a pairing of positive and negative theology or cosmology respectively; the zeros can now be understood straightforwardly as, in column IV and row 4, the atheistic and acosmic options respectively.

Table 7 Kataphatic and apophatic theologies II

	I	II	III	IV	V
1	K.k	A.k	KA.k	AK.k	O.k
2	K.a	A.a	KA.a	AK.a	O.a
3	K.ka	A.ka	KA.ka	AK.ka	O.ka
4	K.ak	A.ak	KA.ak	AK.ak	o.ak
5	K.o	A.o	KA.o	AK.o	O.o

This matrix does not bring out the primacy that a particular philosopher might give to K or A. Hartshorne, for example, believes that in theology, primacy should be given to positive ascriptions; Maimonides seems to favor the negative. One could solve this problem by this convention: Let KA=primacy given to kataphatic theology; let AK=primacy given to apophatic theology (similarly for the cosmological cases). This results in an additional column and an additional row, yielding a 25-fold matrix (Table 7).

This matrix differs from the previous one in the third and fourth columns and rows, where emphasis on the positive or the negative has been stressed. Hartshorne's view is expressed by KA.ka whereas Neville's view is somewhere in the fourth, or AK, column. The meta-matrix is not nuanced enough to capture the differences among philosophers about literal versus analogical ascriptions, or between anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic language. As in the case of concepts of God, however, where different matricies express different polar contrasts, so in the case of theological language, more than one matrix can be used to map the formal space of different dimensions of the problem. It would not be difficult, following Hartshorne's method, to construct separate matricies for the formally possible combinations of analogical and literal language, or anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic language, as they apply to God and the world.

Conclusions

We have seen that Hartshorne's early attempts at classification omitted or did not do justice to the idea of divine creativity. His last classification scheme allows for modest improvement. Since Hartshorne includes contrasts as they apply to the world, one may speak of the world—or individuals within the world—as being creative. Thus, classical theism, which says God is creator and worldly individuals are created, can be contrasted with forms of theism that allow creativity in the creatures. For instance, Lequyer speaks of “God, who created me creator of myself” (1952: 70). The idea that genuine creativity is found in both God and non-divine beings is easily symbolized (C.c, where “C/c” represent creativity) in Hartshorne's final classification system.

It is less clear whether Hartshorne's schema can adequately address the question of deism. Deism, unlike other forms of theism, affirms divine creativity but denies God's continued involvement with the world. One might argue that deism, by denying

R-perfection but affirming a certain independence of the world from God's activity, combines the worst of classical theism and the best of Hartshorne's neoclassical theism. On the other hand, deism, like classical theism but unlike neoclassical theism, is deterministic. The deistic doctrine of the world's independence from God is tantamount to a denial of miraculous intervention from the realm of the supernatural. Hartshorne too denies miraculous intervention, but this is because the distinction between the natural and the supernatural is alien to his neoclassical metaphysics.

It is too much to ask of Hartshorne's matrices to solve differences of doctrine in philosophical theology. After all, the matrices, as Hartshorne presents them, are arrays of *formally possible alternatives* and are limited to issues in philosophical theology. They touch, only by implication, broader issues in the philosophy of religion which, following Robert Neville, I define as "the critic of abstractions in religions" (Neville 1995: 169). Religions come in many varieties, not all of them theistic. As Neville points out, it is parochial to assume that, for religions that deny or downplay the existence of God, their non-theistic perspective is the most important fact about them (*Ibid.*,: 173).⁷

Their limitations notwithstanding, Hartshorne's matrices represent a significant advance in philosophic understanding. It is useful, in the first place, to be able to map alternatives in philosophical debate if for no other reason than to avoid the fallacy of false alternatives. The matrices, used in concert with the historical approach, can illuminate the theological landscape by spotlighting not only well-known doctrines but also lesser known options. What Hartshorne calls the monopolar prejudice of classical theism (cf. Table 4) is the familiar and dominant way of thinking of God. A genuinely dipolar theism is unlikely to get a fair hearing until it is seen as a legitimate option. The matrices help to bring the dipolar options into clear relief. Indeed, we have noted that the matrices *relativize* classical theism by showing that it can be construed as a truncated version of neoclassical theism.

Equally, the matrices are useful in helping one see what is being denied by any particular theological construct. Any alternative accepted is 15 (or 24, as in our last matrix) alternatives rejected. According to Hartshorne, many philosophical errors are hidden in what philosophers deny (cf. 1997: 166). At the very least, a philosophical position can be as interesting for what it denies as for what it affirms. Hartshorne's matrices can serve theistic and non-theistic religions by outlining their denials. One may recommend Hartshorne's method as a necessary prolegomenon for dialogue among competing theological perspectives.

If Hartshorne's method, suitably refined, allows one to chart most historically significant concepts of God, it is no less effective in providing a map of some unexplored areas of philosophical theology. For example, Hartshorne's final classification scheme explicitly includes the world and raises the question how metaphysical contrasts apply to it. It is often as important to reflect on the relevance of one's doctrine of the world for one's idea of God as it is to reflect on the relevance of one's doctrine of God for one's idea of the world. Aristotle understood this when he denied that an

⁷ I place Taoism, many forms of Buddhism, Jainism, and Confucianism among the non-theistic religions.

immutable deity could know a mutable world. Aquinas too understood this when he inverted the usual dependence of the knower upon the known to show how his immutable God could know a mutable world (see Hartshorne's discussion of this in 1976). We have also seen that position matrices can be extended to include issues in the philosophy of language as this applies to theological discourse.

Hartshorne's matrices highlight the fact that not all forms of theism require supernaturalism. Traditional theism posited a two-tiered universe of the creator (God) and the created order (the creatures). The basis of the distinction is that God alone has the power to create, to bring something from nothing, or from no pre-existing material. In Hartshorne's theism—as well as some others—all creativity, including God's, requires antecedent “material” from which to create. This does not mean that principled distinctions cannot be made between God and the creatures, but the lines need not be drawn on the concept of creativity itself. Hartshorne argues that the differences lie elsewhere: for example, in the scope of creativity—God affecting and being affected by *all others*; the creatures affecting and being affected by *some but not all others*; and in the quality of creativity—God's responses are ideal and creaturely responses are always less than ideal (see especially Hartshorne 1967: chapter 2).

The issue of unexplored alternatives brings us full circle to Lovejoy's insight about the relationship between the questions *whether* God exists, *what* we mean by “God,” and even *what we mean* by the language that we use about God. Hartshorne's matrices are a dramatic demonstration that the question “Does God exist?” is at best *vague* (if one hasn't a clear vision of the alternatives) and at worst *loaded* (if one tacitly privileges one concept of God or one mode of theological discourse). If there are many forms of theism, it follows that there are many forms of atheism—as many as there are forms of theism to deny. The significance of this insight for the life of faith cannot be underestimated. Hartshorne's “history” of God frees the imagination to think of the divine in ways often bypassed by the dominant systems of belief. Theology may then prove to be as dynamic as the God in whom Charles Hartshorne believed.

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Can We Acquire Knowledge of Ultimate Reality?

Michael V. Antony

Can we acquire knowledge of ultimate reality, even significant or comprehensive knowledge? The answer I wish to offer is that for all we know we can, and there is room to rationally hope that we can. That is true, I shall maintain, whether ultimate reality is divine or non-divine, and if it is divine, whether it is personal or non-personal. At the end of the chapter I shall discuss a common response to my position. However, before presenting and defending my answer, I must first briefly discuss ultimate reality, knowledge acquisition, and kinds of possibility.

Ultimate Reality

In explaining ultimate reality, Peter van Inwagen notes that the meaning of the word ‘reality’ is closely linked to that of ‘appearance’. We typically speak of something *really* being some way in contrast to how it is apparently, or of *reality* when there is an appearance to “get behind” (e.g., the reality of a heliocentric solar system behind the appearance of the heavenly bodies rotating about the Earth). Since realities behind appearances can themselves be appearances relative to still deeper realities, *ultimate* reality, van Inwagen suggests, is the reality that is not an appearance relative to any deeper reality; or perhaps, better, the most general features of such a reality. But what if all that exists is a series of appearances behind appearances *ad infinitum*? Well, then *that*, van Inwagen suggests, will be what ultimate reality is like. So put, it seems hard to deny that there is some ultimate reality.¹

Van Inwagen’s characterization highlights two main features of our intuitive concept of ultimate reality: that there is some way reality is (even if it is all appearances), and that its most general or fundamental features are what count.

¹ van Inwagen (2002), p. 1 ff.

Although this suffices for our purposes, we need not be committed to its details. Perhaps our intuitive object-attribute metaphysics is deeply mistaken, or the concept of ultimate reality is incoherent for reasons we cannot yet grasp. In the case of a divine ultimate reality, perhaps conceiving God as a “being alongside other beings” or even as “existing” is somehow problematic. I believe, and shall assume, however, that in such cases, if necessary, the discussion in this chapter could be suitably modified to preserve its main arguments.

Knowledge Acquisition

On the matter of knowledge acquisition, I wish to ask whether *we* can acquire knowledge of ultimate reality. At issue is whether a kind of shared or *public* knowledge regarding ultimate reality can be acquired, as opposed to, say, incommunicable private knowledge. Public knowledge is what is sought in science, and other areas, both academic and non-academic (e.g., in everyday shared perceptual experiences, like a crowd watching a sporting event). It involves a common method for justifying beliefs, which is almost certain to result in belief-fixation for anyone who follows the method. It also involves a second-order justified belief to the effect that *there is* a common method that works with virtually anyone. This second-order belief licenses increased confidence in the first-order belief, resulting in epistemically superior justification of the latter.

To illustrate, suppose someone looks up at the sky and forms the first-order belief that there is a strange, luminous object moving in an easterly direction. She may harbor doubts, wondering whether she is hallucinating or imagining, or the street lights are playing tricks with her eyes. However, if she subsequently comes to justifiably believe (second-order) that anyone who looked up would believe what she does—say, because people nearby *do* look up and issue similar reports—she can rightly dismiss her doubts and increase her confidence in her first-order belief.

The operative principle is this. A justified second-order belief that a method for acquiring a first-order belief that P is a good one (in the sense that virtually anyone following the method will acquire the belief) has the following epistemic benefit: it allows one to rule out possibilities that certain errors have crept in to one’s processes of belief-formation—errors due to idiosyncratic psychological tendencies, sloppiness, oversight, biases, etc. To the degree that such errors can be ruled out, one is justified in more confidently believing that P.²

That is why public justification and knowledge are usually epistemically superior to their non-public varieties, and it is why we tend to value them most, as is evidenced

²This will hold whenever there is a non-negligible probability of our falling into error. Where there is little or no probability of error—for example, in simple cases of introspection—publicity will provide little or no epistemic benefit. On this point, and for a useful discussion of publicity in science, see Goldman (1997). For an expanded discussion of issues discussed in this section, see Antony (2013).

by the fact that we seek them out whenever possible. It is also why, I would suggest, that public justifications *intuitively* strike us as so powerful. Consequently, other things being equal (i.e., where quality of knowledge is the only consideration), it is what we should aspire to for ultimate reality as well, even divine ultimate reality.^{3, 4}

Possibility

Consider now the word ‘can’, which refers to the *possibility* of our acquiring knowledge of ultimate reality. There are various kinds of possibility, the most inclusive of which is metaphysical or logical possibility, which for our purposes can be understood as including anything whose concept is not self-contradictory.⁵ Since it is arguably metaphysically possible that bananas might have flown, if that is the only sense in which it is possible for humans to acquire knowledge of ultimate reality, that is not very informative.

A more restricted notion of possibility is natural or nomological possibility—what is possible given the laws of nature. But that is also too open-ended. There are possibilities consistent with the laws of nature that are closed off to us due to our universe’s actual history, and we are interested only in what is possible given that history. We must also assume conditions favorable to human knowledge acquisition: we are not interested, for example, in what knowledge could be acquired in the wake of a global catastrophe in which humans revert to conditions of severe poverty, illiteracy, and lawlessness. Finally, even assuming the world’s history, and conditions conducive to knowledge acquisition, there remain possibilities so improbable as to not merit serious consideration (e.g., maximally intelligent and virtuous humans popping into existence by quantum accident), so these too must be excluded.

It is in fact very difficult to characterize precisely the kind of possibility that is relevant to our discussion. At issue seems to be a kind of *practical possibility*, concerning, roughly, what is possible given that certain conditions in the actual world (like those described in the previous paragraph) are held fixed.⁶ However, there is also an especially strong focus on *psychological possibility*, because knowledge is at least

³ For many believers in a personal god, of course, quality of knowledge is not the only consideration. Still, the question of what knowledge humans *can acquire* of a divine reality is largely independent of the question of what knowledge of a divine reality humans *ought to pursue*, all things considered. This chapter concerns only the former question.

⁴ Although, if public knowledge of ultimate reality is possible, it would seem that this must be encoded in some kind of first-order representational structure like a theory or model, I shall not assume anything here about the kinds of the representations required—propositional, imagistic, experiential, some combination of these or other forms, etc.

⁵ Although metaphysical and logical possibility are often distinguished from one another in various ways, we need not do so here.

⁶ For a useful discussion of the concept of practical possibility in the context of political philosophy, see Jensen (2009).

in large part a psychological state. For this reason, and for ease of expression, in what follows I shall speak mainly of (*human*) *psychological possibility*. It must be kept in mind, however, that we are holding fixed all laws of nature, the actual history of our universe, conditions more or less conducive to knowledge acquisition, and the like.

So, is it psychologically possible for humans to acquire significant knowledge of ultimate reality, maybe even full or comprehensive knowledge? I shall argue that we have no clue whether such possibilities exist. This may seem to contradict my earlier assertion that for all we know we *can* acquire comprehensive knowledge of ultimate reality. But as we shall see below, that claim concerns a different kind of possibility: epistemic possibility.

Psychological Routes, Distances, and Limits

To make the case that we can know little or nothing about what is psychologically possible for us to know about ultimate reality, I must introduce a few concepts. Take a *psychological route* to be a path from a mind in an initial state of knowledge regarding some topic to a mind with increased or improved knowledge about that topic (the target state). The psychological route from the initial state to the target state comprises a series of *psychological transitions*—involving the acquisition and refinement of concepts, mental skills and capacities (intellectual, experiential, emotional, etc.), kinds of information, and so on. Psychological routes are to be conceived as *optimal*, in the sense that a route involves the best or most direct way of transforming a mind in the initial state to a mind in the target state. One might think here of the psychological transitions needed to transform a mind with a knowledge of addition into a mind with a knowledge of long division, or into a mind with a knowledge of calculus. Fewer psychological transitions are needed to transform a mind that can add into a mind that can divide than are needed to transform a mind that can add into a mind that can do calculus, and so we can say that the *psychological distance* between the initial and target states is greater in the latter case than in the former.

Our question is whether humans can acquire significant or comprehensive knowledge of ultimate reality. That is to say, we are concerned with a psychological route from **humans' current state of knowledge**—call this initial state of knowledge K^{CurHum} —to a target state that is full or comprehensive knowledge of **ultimate reality**—call this $K^{UltReal}$. We can think of K^{CurHum} as something like the state of knowledge of a properly functioning, well-educated, emotionally-balanced, adult human mind/brain in the second decade of the twenty-first century. This would include the stock of innate neurophysiological and cognitive-architectural features determined by our genetic makeup, as well as the concepts, knowledge, and skills (scientific, commonsensical, social, moral, etc.) from human culture that are “installed” in the brain during development. Regarding $K^{UltReal}$, I shall assume for now only that it is a metaphysically possible state for a mind to be in (e.g., an omniscient mind, at least).

In thinking of the psychological route from K^{CurHum} to $K^{UltReal}$, let us begin with the psychological transitions that an unmodified human brain, with its

genetically determined characteristics and acquired social and cultural representations, is capable of undergoing. Although not inevitable, it seems highly likely that the innate features of the human brain place limits on how much humans can grasp about reality—much as the nature of a cat's brain prohibits it from understanding the principles of organic chemistry or noncognitive metaethical positions.⁷ If so, there will be a point along the route to K^{UltReal} at which, in order to undergo further psychological transitions, a human brain would have to be altered or enhanced in a way that enables it to acquire new concepts, perform new computations, realize new states of consciousness, etc. Indeed, enhancements or alterations to our neural circuitry may be required at several points along the route to K^{UltReal} . People in the transhumanist movement, and others, believe that in the future humans will employ brain-enhancement technologies to make us vastly smarter, and more capable psychologically in other ways, than we now are.⁸ It could also be, however, that there are deep limits to what any psychologically possible, embodied mind could grasp about ultimate reality. In that case, any remaining transitions to K^{UltReal} would be merely metaphysically possible.⁹

Our Ignorance of What Is Psychologically Possible to Know About Ultimate Reality

Consider the point (assuming there is one) along the route from K^{CurHum} to K^{UltReal} at which the human brain must be altered or enhanced in order to undergo the next transition. That point represents the **maximal degree of knowledge** that is psychologically possible for **humans** to attain about ultimate reality, given the current structure of our brains. Call that point K^{MaxHum} . Next, consider the point along the route to K^{UltReal} at which alterations or enhancements to the human or transhuman (hereafter ‘(trans)human’) brain no longer facilitate increased knowledge of ultimate reality. Call that point K^{MaxHum^*} . K^{MaxHum^*} represents the most that is psychologically possible for an altered or enhanced (trans)human brain to know about ultimate reality.

Question: Can we currently know anything, in the sense of public knowledge, about where K^{MaxHum} or K^{MaxHum^*} lie on the route from K^{CurHum} to K^{UltReal} ?

One way of defending an affirmative answer would be to maintain that we *already are* quite close to having public knowledge of ultimate reality. The physicist Steven Weinberg, for example, has put forward such a view in his book *Dreams of a Final*

⁷ See, e.g., Chomsky (1975), Ch. 4; McGinn (1989).

⁸ See Savulescu and Bostrom (2009), Bostrom (2003), Kurzweil (2005), eminent scientists such as Hawking (1996) and Rees (2003), among many others.

⁹ I should add that my assumption that complete knowledge of ultimate reality is metaphysically possible might be false, even if there is an ultimate reality.

*Theory.*¹⁰ If we already possess full knowledge of ultimate reality (more or less), then we clearly *can* have it—i.e., it is psychologically possible for us to have it. It could thus be said (more or less) that $K^{CurHum} = K^{MaxHum} = K^{MaxHum^*} = K^{UltReal}$. The trouble with Weinberg’s position, however, is that it is extremely controversial, even among those committed to naturalism: many strongly disbelieve it, adopting a wide range of positions on how far we are from a complete understanding ultimate reality. To take one example, the cosmologist Martin Rees agrees with Isaac Asimov¹¹ who

likened science’s frontier to a fractal—a pattern with layer upon layer of structure, so that a tiny bit, when magnified, is a simulacrum of the whole: “No matter how much we learn, whatever is left, however small it may seem, is just as infinitely complex as the whole was to start with.”

Although Rees and Asimov are both atheists, on the view they espouse $K^{UltReal}$ is very distant from K^{CurHum} , perhaps infinitely so. And, of course, anyone who believes in a divine ultimate reality will believe that the distance from K^{CurHum} to $K^{UltReal}$ is much greater than Weinberg believes.

Such controversy entails that there is currently no public justification for, and hence no public knowledge of, the truth of Weinberg’s position (or Rees’ or Asimov’s). For even if there is a method (e.g., an argument) that would lead anyone who follows it to adopt Weinberg’s (or Rees’ or Asimov’s) position, in the face of the existing controversy there is no reason to believe (second-order) that such a method exists. Consequently, the epistemic benefits that publicity bestows are unavailable for these positions.

Another way of maintaining that we are already close to having knowledge of ultimate reality comes from religious believers—although the claim here concerns only *certain aspects* of ultimate reality, for example, that it is divine, personal, loving, merciful, etc. The idea, in other words, is that K^{CurHum} is close to *some elements* of $K^{UltReal}$. Such claims are usually accompanied by a description of the steps that must be taken to acquire knowledge of those aspects of ultimate reality. The steps rarely involve conceptual, theoretical, or other intellectual development, but have more to do with improving one’s moral character, performing rituals, performing communicative acts expressing commitment toward, or a desire to enter into a loving relationship with, the deity, and so forth. In such circumstances, it is suggested, the divine ultimate reality, or aspects of it, will often be revealed to the believer in a way that imparts knowledge.¹² However, even if that is true, at most

¹⁰ Weinberg (1992). Weinberg is cautious not to overstate his belief that the final theory is near, offering remarks such as “from time to time we catch hints that it is not very far off” (p. 6), or “[w]e may even be able to find a candidate for such a final theory among today’s string theories” (p. 235), etc. See also Horgan (1997).

¹¹ Rees (2003), p. 142; Asimov (1994), p. 472.

¹² Moser (2008) presents a view of this general sort. Questions arise here concerning revelation, an important topic that I cannot adequately treat here due to limitations of space. Suffice it to say that, although public knowledge can be imparted by way of testimony (e.g., when millions of people watch a news program on TV), I would argue that no cases of testimony about the divine that we know of have given rise to public knowledge of the divine, even if private knowledge of the divine has sometimes resulted from such testimony. See Antony (2013).

such knowledge will be private. For, again, there is far too much controversy on these matters at present for there to be public knowledge about them.

There is a third way of arguing that we can know something about where K^{MaxHum} lies on the route from K^{CurHum} to $K^{UltReal}$. As with the previous two ways, K^{MaxHum} is taken to be very close to K^{CurHum} , but not because $K^{UltReal}$ is close to K^{CurHum} . The reason, rather, is because $K^{UltReal}$ is believed to be so far removed from K^{CurHum} , so radically transcendent, that humans can make no significant progress toward $K^{UltReal}$ whatsoever. Kantian and neo-Kantian views suggest a picture of this sort, as do other views of a radically transcendent divine reality relative to all possible (trans) human representational structures. Once again, however, there is nothing approaching public justification or knowledge regarding such positions.

Since no public justification or knowledge are involved in the above claims that we already know something about where K^{MaxHum} or K^{MaxHum^*} lie on the route from K^{CurHum} to $K^{UltReal}$, we must take seriously a wide range of possibilities concerning the psychological distance between K^{CurHum} and $K^{UltReal}$, and the positions of K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} on that route. Is there any hope of our formulating and defending an account of how far (trans)humans can get—i.e., where K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} lie on the route from K^{CurHum} to $K^{UltReal}$? A bit of reflection suggests that the answer is ‘no’, and that we must remain very much in the dark about what the psychological possibilities are.

A full understanding of the relevant modal facts about K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} would involve a complete description of the psychological route from K^{CurHum} to $K^{UltReal}$ (i.e., all psychological transitions), and the positions of K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} along the route. To know anything specific about the positions of K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} , one would have to know much about the route itself. But given that we are taking seriously possibilities that the distances between K^{CurHum} and $K^{UltReal}$ and between K^{CurHum} and K^{MaxHum} are not short, how could one know any details of routes in which such possibilities obtain? After all, such routes are made up of psychological transitions through which the (trans)human mind/brain must pass in increasing its understanding of ultimate reality—*transitions humans have not yet undergone*. Consequently, so long as there is any significant distance between K^{CurHum} and K^{MaxHum} , our mind/brains as they are currently configured cannot even *conceptualize* the psychological-developmental terrain through which they must pass to achieve maximal understanding. That is not to say that we currently lack all concepts, experiential capacities, and the like that are necessary to conceive or imagine the route; on the contrary, we almost certainly possess some. But it is unlikely that those we possess would enable humans to conceive any more of the route to K^{MaxHum} than, say, Democritus could have conceived of the route from his ancient atomic theory to contemporary particle physics—even though he possessed some concepts modern physicists employ when thinking about elementary particles (*small, invisible, combine*, etc.). Similarly, if K^{MaxHum} is even somewhat distant from K^{CurHum} , it is unlikely that we can conceive or imagine much, if anything, of that route, and *a fortiori* of the route from K^{MaxHum} to K^{MaxHum^*} and $K^{UltReal}$. Certainly, we can currently *know* nothing substantive about such psychological routes, and so nothing about where K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} lie on them.

Epistemic Possibilities and Hope

At the outset, I said I would argue that for all we know we can acquire significant or comprehensive knowledge of ultimate reality. And at the end of the section “*Possibility*” I said that my claim concerns *epistemic possibility*. Let me now explain. According to a common characterization, a proposition P is epistemically possible for a thinker S if and only if P is consistent with everything S believes; or, in other words, if and only if P is not ruled out by any of S’s beliefs.¹³ (A public version of this would appeal to the consistency of P with what we take to be the stock of human knowledge.) The domain of the epistemically possible can thus be conceived as *everything that remains open to us, given what we believe about the world*.

Applying this to the question of what we can know about ultimate reality, we have seen that our ignorance of the psychological possibilities concerning K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} runs deep. But that means that virtually *the entire range of possibilities* regarding lengths of routes, and positions of K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} on them, is left open by our beliefs. Because we have no publicly justified beliefs about the positions of K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} , there is nothing that such (non-existent) beliefs can rule out. So for all we know there may be no divine reality, and K^{CurHum} is close to $K^{UltReal}$ (as Weinberg believes), or far from $K^{UltReal}$ (as Rees believes), or any number of other possibilities in between. Alternatively, if there is a divine reality, then the distance from K^{CurHum} to $K^{UltReal}$ is unlikely to be short, but how long it is is beyond our current capacity to know. Regarding K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} , unless the distance to $K^{UltReal}$ is short or nonexistent, there will be an enormous range of possibilities as to where K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} lie. Perhaps K^{MaxHum} is near to K^{CurHum} but K^{MaxHum^*} is much farther. Or perhaps both K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} are very far off. Maybe $K^{MaxHum} = K^{MaxHum^*}$ (more or less), and both K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} are positioned close to a distant $K^{UltReal}$. Who knows? All of this, of course, is sheer speculation. But that we can speculate so freely is itself is an indication of how open these possibilities are relative to our stock of publicly justified beliefs.

So although there are indefinitely many scenarios that are epistemically possible vis-à-vis what we can come to know about ultimate reality, according to a large family of such scenarios, we (or future, enhanced versions of ourselves) can attain a significant degree of knowledge about ultimate reality, possibly even full or comprehensive knowledge. That holds even if the psychological distances are great, and even if ultimate reality is divine. That is the conclusion I set out to defend.

This means there is room for hope that we can go far, even if there exists a divine reality, reaching a point where our knowledge dwarfs anything we now possess (even if it falls far short of full or comprehensive knowledge). Other things being equal, of course, the longer the psychological distance is to K^{MaxHum} or K^{MaxHum^*} , the more time it will take (trans)humans to reach those points. Approaching a very distant K^{MaxHum} or K^{MaxHum^*} could thus take centuries, millennia, or even millions of years. It would thus likely be only our very distant descendants, if anyone, who begin to achieve a

¹³This common characterization has several problems, but we can ignore them. See Huemer ([2007](#)) for one useful discussion.

deep understanding of ultimate reality. Our hopes or expectations for progress in our or our immediate descendants' lifetimes, therefore, must be adjusted accordingly.

Interesting questions arise here about the rationality of hoping for a K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} that is close to $K^{UltReal}$, and our ability to reach it. Philip Pettit suggests that hope can have a kind of epistemic rationality, but whether it can or not, it at least seems that it can be instrumentally rational.¹⁴ After all, focusing on epistemically possible scenarios in which we acquire significant knowledge about ultimate reality seems certain to increase the probability that we will realize our epistemic potential (i.e., reach K^{MaxHum} and possibly K^{MaxHum^*}), *regardless of where K^{MaxHum} and K^{MaxHum^*} are*. In any event, our epistemic situation vis-à-vis ultimate reality closely parallels our epistemic situation regarding other deep and difficult problems in science and philosophy (they both involve ignorance of psychological possibilities about what we can know, epistemic possibilities that we might make significant progress, etc.), so the story one tells there about the rationality of hope for progress, and motives for engaging in inquiry, should be closely parallel as well.

A Common Response

I would like to end by addressing a common response to the claim that, for all we know, we might acquire significant knowledge of ultimate reality, even a divine ultimate reality. The response does not involve an argument; it is more of a reaction to, or expression of, a strong feeling that humans could never come close to acquiring significant knowledge of ultimate reality, especially God or any other divine reality. This feeling, I believe, is grounded primarily in one's inability to even begin to imagine how we could traverse the vast psychological distance to a rich understanding of ultimate (divine) reality. I believe that this is the most common barrier to people accepting that we might come to know much about ultimate reality (or about other deep problems such as consciousness, free will, etc.).¹⁵

The confusion implicit in this worry, however, should be apparent. Given that we currently lack the psychological resources to see beyond what our current psychological resources permit, we should not *expect* to be able to see along any route from K^{CurHum} to $K^{UltReal}$. Cluelessness is what we should expect. Our epistemic situation,

¹⁴ Pettit (2004).

¹⁵ For believers in an infinite divine being, it might be thought that the fact that we are finite beings contributes to the feeling that we could never reach $K^{UltReal}$. But this may come to much the same thing: it is simply very hard to conceive or imagine how we, as finite beings, could come to possess significant, not to mention comprehensive or full, knowledge of an infinite being. Many would claim that having full knowledge of an infinite being would require that one *be* infinite. However, in spite of its *prima facie* plausibility, that is not yet an argument, certainly not one against our acquiring significant or comprehensive knowledge that falls slightly short of full knowledge. I suspect there is also a different factor that sometimes contributes to the feeling that humans cannot acquire significant or comprehensive knowledge of a divine reality—namely, the feeling that we *ought not* attempt to do so because there is something immoral, arrogant, blasphemous, etc. in the pursuit. Although there is much to be said about this issue, I believe that, even for such believers, the factor described in the text would often suffice on its own to generate the feeling that we cannot reach $K^{UltReal}$.

after all, would be the same for a somewhat close K^{MaxHum} and a very distant K^{MaxHum} (we would be unequipped to conceive the routes to either of them), so our epistemic situation in itself can provide no reason for disbelieving that K^{MaxHum} (or K^{MaxHum^*}) is very distant, and possibly close to $K^{UltReal}$.

This conclusion can be strengthened by reflecting on conceptual revolutions in the history of human thought, and how they transform people's visions of reality. How the world looks after a conceptual revolution in general could not have been glimpsed prior to the conceptual revolution. Longstanding problems viewed from a post-conceptual-revolution perspective often take on an entirely new character, which also could not have been predicted (or conceived) before the conceptual revolution. One need only imagine a dozen or so conceptual revolutions of Einsteinian proportions over the course of some centuries or millennia to get a sense of how easily the (trans)human *commonsense* perspective on reality could become incomprehensible and alien to us. However, for all we know, such changes might not be very far from K^{CurHum} , relatively speaking, and the psychological distance to K^{MaxHum} or K^{MaxHum^*} might be much further. Viewed in this light, it should seem obvious that we should not expect to be able to glimpse *how* we might come to acquire rich, detailed, possibly even comprehensive knowledge of ultimate reality. But that does nothing to weaken the claim that, for all we know, we might in time acquire comprehensive knowledge of the most fundamental and deepest aspects of reality.¹⁶

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Part II

Classical Theism

Introduction to Classical Theism

Thomas Williams

“Classical theism” is the name given to the model of God we find in Platonic, neo-Platonic, and Aristotelian philosophy and in Christian, Muslim, and Jewish thinkers who appropriate those traditions of classical Greek philosophy. The God of classical theism is unqualifiedly perfect, where “perfection” is conceived in ways congenial to the mind of Greek metaphysics: as requiring absolute unity, self-sufficiency, and immutability. The unqualifiedly perfect being is atemporal and immaterial – free from all limitations of time and place. It acts but is not acted upon, and so it is said to be impassible. It is perfect in knowledge, perfect in power, and perfect in goodness.

The tradition of classical theism has room for debate about how to flesh out many of the characteristics that I have mentioned. Consider, as one example among many, the debates over God’s knowledge. Aristotle regarded his Prime Mover as perfect in knowledge because it was wholly occupied with the greatest and most perfect object of knowledge, namely, itself; knowing the world of lesser things, the domain of change and chance and imperfection, could only be regarded as a derogation from its supreme perfection. Some classical theists argued that by knowing his own essence, God could know other things as well, at least in a universal way. Others – mindful of religious doctrines about particular providence, and with correspondingly different ideas about what would constitute perfection in knowledge – argued that God’s knowledge must go beyond the merely universal to include all particular beings and truths as well. This last conception of divine perfection in knowledge is what most people have in mind when they speak of divine omniscience, but omniscience in this sense has by no means been the default assumption in classical theism.

Indeed, textbook characterizations of classical theism as the view that affirms the three “omni” attributes – omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence – are deeply misleading. We have already seen that omniscience in the contemporary sense

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is only one interpretation – and a highly contested one at that – of what perfection in knowledge amounts to. Omnipotence, or perfection in power, is less controversial than omniscience, but it is also much less central to classical theism than the textbook characterization would suggest. And classical theists do not speak of omnibenevolence, but of perfect goodness. Classical theists do not think of perfection in goodness as a matter of the *extent* of God's goodness, as the ‘omni’ suggests; nor do they think of it as a matter of God's maximizing certain sorts of desirable outcomes, as the ‘benevolence’ suggests. ‘Omnibenevolence’ thus imports consequentialist assumptions that are alien to most classical theists, who associate perfection in goodness very closely with perfection in *being* and are not inclined to view goodness, whether God's or the world's, as the sort of thing that can be quantified and summed.

Far more central to the concerns of classical theists were attributes that contemporary philosophers of religion, including many who would claim the label of classical theist for themselves, either ignore or explicitly reject, such as divine simplicity, eternity, immutability, and impassibility. According to the doctrine of divine simplicity, God is one; he is in no way a composite. In particular, God does not have a variety of features or attributes that are distinct from God's nature and from each other. Our language, with its subject-predicate structure, might encourage us to think of “God is wise” or “God is good” as making the same sort of statement as “The cat is yellow” or “The man is bald,” in which we point out two distinct items: a property and the thing that bears it. But according to classical theism, such a thought would be mistaken. If God is one thing and his wisdom or goodness is something else, then God depends on something other than himself to be what he is, in violation of his perfect self-sufficiency or “aseity.” (‘Aseity’ is from the Latin *a se*, “from himself”; God's aseity is his “from-himself-ness.”) Instead, God just is – is identical with, is one and the same as – his wisdom, his goodness, his power, and so forth; and since identity is transitive, all those attributes are really identical with each other.

Just as the God of classical theism lacks what we might call “metaphysical parts” – a plurality of attributes distinct from the divine nature and from each other – he also lacks temporal parts. God is *eternal*, not in the sense that he exists at every moment of time, but in the sense that his life is not characterized by succession at all. For God there is no before and after. His life is not marked by gain and loss in the way that a time-bound being's life is, part of his life having slipped away into an unrecoverable past, part of it still to be experienced in a future that has not yet arrived, and only this tiny sliver of a “now” present and accessible to him. Instead, God enjoys “the total and complete possession of illimitable life all at once,” as Boethius put it in Book V of his *Consolation of Philosophy*. Because there is no before and after in God, God cannot undergo change, and so the doctrine of divine eternity leads directly to the claim that God is *immutable*.

Closely associated with immutability is the claim that God is *impassible*: that is, God cannot be acted upon by anything outside himself. If something other than God were able to affect God, God would undergo change. Now perhaps we might think that impassibility does not quite entail immutability, because we might be able to imagine something other than God that always acts uniformly on God; in this way

God would be acted upon without undergoing change. (Whether the classical theist would regard such a scenario as conceivable is doubtful.) But divine aseity certainly does entail impassibility: for if God could be acted upon by something other than himself, he would in some respect depend on something other than himself to be what he is, in violation of aseity.

Classical theists thus typically understand God's perfection as requiring simplicity, eternity, immutability, and impassibility, and not merely his perfection in knowledge, power, and goodness. The papers in this section all keep their focus squarely on these central claims of classical theism, even as they consider a wide range of thinkers and topics and give a good idea of the kinds of disputes that have characterized the tradition. We begin with Aristotle – not, one might initially think, the most obvious starting point, since as R. Michael Olson notes in “Aristotle on God: Divine *Nous* as Unmoved Mover,” “Aristotle is not primarily known as a theologian. . . . Aristotle writes no treatise on God, the gods, or divinity, and he offers no systematic theology.” Yet if Aristotle’s account of God is not central to his own thought, the conceptual resources that Aristotle deploys become foundational for classical theism. By tracing the complex interrelationships among such notions as *nous*, cause, motion, substance, and actuality, Olson not only sheds light on Aristotle’s theology but also defines the legacy that later theologians in the tradition of classical theism would exploit, even as they departed from Aristotle on such a central question as the character of divine transcendence.

Though Maimonides (also considered elsewhere in this volume; see the section on Negative Theology in Part III) plays a role in Elliot N. Dorff’s “Jewish Images of God,” Dorff’s consideration is not primarily historical, but systematic: he seeks to explain the “cognitive status of Jewish images of God.” Images are both epistemically and religiously indispensable – since we cannot fully grasp an infinite God, we must use images to interpret our experiences of God in ways that can reach our minds and affect the springs of action – yet they seem to pose the danger of idolatry. Dorff argues that in practice people manage to use images without falling into idolatry; a strong emphasis on divine transcendence cautions that all images fall short of the God they are intended to depict. And since images are intended as depictions or descriptions (albeit partial ones), we can intelligibly ask about their truth or falsity. “The truth of a religious image,” Dorff argues, “will depend not only on its ability to reflect an aspect of our experience, but also on its coherence with a communal framework of belief *and action* to which the particular experience is linked and through which it is understood.” Although Dorff is centrally concerned with Jewish images of God, his arguments speak to the concerns of classical theists in other religious traditions. Indeed, they could even be used as a touchstone by which the images of God that are most at home within classical theism can be evaluated in comparison with those that are found in other traditions of thinking about God; in this way, Dorff’s essay puts the essays on classical theism into conversation with the other essays in this volume.

Augustine presents the opposite challenge from Aristotle. Rather than being easily overlooked in a discussion of classical theism, Augustine is too inevitably included. Surely if anyone is a paradigmatic classical theist, it is Augustine, with his

uncompromising assertion of God's limitless power and knowledge, his moral and metaphysical perfection, and his immateriality and timeless eternity. But in "Augustine and Classical Theism" John Peter Kenney complicates this all-too-predictable account. Yes, Augustine defends this classical account of God; but if we think of Augustine primarily as an exponent of some standard list of divine attributes, Kenney argues, we miss the central role of contemplation in Augustine's project of theological reflection. With careful attention to Augustine's accounts of contemplation in Book 7 of the *Confessions*, Kenney draws out the ways in which contemplation reveals God as "both the eternal paradigm of being and the active agent of creation and salvation." Such contemplation, Kenney argues, is not a mere matter of abstract speculation, the fruit of success in the practice of Platonic philosophy. Instead, it "occurs through divine intervention, by direct assistance and guidance, and not through the intrinsic power of the soul itself."

Anselm belongs to the Augustinian tradition, so it is no surprise that before embarking on his famous "ontological" argument for the existence of God, he takes his reader through "a rousing of the mind to the contemplation of God." The fruit of this contemplation is the insight that God, a being than which a greater cannot be thought, must truly exist, and must be whatever it is in every respect better to be than not to be. As Katherin A. Rogers shows in "Anselm's Perfect God," Anselm uses this understanding of God to identify and characterize what one is tempted to call "the divine attributes." But to speak of 'attributes' in the plural is as misleading as it is inevitable, since for Anselm God does not *have* a plurality of distinct attributes but simply *is* the unitary and simple nature that we characterize by using a variety of distinct attribute-terms. Rogers lays out this understanding of divine simplicity – a much-contested doctrine in contemporary philosophy but non-negotiable for Anselm and for many others in the tradition of classical theism – and connects it with divine eternity and immutability before turning to Anselm's account of such problems as the nature of omnipotence, the apparent incompatibility of freedom and foreknowledge, and the relation of God's will to logical and moral truths. One often neglected theme to which Rogers rightly draws our attention is the importance for Anselm of God's aseity, which Anselm puts to work in a variety of contexts in his exploration of the divine nature.

The neo-Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical inheritance that undergirded classical theism was not, of course, confined to the Christian tradition. Muslim and Jewish thinkers likewise drew on classical Greek philosophy – including the full Aristotelian corpus, available to them long before it was recovered in the west beginning in the middle of the twelfth century – and faced similar problems in negotiating the apparent inconsistencies between the conclusions of the philosophers and the data of revelation. In "Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) on Creation and the Divine Attributes," Ali Hasan explores the very different approaches of two leading Muslim thinkers. United by their conviction that if the conclusion of a demonstrative argument contradicted a passage in the Qur'an taken literally, the passage must instead be interpreted figuratively, they nonetheless disagreed sharply about what the philosophers had actually managed to demonstrate – and even about what the Qur'an itself said. For al-Ghazali, the philosophers had failed to demonstrate the

eternity of the world; and indeed it could be demonstrated that the world had a beginning in time, just as the Qur'an teaches. For Ibn Rushd, al-Ghazali's arguments for the temporal beginning of the world are failures; but the Qur'an does not require belief in such a beginning anyway. And though both thinkers aim at developing a positive or substantive conception of God that preserves the harmony of reason and revelation while avoiding anthropomorphism, they disagree about how this can be done. Ibn Rushd agrees with al-Ghazali in rejecting the idea that God knows only universals, but "he complains that al-Ghazali compromises God's transcendent and unchangeable nature by making His knowledge too much like our own. God does not know the world by observing or perceiving it directly; rather, he knows the world by knowing His own essence, which contains the essence of all that exists." Hasan examines these differences, along with their divergent approaches to divine omnipotence, divine justice, and the afterlife, before turning to an exploration of the mystical monism of al-Ghazali's later thought.

In "Thomas Aquinas: Model of God," Robert G. Kennedy turns our attention back to the Christian tradition. Aquinas's use of such metaphysical tools as the distinctions between actuality and potentiality, contingency and necessity, and nature and individual in his model of God mark him as an Aristotelian; but Kennedy brings out very well the extent to which Aquinas draws not merely on Aristotle's metaphysics but on his theory of knowledge. It is because he accepts an Aristotelian account of knowledge as beginning from sensation that Aquinas insists (contrary to Anselm as he understands him) that "In attempting to prove that God exists, one cannot begin with a definition of God that entails existence." Instead we must begin with the sensible things that are God's effects: the contingency of sensible things points us to a necessary being that causes all other things, and the derivative and partial goodness of sensible things points us to a being whose goodness is primary and complete. Aquinas's Aristotelian account of knowledge also undergirds his distinction between what can and what cannot be known about God on the basis of reason, independently of revelation. And since, as a standard medieval dictum put it, "we name things as we know them," the consequences of Aquinas's Aristotelian account of knowledge can also be seen in his doctrine that "nothing can be affirmatively predicated of God and creatures univocally but only by analogy." By such means Kennedy brings out the ways in which not merely the content of Aquinas's model of God, but the kinds of arguments by which he constructs it, reflect his Aristotelian commitments.

We find two main kinds of objections among contemporary philosophers to Aquinas's model of God. (The same lines of objection are raised against other philosophers in the tradition of classical theism as well, but the prestige of Aquinas makes him a favored target.) One line of critique concerns its *metaphysical* adequacy; the doctrine of divine simplicity is a favorite bugbear, since it is hard for contemporary metaphysicians to make sense of such claims as "God's wisdom is identical with God's power" and "God is identical with each of his attributes." The other line of critique concerns its *religious* adequacy, and here the most contentious aspect of Aquinas's model is the doctrine of divine impassibility. As Eric J. Silverman shows in "Impassibility and Divine Love," some writers have argued that "the impassible

model of God advocated by Thomism commits its adherents to a conception of an indifferent, uncaring deity.” Silverman shows that impassibility as Aquinas understands it has no such implication. Divine impassibility is not divine apathy. Aquinas’s God takes joy in his own goodness, and not merely that: he takes joy in every other good, which is to say, in every other being. It is true that God does not share in our sufferings (we are of course setting aside for these purposes any consideration of the Incarnate Word); but, Silverman argues, this turns out to be an advantage of Aquinas’s account. For Aquinas’s God responds to our sufferings, not by sharing them, but by offering us union with himself so that we might share his own unshakeable joy.

For all that he presented his philosophy as a revolutionary break with scholasticism, Descartes’s conception of God had much in common with Aquinas’s. Certainly Descartes belongs firmly in the tradition of classical theism, and he insists on such classical attributes as simplicity and immutability. In “*Descartes on God and the Products of His Will*,” David Cunning shows how Descartes’s commitment to these tenets of classical theism informs his view of the relationship between God and possibility. Given that the divine intellect and the divine will are one and the same (as the doctrine of divine simplicity requires), we must not think that first God’s intellect considers the whole range of possibilities and then God’s will selects from among them the ones that he will create. Rather, God’s understanding and his willing are “only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure.” Moreover, God’s immutability means that God eternally and unchangeably wills whatever he creates; hence, “there at no point exists the possibility that His will change course and produce an alternate series, and so there do not exist any alternative possible series. God is of course the author of all reality and thus the author of any actual and possible reality that there might be, but it turns out that the latter sort of reality is non-existent.” There is no room in Descartes’s system for claims that things could have been otherwise than they in fact are.

Aristotle on God: Divine *Nous* as Unmoved Mover

R. Michael Olson

God, according to Aristotle, is divine intellect or *nous*, the unmoved mover that stands as final cause responsible for the intelligible motion of the cosmos. This conception of God has two distinct though related aspects. On the one hand, God is conceived relative to nature. As a necessary, prime, unmoved mover, responsible for the intelligible motion of the natural order, God is conceived both according to his causal agency in nature, as a mover responsible for motion, and according to his essential attribute as such a cause, as unmoved. On the other hand, God is conceived according to his actuality, according to his activity as thought thinking itself, which is the epitome of substance and being: eternal, immovable, indivisible, and existing separately from sensible things (*Meta.* 1073a4-7). Based on this metaphysical conception, Aristotle is commonly held to be a monotheist of some sort. Just what sort of monotheist he may be, however, remains a question, the answer to which may be approached by looking at how he conceives of God's relationship to the natural order.

The relationship of God to the natural order or the world is central to any satisfying theological conception or model of him. It may be argued that any conception of God has significance only insofar as it says something regarding the God-world or God-nature distinction and relationship. If, on the one hand, God is conceived to be transcendent, as wholly other to the world or nature, without any further elaboration of his relationship, then he is nothing more than empty otherness, void of any real significance to the actual world. If, on the other hand, God or divinity is conceived to be immanent in the world or the natural whole, that reality designated "God" or "divinity" must be distinguished from other aspects of reality, for if these terms are to make any real and significant difference, they must tell what that difference is. Perhaps it is the attempt to articulate the God-world relationship that is most difficult in coming to any conception of God. This difficulty appears to be no less true for

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Aristotle. On the one hand, he appears to advance a view of God as separate from nature, attributing to his being some manner of transcendence. On the other hand, he appears to advance a view of God as a function of nature, making divinity appear to be immanent in the natural order or consubstantial with the human soul or *psyche*. In order to elaborate on this tension in Aristotle, I will first comment on his idea of the unmoved mover as it appears in the context of his *Physics*. Because Aristotle's theological speculations are, as it were, looking out from nature and the evidences of divinity given within it, one must, I believe, have some idea of that nature in which God or divinity is manifested. I will then comment on his substantial conception of God as divine *nous* as it appears in his *Metaphysics*. After looking at both these aspects, I will compare Aristotle's theology with creation monotheism.

Unmoved Mover

Nature, according to Aristotle, is the domain of movement and change, and Aristotelian physics, as the study of nature, is the investigation into the kinds of motion manifested in the natural order and the causes responsible for their intelligibility. Unlike modern mathematical physics, which countenances only local motion, the external motion of bodies according to place, Aristotelian physics countenances three forms of motion: locomotion, alteration, and increase/decrease. And unlike modern mathematical physics, which countenances only mechanical efficient causation in its account of any physical happening, Aristotelian physics countenances four distinct kinds of causes: material, efficient, formal, and final causation. Final causation holds a position of priority in Aristotle's account of nature, both as an immanent principle operative in the movement of living beings and as the kind of causality that God exercises over cosmic motion as a whole.

In Books H and Θ of the *Physics*, Aristotle argues for the necessity of a prime unmoved mover. Axiomatic to Aristotle is the principle that every motion must have some cause. Spontaneous motion is unintelligible; anything that is in motion or undergoes change must have a cause responsible for moving it. Something happens as it does because something else causes it to happen that way. Moreover, no motion in the natural order is necessary: any motion could have been otherwise or might not have happened at all. Because no motion is necessary and thus refers beyond itself to something responsible for bringing it about, no motion is in itself complete and wholly intelligible; any motion is intelligible only with reference to the causes responsible for it. Carrying this principle to its conclusion, Aristotle argues that, if any motion is wholly intelligible, then it must ultimately refer to some necessary cause that is not itself a motion. The collective motions of the natural order cannot simply refer back to an infinite succession of other motions as causes, each one incomplete and non-necessary, *ad infinitum*; they must, argues Aristotle, ultimately have some reference to a necessary first cause, which is itself unmoved.

Although Aristotle argues for a necessary first cause of motion, which is itself unmoved, he does not attribute to this first cause the function of efficient cause.

Such an idea of an efficient first cause of motion, he argues, is unintelligible. In order for something to be operative as an efficient cause, it must be in the temporal order, and if it exists in the temporal order, it must participate in and be subject to the dynamic of efficient causality. Consequently, an efficient first cause of motion would have to be in motion too, in which case it would not be necessary but would require reference to something else to account for its motion; thus, it would not be first. Aristotle argues that because there can be no efficient first cause of motion and because all motion requires some cause, motion can have no beginning in time; therefore, motion and its medium, time, are eternal. Accordingly, Aristotle's prime mover is no demiurge. As unmoved, the prime mover is not prior in the sense of first in the order of the temporal series of efficient causes and effects but, rather, in the sense of ontologically prior, remaining separate from the dynamic of the efficient causal nexus, exercising its causal power solely as a final cause.

When Aristotle appeals to the general principle of an unmoved, final cause, responsible for intelligible motions in the natural order, he posits nothing occultic. Nature, as he observes, evinces finality and rest in the ordinary experience of self-initiated motion and rest with regard to place, a capacity shared by all animals, both non-rational and rational. In his analysis of desire (*orexis*), the proximate cause of motility, Aristotle locates a principle of rest as final cause in the object of desire, mediated by the image. Aristotle distinguishes two moments within the structure of desire: the moving cause that is itself moved and the immovable or unmoved cause (*De an.* 3.10.433b13-19). The moving cause that is itself moved, says Aristotle, is the capacity of desire (*to orektikon*); this is the affective capacity of life to be moved in self-feeling by something from without and the corresponding translation of self-feeling into agency in response to the causes of its affections. Since nothing is moved without a cause, the capacity of affection requires something to move it; this cause is the object of desire (*to orekton*), which functions as an unmoved mover. The object of desire is the practical good sought in any desiring motion. It is unmoved in that it remains present in awareness, stirring the internal motion of affection that awakens desire, and sustaining this initiative of desire throughout the temporally protracted movement of pursuit. The object of desire is a final cause in that it is the end that is present at the beginning and that persists in each moment of the temporal span through which the movement occurs. It is by virtue of the image that the end of any pursuit remains present in awareness throughout the movement. Thus, argues Aristotle, any instance of desire and motility is predicated on the capacity of imagination, the capacity to make present as awareness that which is not immediately and materially present. By identifying the role of the image and imagination in desire and motility, Aristotle countenances noetic intelligence as an irreducible causal principle in the natural order.

Although Aristotle says that motion is nature's characteristic fact, he maintains that rest is no less a principle of the natural order (*Ph.* 253b9-10). But how does rest take its place in the natural order as an actual cause responsible for motion?

Rest is present in the soul or *psyche* possessing the potency of noetic intelligence.¹ In the activity of disclosing what is other, awareness experiences a moment of stasis, a moment in which intelligence and its *present* object of attention are ontologically removed from the interplay of elemental forces and thus are not objects within the nexus of efficient causation, subject to its dynamic.² Aristotle speaks of this moment of “ideality” in any awareness of what is other when he makes such comments as mind is not blended with matter (*De an.* 429a16-19) and mind receives the form of its object without the matter in any act of perceptual or intellectual beholding (*De an.* 424a18-23, 434a30-31, 432a9-10). In the case of human intellect or *nous* and its awareness of what is other, this repose of awareness fully obtains in the identity of thought and its object, which Aristotle calls contemplation or *theoria*. It is in this repose of intelligence that he finds in nature the attribute of divinity, which points to his conception of the unmoved mover as divine *nous*.

Divine *Nous*

In his *Metaphysics*, Book Λ, Aristotle resumes the topic of a necessary, first, unmoved mover. In this context, however, the unmoved mover is developed in terms of its being. Aristotle speaks here according to the metaphysical category of substance, defining the unmoved mover according to that actuality in which its substance consists: thought thinking itself. Aristotle explicitly calls this substance and actuality God or divinity (*theos*).

Aristotle refers to the investigation of his *Metaphysics* as first philosophy, which he also says is theology. First philosophy is the investigation into the fundamental causes of things, those necessary, universal, and eternal or unchanging principles responsible for the being and intelligibility of things. First philosophy is distinct from the other theoretical sciences (physics and mathematics, both of which, as theoretical sciences, have to do with eternal and unchanging principles) in that it has to do with eternal and immovable *substances* and with being *qua* being (*Met.* 1026a7-33). Metaphysics, it may be said, is the new theology that replaces the old. Metaphysics replaces the old *logoi* of myth, which spoke about the origins of the gods, the cosmos, and humans in the form of veiled stories, with a new *logos* of divine origins: the *logos* of being, a *logos* available to natural intelligence. As an inquiry into origins or first principles, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* provides a thematic elaboration of the ways in which being is spoken of by clarifying the categories appropriate to the subject and by investigating into primary and highest being.

¹ Aristotle consistently argues to this fundamental insight in *De anima*, that rest is the essential attribute of the soul and a principle of its motility and that this principle of rest is in the noetic capacity of ensouled beings (*De an.* 405b32-407b27, 408a35-408b19, 434a16-18).

² Han Jonas offers an excellent account of the “dynamic neutralization” involved in distance perception as the present awareness otherness and form. Cf. “Causality and Perception” (26–33) and “Dynamic Neutralization” (145–149) in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Jonas 1966).

Substance or beingness (*ousia*) is, according to Aristotle, the fundamental sense of being and the primary subject of the *Metaphysics*. “Substance” refers to any being that possesses separable existence. Something is a substance or has substantial being insofar as it exists independently, insofar as it exists in and through itself, depending on no other for its being. Substances are manifested in the sensible order, showing forth in the form or “intelligible look” (*eidos*) of the phenomena, both in the persistence of the imperishable elements and in the persistent form of perishable living beings. As sensible, these substances admit of materiality and are thus subject to change and motion, making them the subject matter of physics and discounting them as substance in the highest sense. In contrast to physics, first philosophy has as its proper subject non-sensible substance, which does not admit of any determinations of matter and is, therefore, eternal, necessary, and separable from natural things. Such being, according to Aristotle, is pure actuality.

In his analysis of the senses of being, Aristotle distinguishes between potential and actual being. Potential being or potency (*dunamis*) is any unrealized capacity for some actuality, the capacity for something to become something it is not yet. In order for anything to move, it must have the potential nature to be moved in some specific way. Because potential being is the capacity for change, it does not exist necessarily. Insofar as something exists potentially, it is open to a range of possible outcomes, none of which is necessary and all of which are dependent on other causal factors to bring about an actuality that could have been otherwise. Actuality (*energeia*), on the other hand, is that into which something changes; it is the specific activity in which any natural potency achieves satisfaction of being. All potential being has reference to actuality, both for its being and for its intelligibility. Axiomatic in Aristotle’s ontology is the priority of actuality over potency.

Actuality in the pure sense, admitting of no potency, is the epitome of being and substance: wholly self-sufficient, dependent on no other being, and unmoved. Because it would admit of no potency, such actuality would be non-sensible, necessary, eternal, and separate from natural things. It would be non-sensible in that it would not admit of the potency of materiality; it would be necessary in that it would admit no possibility of being otherwise than it is; it would be eternal in that it would be unmoved and unchanging and thus free of all determinations of time, and it would be separate from natural things in that it would not itself be an object in the efficient causal nexus of the natural order and thus would remain unaffected by its dynamic. Even though such a necessary substance is unmoved and is a kind of *stasis*, it is not an inert remaining. Rather, actuality, as its name implies, is activity or act, but it is activity or act that admits of no change or motion; it is not a changing from something into something but, rather, activity that has its end or purpose in itself. Having its end or purpose present throughout its activity, it is complete in every moment, reposing in itself like the circle, thus possessing ontological closure. Such activity requires reference to nothing outside itself for its being and its intelligibility. This actuality, argues Aristotle is the necessary, prime, unmoved mover.

In order to find evidence of such an actuality that has this kind of ontological closure in the natural order and that functions as an unmoved final cause, Aristotle looks to human nature. Of those activities in which humans partake, thinking, he says, is most

divine like. While thought is moved by the appearance of intelligibility in the world, it achieves its satisfaction in knowing, which involves the identity of intelligence with its object, intelligible being. In the achievement of knowing, the end of the activity is present throughout such that intelligence, in standing witness to intelligible being, achieves repose. “As for the [part of the soul] that *knows*,” says Aristotle, “it is not moved but remains still” (*De an.* 434a17–18, also, see 407a33–34). It is in this repose of knowing, this actuality which he calls *theoria* or contemplation, that the potency of rational nature achieves satisfaction of being, however imperfect our human share in this life may be. The fullness and perfection of such a life, he says, is reserved for God, who is divine intellect or *nous*. Furthermore, argues Aristotle, if this activity of intellect is perfectly achieved, as it must be in the life of God, then its object of thought must be of the same dignity as the intellect that thinks it; its object must be that which is highest being and most intelligible. Thus, he concludes, divine *nous* is thought thinking itself.

As perfection of being, necessary and eternal, divine *nous* is the unmoved mover, that final cause responsible for the shapely motion in the cosmos. If, however, divine *nous*, unmoved, remaining wholly aloof from the dynamic of efficient causation in the natural order, is to function as final cause, then nature must be susceptible to being moved by it. Nature is, indeed, susceptible to being moved by an unmoved mover insofar as it is capable of being moved by desire, for it is, as Aristotle says, as an object of desire that divine *nous* functions as a final cause. Those natural beings possessing some capacity of noetic intelligence are capable of moving themselves through desire. As already mentioned, all desire is mediated by a moment of ideality and, thus, contains within it the potency to arrest motion in order to behold what is other. Even in the perceptual awareness of the wholly non-rational animal, the potency of repose in the appreciation of what is other is present, which allows for the animal to arrest its external movement of pursuit or avoidance in order simply to take pleasure in looking at. In rational awareness, this unmoved moment of knowing can become explicit to itself. In its moments of insight, awareness experiences a fullness or completeness of being, a kind of divinity, that is desired in itself. Human beings can be moved by God because our intellect is connate with divine *nous*.

Question of God’s Transcendence

Aristotle is not primarily known as a theologian, at least not in the more common sense of the word. Unlike his Medieval successors, for whom reflection on God is central, Aristotle writes no treatise on God, the gods, or divinity, and he offers no systematic theology.³ Nonetheless, his metaphysical investigations have contributed

³ Even though Aristotle says in his *Metaphysics* that first-philosophy has to do with eternal and unchanging substance and is thus theology, he does not start with this conception as his hypothesis but, rather, starts with our familiar experience of substances and works out to his more speculative pronouncements. It is only toward the end of the *Metaphysics* in Book A, where he argues for the necessity of an eternal and unchanging substance and calls this substance God. Moreover, contemporary scholars are largely in agreement that Book A is not an original book in *Metaphysics* (Frede and Charles 2001).

much to subsequent theology. Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theologians in the Middle Ages found in Aristotle a well-articulated vocabulary suitable for speaking about God, namely, the metaphysical vocabulary of being. Following Aristotle's metaphysical reflections, subsequent classical monotheists begin with the definition of God as perfection of being. From this fundamental axiom, the basic tenets of classical monotheism regarding certain of God's attributes follow. As perfection of being, God is complete substance, wholly self-sufficient being, independent, requiring nothing outside of himself for his being. God is wholly independent substance because he is pure act, admitting of no potency. Therefore, his being is necessary, not capable of being other than it is; he is immovable and thus impassive, not admitting any change and not subject to suffer any affection; and he is eternal, not admitting any of the determinations of time. Furthermore, based on Aristotle's view that actuality is the grounds of all normative judgments and that the activity of intellect or *nous* is substantial being, classical monotheism finds support for the identification of God's being with his goodness and his wisdom. Similar to Aristotle's divine *nous*, the God of subsequent classical monotheism is an inviolable reality, indivisible and one, separate from the natural things and, thus, having transcendent being. Yet, it is precisely over the nature of God's separation from the world that creation monotheists part ways with Aristotle's conception of God as divine *nous*.

Aristotle's God is distinct from the God of most other monotheisms in that Aristotle's divine *nous* does not create. God is not responsible for bringing into existence the world, and, thus, he is not responsible for imbuing the natural order with a design according to his divine wisdom. Rather, God acts as an ordering principle of the cosmos only insofar as he is a final cause, always remaining aloof from the dynamic of the natural order, never intervening in temporal affairs, solely responsible for the orderliness of the movements of the world as the object of desire toward which the *conatus* of natural beings inclines as they strive to emulate or participate in divine reality by achieving actuality to the degree promised in their natural potencies. In contrast to this view, creation monotheism conceives of God not only as the final cause toward which beings move but also as the creative grounds of the world, a relationship which confers to the world the radically dependent status of creation. As creator, God is responsible for the very existence of the world. God brings into being and sustains all that exists according to his divine wisdom, bestowing intelligibility to the world through the act of creation, an intelligibility partially manifested in the natural orderliness of the created whole and further revealed through its unfolding in time.

By conceiving of the God-world relationship in terms of the creator-creation relationship, creation monotheism maintains a stronger sense of God's transcendence of the world than one finds in Aristotle. According to the creator-creation model, the principle that bestows intelligibility and significance to the created whole is not itself immanent in that whole. While the creation evinces orderliness, inviting the mind to seek the grounds of that intelligibility or wholeness, the final principle of its intelligibility and wholeness, located in the creating source, radically transcends the creation and the human intellect, which is also created. Accordingly, the creator-creation model allows for another attribute commonly thought to pertain to God: *mystery*. By contrast, Aristotle's God leaves no room for such mystery. While

Aristotle speaks of divine *nous* as separate and one, it is, if not a principle immanent in the natural whole, at least a principle connate with human intellect. However much this idea of God may inspire wonder (*thaumazien*, *Meta.* 1072b25-27), it is the philosophical wonder that things are thus and so, not religious awe before the *Mysterium Tremendum*. This is suggested by the fact that religious piety has no place in Aristotle's catalogue of virtues.⁴

Rather than bequeathing to us a worked out theology, Aristotle leaves us with a tension in his conception of God or divine *nous* as one and separate from natural things, on the one hand, and as a real causal principle, operative in the natural order, on the other hand. This tension, however, may be an accurate elaboration of the experience of philosophical reason, as Eric Voegelin contends.⁵ As an ancient philosopher, primarily concerned with the capacity of intellect or *nous* and its object, the intelligibility of the cosmos, Aristotle provides us an elaboration of the classical experience of reason in his doctrine of *nous*. In its openness to the whole, the human *psyche* is moved in search of a divine *aition* or grounds of that whole, a questioning unrest that is given intimations of the end of its seeking in the satisfaction of being, experienced in its achievements of intellectual apperception, wherein the identity of intelligence and being is recognized. The life of reason (and thus the life of the philosopher), says Voegelin, exists in this tension toward the grounds, in reason's openness to and quest for a divine *aition* beyond self, external nature, and political life, on the one hand, and in reason's arresting moment of insight, on the other hand, wherein the human soul experiences itself as the “sensorium of the divine *aition*” and, thus, as bearing of the divine principle of rest responsible for shapely motion in the cosmos (Voegelin 1990, 95). While Aristotle may not have provided us with a satisfying systematic theology, he did provide us with an elaboration of rational nature as the metaphysical and, thus, the theological being.

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⁴ Although Sara Broadie argues that the virtue of piety is present in Aristotle, she must argue the point because piety is not included in Aristotle's list of virtues. The piety that Broadie argues for is not the virtue of religious piety found in creation monotheism (Broadie 2003).

⁵ I am referring mainly to Voegelin's account of Aristotle's doctrine of *nous* as an elaboration of philosophical experience as it is found in “Reason: The Classical Experience” in his *Anamnesis* (Voegelin 1990).

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Jewish Images of God

Elliot N. Dorff

Anthropomorphism as a Form of Idolatry

How shall we picture God? Some prominent medieval philosophers held that we can know with certainty of the existence of God, but the limitations of human intelligence and the infinite character of God make it impossible for us to know the nature of God altogether. Maimonides, for example, claimed that we can only know that God is *not* characterized by any finite attributes such as the ones that humans possess.

Indeed, the problem goes even deeper. Not only is it philosophically unreasonable to expect to know the character of God; it is also, according to some interpretations, religiously forbidden to depict God in human terms. This stems from the biblical laws against idolatry.

Three related, but distinct, matters are included in these prohibitions: the worship of idols, the worship of God with pagan rites, and the making of idols. The first of those, the worship of idols, includes prohibitions against idol worship conforming to pagan rituals; bowing down to an idol; offering a sacrifice to another god, including those

The following abbreviations apply to all endnotes below:

M.=Mishnah (edited by Rabbi Judah, the President of the Sanhedrin, c. 200 C.E.).

B.=Babylonian Talmud, edited by Ravina and Rav Ashi c. 500 C.E.

M.T.=Maimonides' law code, the *Mishneh Torah*, completed in 1177 C.E.

S.A.=Joseph Caro's law code, the *Shulhan Arukh*, completed in 1565 C.E.

The books ending in the word *Rabbah* (the great, or expanded) series – e.g., *Genesis Rabbah*, *Numbers Rabbah*, *Song of Songs Rabbah* – follow the order of the biblical text, but they contain rabbinic interpretations and expansions of the Bible. Citations of those books are to the chapter and subsection of the midrashic text, not to the biblical verse on which they are a commentary.

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represented by an idol; and paying homage to an idol.¹ The second injunction, that against worshiping God with pagan rites,² reflects the biblical view that only divinely ordained methods of worship can be assured of according with God's will. And finally, making idols is explicitly prohibited, although only images to be used for worship.³ This reflects the common practice in the ancient world of requiring a ceremonial consecration before a graven image could become an embodiment of a god.⁴

It is the last of these biblical prohibitions that addresses our issue, in particular the later rabbinic and philosophic expansions of it. The Rabbis proscribed making idols for anyone's worship, not just one's own,⁵ but they also went beyond the context of worship in prohibiting the making of any human image:

Why has it been taught: "All portraits are allowed except the portrait of a human being"? Rav Huna, the son of Rav Idi, replied: "From a discourse of Abaye I learned: 'You shall not make with me' (Ex. 20:20) [implies] you shall not make Me.'"⁶

Since human beings were made "in God's image,"⁷ making a human image would be tantamount to making a likeness of God. The later codes restrict this prohibition to sculpted images that protrude like idols (excluding those on indented or flat surfaces) and to representations of the full human being and not just the head or a part of the body,⁸ but the principle remains the same: since human beings partake in the likeness of God, to create a graven image of a human being would be, as it were, to create a likeness of God.

Modern Jews may be startled by the prohibitions described here, both because even the most observant Jews take photographs of one another; in fact, children in the ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) community trade "rebbe cards" with photographs of famous rabbis prominently displayed in much the same way that many children trade baseball cards. Moreover, many understand these laws to prohibit only intentional representations of God. The fact that the Rabbis prohibited images of human beings under these laws underscores the importance they ascribed to the biblical verses attributing a divine image to human beings. It also makes it clear that the Rabbis conceived of God, in turn, in human form.

While the injunction against making images of human beings is perhaps the starker expression of the classical tradition's belief that God is to be conceived in

¹ Prohibitions against idol worship conforming to pagan rituals: Exodus 34:14; Deuteronomy 12:30; cf. B. *Sanhedrin* 61b. Prohibitions against bowing down to an idol and against paying homage to an idol in other forms: Exodus 20:5. Prohibition against offering a sacrifice to another god, including those represented by an idol: Exodus 22:19.

² Deuteronomy 12:31.

³ That making idols is prohibited: Exodus 20:4, 20. That this applies only to objects used for worship: cf., for example, Lev. 26:1.

⁴ I have used here the categorization found in Faur (2007), 8:1231.

⁵ *Sifra* 7:1, end.

⁶ B. *Rosh Hashanah* 24b; B. *Avodah Zarah* 43b.

⁷ Genesis 1:26, 27; 5:1; 9:6.

⁸ M.T. *Laws of Idolatry* 3:10, 11; S.A. *Yoreh De'ah* 141:4–7. They follow the Talmud (B. *Avodah Zarah* 43b), although *Mekhilta*, Yitro, Ch. 6 on Ex. 20:4, seems to prohibit indented representations too. Cf. *Hagahot Maimoniyot* on M.T. *Laws of Idolatry* 3:10.

human form, it is by no means the only one. In both biblical and rabbinic literature, God is portrayed in human images. In the Bible, God has a face, nose, mouth, eyes, ears, hands, fingers, an arm, and feet.⁹ The Rabbis continue this use of human imagery to describe God. For example, they assert, in one of my favorite Rabbinic passages, that on the occasion of the wedding of Adam and Eve, God plaits Eve's hair and serves as best man for Adam to indicate God's intimate involvement in their wedding and, by extension, in every couple's wedding. In other passages, God wears phylacteries and wraps Himself in a prayer shawl; He prays to Himself and studies the Torah during 3 hours of each day; He weeps over the failures of His creatures, visits the sick, comforts the mourner, and buries the dead.¹⁰

This stands in sharp contrast to the rationalist tradition in medieval Jewish philosophy. Maimonides, perhaps most of all, cannot tolerate depicting God in human form lest that limit God. Bodies and bodily parts, after all, are finite in extension and ability. Therefore any ascription of a body to God, however strongly one qualifies the comparison, implies a limitation on God's extent and power. Instead, according to Maimonides,¹¹ one must read the Bible's bodily descriptions of God as negative attributes and, as he summarizes in his 13 Principles of the Faith, one must believe in a God who "is no body and...who is not affected by bodily characteristics."¹²

One does not have to adopt Maimonides' position to appreciate the problematic that motivates it. If we depict God, either physically or mentally, as having human form, are we not simply writing ourselves large? Are we not engaging in an act of human hubris and divine diminution at one and the same time? God, after all, must be infinite and omnipotent in order to be God, or so it would seem, and that effectively precludes God's having any shape, human or otherwise.

⁹ A *face*: e.g., Exodus 33:20, 23; Numbers 6:25, 26.

A *nose*: e.g., Exodus 15:8; 2 Samuel 22:9, 16= Psalms 18:9, 16.

A *mouth*: e.g., Numbers 12:8; 14:41; 22:18; 24:13; Deuteronomy 8:3; Isaiah 1:20; 40:5; 45:23; Jeremiah 9:11; Psalms 33:6.

Eyes: e.g., Genesis 6:8; Deuteronomy 11:12; 32:10; Isaiah 43:4; 49:5; Psalms 17:8; 33:18.

Ears: e.g., Numbers 11:1; 14:28; 1 Samuel 8:21; Ezekiel 8:18.

Hands: e.g., Exodus 3:20; 15:6; I Samuel 5:6; Psalms 8:7; Job 12:9.

Fingers: e.g., Exodus 8:15; 31:18; Deuteronomy 9:10.

An *arm*: e.g., Exodus 6:6; Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 26:8; 33:27; Isaiah 40:11; 51:9; 52:10; Jeremiah 21:5; 27:5; Psalms 77:16; 79:11; 89:22.

Feet: e.g., Exodus 24:10; 2 Samuel 22:10= Psalms 18:10; Nahum 1:3; Habbakuk 3:5; Isaiah 60:13; 66:1; Psalms 99:5; 132:7.

¹⁰ God plaited Eve's hair and serves as best man for Adam: B. *Berakhot* 61a. God wears phylacteries and wraps Himself in a prayer shawl: B. *Berakhot* 6a; B. *Rosh Hashanah* 17b. He prays to Himself and studies the Torah during 3 hours of each day: B. *Avodah Zarah* 3b. He weeps over the failures of His creatures, visits the sick, comforts the mourner, and buries the dead: B. *Haggigah* 5b; B. *Sotah* 14a; *Genesis Rabbah* 8:13.

¹¹ Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part One, esp. chs. 1, 26, 28, 31, 35, 46, 50–60.

¹² Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Introduction to Sanhedrin, Chapter 10 (*Ha-Helek*), Section 5, Fundamental Belief 3.

On the other hand, though, the rationales behind the biblical and rabbinic depictions of God in human form are also clear. If we cannot picture God in some form, how are we to conceive of the Eternal at all? Moreover, what is to distinguish a believer from a non-believer if both assert that God cannot be conceived? Surely the belief in God must have *some* cognitive content for believers to assert it so strenuously and for non-believers to deny it just as vigorously. Moreover, God becomes awfully abstract and distant if we can only say what He is not; the God of the Bible and Rabbinic literature is so much more alive and emotionally real for us.

For all of the problems that the Rabbis had with idolatry, they thought that it had been conquered. “God created two evil inclinations in the world, that toward idolatry and the other toward incest. The former has already been uprooted, [but] the latter still holds sway.”¹³ This undoubtedly reflects the historical fact that after the Maccabees, there was little tendency on the part of the Jews to succumb to idolatry in its physical forms. The Rabbis clearly did not mean that psychological forms of idolatry had vanished, for human beings in all ages have made a whole host of objects of finite worth their gods, including especially money, fame, power, and, particularly in modern America, work. People may not physically bow down to such things or even call them gods, but they surely treat them as such with equally devastating effects. Nothing matters in such people’s lives except their idol; all other worthy things and relationships are ignored or even dismissed as insignificant.

When viewed from the standpoint of the conceptions that motivate us to act in given ways, this kind of idolatry is at the root of much of the immorality and decadence in modern society, just as it was in ancient society. Confusing the unimportant with the important, the finite with the infinite, leads us mistakenly to devote our time and energy to what are at best only partial or instrumental goals. Only getting a grasp on what is ultimately important in life – in theological terms, learning to discern the difference between idols and God – can save us from such serious mistakes. In practice, we human beings are all too often tempted by the sirens of temporary and improper goals, and it is the ongoing function of religion to remind us of what is really important.

One can readily recognize the practical problems entailed in avoiding idolatry and instead living lives directed to appropriate goals; we struggle with that each day. Idolatry, though, is an intellectual challenge just as much as it is a practical one. We gain knowledge of God through the various avenues I discuss in my book, *Knowing God: Jewish Journeys to the Unknowable*, and that knowledge presumably suggests that certain understandings of God are more apt reflections of such experiences than others. Because both the Jewish tradition and our own experiences attest to a God who is infinite, though, we can never gain a total understanding of the Divine. Instead, we must formulate images of God based on our own, limited experience of the world and of God. Our epistemological position – our capacity to know and the limitations on that ability – gives us no choice in this; we simply have no other way to assimilate the knowledge our experiences give us of God. The same, of course,

¹³ *Song of Songs Rabbah* 7:8; cf. B. *Yoma* 69b.

was true of the authors of the Bible and Rabbinic literature: they too had to translate their experiences into images they could understand, feel, and communicate to others. How, then, do we judge whether we have done this as appropriately and accurately as possible? And how do we avoid mistaking our image of God – whatever it is – for God? That is, how do we protect against idolatry in our very conception of God?

In this essay, then, I shall address the cognitive status of Jewish images of God. Are they properly understood as literal descriptions of God, as totally metaphoric language, or as something in between? If we choose the last of these alternatives, how is that usage of language to be construed, and into what context of life does it best fit? How does it signify anything in that context? And finally, if God remains beyond human comprehension, can we at all distinguish proper images of God from idolatrous ones and between belief and unbelief? If so, how?¹⁴

How Images Mean

How, then, do we understand the meaning of religious images? Paul Tillich claimed that everything we say about God is symbolic,¹⁵ but, as Wilbur Urban has maintained, without “some literal knowledge of divine things, symbolic knowledge is an illusion.”¹⁶ Without the ability to translate, however inadequately, the meaning of symbols to more literal language, one has no way of determining whether they refer to anything at all and can certainly not discriminate between more or less adequate symbols for a given datum of experience.¹⁷

Tillich and many others who speak of the symbolic nature of our discourse also neglect the difference between the meaning of religious symbols when contemplated philosophically and when used in religious acts. Theologians have been worried about limiting God through anthropomorphic images, and some have therefore sought to interpret religious images allegorically. The classic Jewish instance of this among the rationalists is, as I mentioned earlier, Maimonides; but Jewish mystics were at least as reticent to depict God in anything but metaphors, claiming that even their descriptions of the Godhead as divided into specific spheres told us some important things about the nature of God and how we should interact with Him but did not actually describe the Infinite, the *Ein Sof*.

When religious people use images, however, they *want* to depict God in concrete language in order to make the experience of God vivid and at least partially intelligible

¹⁴ See Chapter Seven of Dorff (1992), which is an earlier formulation of what I am wrestling with in this paper. There I discuss the differences between images, creeds, and symbols, but I have eliminated that section here due to limitations on space.

¹⁵ Tillich (1957), Vol. 2, p. 9. Cf. Vol. 1, pp. 237–86 *passim*.

¹⁶ Urban (1951), p. 238.

¹⁷ In one critic’s words, “Tillich’s *via symbolica* becomes a *via negativa*.” See Ford (1966), p. 244. Cf. also Fenton (1965), p. 79; Edwards (1974), pp. 186–205.

in the terms of their daily lives. They therefore literally picture God as their father – or, perhaps, their grandfather or some other powerful and sagacious-looking man – when they use the father image to refer to God, and they have an ordinary rock in mind (albeit an impressive one) when they talk of God as their rock. For the religious person using these images, the experience of God, however indescribable ultimately, is like that of a father and a rock in some ways.

Moreover, religious people are generally not bothered all that much by conflicts in their images of God. Is God a just or merciful judge, hard like a rock or flexible and vibrant like water, majestically transcendent or affectionately immanent? For the religious Jew, God is all of these things.

The inconsistencies are not disturbing for religious people using such images for one or both of two reasons. First, God can be manifest in one characteristic on one occasion and its opposite on another, just as parents can appear to their children as almost different people depending upon the child's age and the particular way in which the parent is interacting with the child now in contrast to yesterday. Moreover, religious people assume that no ascription of a characteristic to God can possibly be adequate in describing the Eternal. Not only is our knowledge limited; our very language, drawn from human experience as it is, is inevitably incapable of capturing that which is beyond it.

As a result, in practice religious people have little difficulty in making a tangible use of images without being idolatrous. Of course, any word or object can be used for idolatrous purposes by those who wish to do so, and virtually any human expression has most probably been abused that way at one time or another. The strong emphasis on God's transcendence, however, particularly in Judaism and Islam, have meant that historically vast numbers of believers in the West have used concrete images without mistaking them to encompass God. In widespread practice, then, the use of concrete imagery is *not* tantamount to idolatry; it is, instead, a way of making the experience of God immediate and vivid.¹⁸

The Truth of Images

Even if we can discern what an image means, how shall we determine its truth or falsity? All human statements, whether intended to be taken literally or metaphorically, will, of course, be limited in their truth to what human beings can know, but how can we know whether a given image reflects reality more than it distorts it? That is, how can we decide whether a particular image is helpful or harmful in revealing the truth to us?

¹⁸ See Barbour (1974), Chapter 4, for a discussion of how religious language is analogical in its meaning, and see Chapter 5 there for a discussion of how conflicting images can complement each other without negating the quest for a unified, coherent, integrated model.

Some have thought religious images should be treated as metaphors expressing hypothetical claims awaiting further confirmation. Their truth value would then be assessed according to the usual procedures for testing scientific propositions.¹⁹ So, for example, God pictured as a rock might be construed as a claim that God is strong. That claim would then be confirmed if our experiences of God showed that to be true.

This approach, however, misconstrues the meaning of the images in the first place. They are not stated in the hypothetical mood; on the contrary, those who use them want to make declarative statements about their faith, not hypothetical ones. Moreover, one wonders how scientific methods would apply to the analysis of religious images. How, for example, can you definitively determine on scientific grounds whether or not God is a rock or water or a fire?

At the other end of the spectrum, other thinkers have asserted that religious language, presumably including religious images, never intends to describe. It instead is used to evoke emotions and/or moral behavior.²⁰ Picturing God as a rock, for example, is not expected to describe God in any way. The user of the image rather wants to make us feel overawed by God's power and comforted by God's ability to protect and sustain us. For those of these thinkers who take a moral rather than an emotional tack, the purpose of the image is to confirm our assurance that we must be moral because the divinely ordained moral standards that govern the world are as reliable and unchangeable as bedrock and because God, like a rock, will steadfastly enforce them.

As Dorothy Emmett has said, however, religion "loses its nerve when it ceases to believe that it expresses in some way truth about our relation to a reality beyond ourselves which ultimately concerns us."²¹ We certainly are moved emotionally by many images of God, and sometimes such images reinforce our desire to act morally. They can do this, though, only if we believe that in some manner they describe the reality of God. Moreover, the people who use them *intend* to describe such a reality. The people of the Bible and the Rabbis who used images certainly wanted thereby to convey the truth about the world – or at least their perception of it – and the same is true for religious people today. If religious people pretend that they do not aim to denote the real world through the images they use, they have both deceived themselves and lost their nerve, for they are then backing away from claims they really want to make.

Denying these extreme positions, though, brings us back to our original questions: how do religious images carry a truth value (that is, make a claim that is either true or false), and how are we to judge that claim? When people say, "God is our father," they are saying that reality as they perceive it has some characteristics of a father.

¹⁹ For example, MacCormac (1976), p. 93, Lundeen (1972), pp. 192–193.

²⁰ Emotive: Ayer (1936), ch. 6. Ethical: Braithwaite (1955), reprinted in many anthologies of articles in contemporary philosophy of religion.

²¹ Emmett (1957), p. 4.

They may be referring to the fact that their needs are provided for, or that they are protected from harm in parts of their lives, or that there are rules to be obeyed, or that they feel personally related to the larger reality they sense – all aspects of their relationship to their own, human father that they experience with regard to the transcendent element of experience as well. When they say that God is a fire, they are saying that ultimate reality enlivens us (“fires us up,” as it were) and that it is both warm and dangerous. A similar analysis could be made of all other religious images, for, after all, they all come from human experience.

As an initial description, then, determining whether a given image by which God is described is true would amount to deciding whether ultimate reality is as the image describes. “God is our Father” would then be true if ultimate reality is, indeed, providing, protective, and so on, and false if it is not. Similarly, “God is our Mother” – one of the feminine images of God that have taken on new meaning with the rise of feminism – is true to the extent that reality as we know it manifests characteristics that we associate with human mothers. In both cases, of course, we must recognize that human fathers and mothers differ among themselves in their nature and that the very project of identifying some characteristics as fatherly and others as motherly is, in our time, fraught with difficulties – although not, I think, ultimately meaningless.

The problem, of course, is that ultimate reality is many things, including some that are contradictory. That is why God is described in conflicting images. Moreover, while most people acknowledge the fullness of human experience, most also emphasize one or another aspect of reality in their visions of the world. For people like the seventeenth-century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes, for example, the world is generally a nasty place with only a few, transient glimmers of something better, while for people like twentieth-century American philosopher John Dewey the world is a positive, growing place whose negative characteristics are equally few and transient.

This has an immediate effect on the truth of images. Hobbes and anyone who shares his view of life might say that God is not much like a rock and that that image does not ring true, for life is “nasty, brutish, and short,” as Hobbes said, and there seems little surety in it, even from God. The image of fire to describe God, on the other hand, might come closer to the truth for such people, but only in fire’s destructive aspects and not in its warm and enlivening character.

For Dewey and like-minded people, in contrast, God depicted as a rock would truly convey the confidence that one can have in God and in objective moral standards. The rock image would, however, hide the dynamic character of God and of life in general. It would thus articulate only a partial truth – but so do many, if not most, images and propositions. It would still be valuable for the truth it communicates, but it must be used with its limitations in mind. God described as a fire would have fewer shortcomings in the eyes of such people, for fire correctly discloses the warm and enlivening character of life, together with its potential for destruction. It does not, however, reveal life’s stationary, dependable aspects as the image of God as a rock does, and so we would need both to transmit a relatively full picture of reality.

Consequently, we must modify our criterion for the truth of an image to read as follows: Determining whether a given image by which God is described is true

would amount to deciding whether ultimate reality is as the image describes *in the perspective through which the world itself is seen*. We must also recognize that, as with propositions, images often tell the truth, but not the whole truth, and, depending upon how they are understood, they may even mask some truths while revealing others. Nevertheless, one *should* speak of the truth of specific religious images to emphasize that in religion one is still, after all, focusing on reality and that religion's claim to truth is no weaker than that of any of the social sciences and humanities where broad perspectives influence what one sees and how one assesses that.

Even recognition of the role of one's viewpoint, however, is not enough. Language, like rituals, laws, and customs, is a *social* phenomenon. A large part of the power of images is a function of how they are understood and used in a community. Human beings can communicate across communal lines, and hence some images are intelligible in multiple communities or even in a general, human context. God imagined as a rock, for example, would immediately appeal to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, although it probably would make less sense, if any at all, to Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, and Jains. Some images communicate effectively, however, only in the context of one community's vision of the world. God plaiting Eve's hair and serving as Adam's best man provide examples of this. The Eastern religions do not speak of Adam and Eve. I am honestly not sure how Catholics would respond to such an image, for, on the one hand, in Catholicism a celibate clergy is held out to the ideal for human beings and the Rabbinic world of *midrash* is foreign and may be seen as making God too familiar, but, on the other, marriage is a sacrament, vested with significant theological meaning. For Islam (except, perhaps, for Sufi Islam), God is too unequivocally transcendent to be involved in this way in the wedding of any couple, even the original one.

Therefore we must say this: To determine whether a given image by which God is described is true one must decide whether ultimate reality is as the image describes it to be in the *communal* perspective through which the world is seen. This revised formulation of our criterion of truth communicates that judgments of the truth of images are functions of *both* the intersubjective experiences we all have *and* the communal, metaphysical glasses through which we see and understand our experiences.

There is yet one other important component in the truth of images. It is indicated, in part, by the fact that religious people in the West do not generally speak of "ultimate reality," but rather of "God." There are theoretical reasons for doing that. Religious Jews, for example, name ultimate reality "God" to say, in part, that ultimate reality, as they perceive it and interact with it, is personal. In recognition of this personal quality they have traditionally called it "He," and they conceive of God as having an intellect, conscience, will, and emotions. God's personhood enables Him to ordain the commandments recorded in the Torah and to act in history. Religious Jews are often also asserting that God is transcendent. Philosophically, they mean that He is beyond the limits of possible experience and hence beyond human knowledge and/or that God exists apart from the material universe.

The distinction between "ultimate reality" and the term "God" as used in religion, however, is greater than these philosophical points describe. In the practice of religion, "God" signifies that the speaker is not just *contemplating* ultimate reality,

but *relating* to it personally, usually in the context of a *convictional community*.²² What makes a perspective religious is, as the etymology of the term indicates, the fact that it binds (Latin, *ligare*) the perceiver to the content of his or her perception and to the community that shares it. In theology, one emphasizes the intellectual component of this link, sometimes, unfortunately, to the exclusion of other forms of relationship; but the ongoing practice of religion does not stress any component of our being over any other. On the contrary, according to the Torah, one is to love God “with all one’s heart, all one’s soul, and all one’s might.”²³

Thus, to continue our example, religious people encounter God’s transcendence most not in the context of theology but rather in worship, where it denotes God’s continuing adverse judgment of people’s false centers of loyalty, their idolatry. In this setting God’s transcendence is referred to as His holiness, and, as such, it takes on implications for action. The proper responses to God’s holiness are not only recognition of the limits of our intellectual understanding of God, but also commitment to fix the brokenness of the world, to education, to family, and to community, together with humility and repentance, for all these taken together are the means by which one gains a proper center for one’s life.²⁴

The truth of a religious image, then, will depend not only on its ability to reflect an aspect of our experience, but also on its coherence with a communal framework of belief *and action* to which the particular experience is linked and through which it is understood. As I have discussed in my book, *Knowing God*, experiences and actions are revelatory of God if, and only if, a given community perceives and interprets them to be so.²⁵ This means that the truth of religious images will depend not only upon their correspondence to reality as we all experience it, but also upon their compatibility with the world view of a particular religious community and with the actions through which it gives expression to its philosophy. Issues of truth in religion are thus ineluctably and indissolubly connected with issues of authority.

The Authority of Images

How does an image become authoritative for a community – say, the Jewish one? In essence, in much the same way as a law does. Although the Bible acts as an original source for Jewish images and laws, it is not the final authority. What ultimately

²² Cf. McClendon and Smith (1975), esp. ch. 1.

²³ Deuteronomy 6:5. This is part of the *Shema*, one of the core prayers of Jewish liturgy.

²⁴ See Holbrook (1984), pp. 202–11. I have been greatly influenced by chapters 4 and 14 of his book, especially pp. 61 and 192–198, in writing this section of this paper.

²⁵ I make this point most explicitly with regard to God’s words in Chapter Four of Dorff (1992), but it carries over also to human actions (Chapter Three), human words (Chapter Five), and divine actions (Chapter Six). See also an earlier expression of this thesis in Dorff (1976–77), pp. 58–68, although there I did not acknowledge that actions in accordance with communal laws and customs can be revelatory.

matters is *how the community has interpreted and applied the Bible in their lives*. To determine that, one must pay attention to all of the following: what the community has, over time, selectively chosen to ignore and, in contrast, to emphasize in its educational and liturgical life; how passages are narrowed or extended in the community's interpretations of them in the face of new circumstances or new sensitivities; what new images or practices have been appended by the legal and literary leaders of the people; and the extent to which all of this affects the actual thinking and practice of the masses and, conversely, the extent to which the conceptions and customs of the masses affect the decisions and creativity of the leaders. While this process may be strange to fundamentalist Protestants, it should be familiar to Jews, for it is nothing but the ongoing work of *midrash*, the biblical interpretation and expansion that is at the heart of rabbinic Judaism.

The authority of images, then, like the authority of law, rests upon an *interaction* between the constitutive text (in the case of Judaism, the Bible) and the community that lives by it. The text gives all subsequent discussion focus and coherence. Interpretations may vary over a wide range, but they can still be Jewish if they are based on the Bible. As the classical Rabbis maintain:

Lest a person say, "Since some scholars declare a thing impure and others declare it pure, some pronounce a thing forbidden and others pronounce it permitted, some disqualify the ritual fitness of an object while others uphold it, how can I study Torah under such circumstances?" Scripture states, "They are given from one shepherd" (Ecclesiastes 12:11): One God has given them, one leader [Moses] has uttered them at the command of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He, as it says, "And God spoke *all* these words" (Exodus 20:1).... Although one scholar offers his view and another offers his, the words of both are all derived from what Moses, the shepherd, received from the One Lord of the Universe.²⁶

An image or a law must also, however, gain social confirmation to become authoritative for the community. It may not be easy to discern whether or not an image has gained social acceptance, especially in a community like the Jewish one that lacks a centralized body to make decisions, but it is not impossible. In any community – even highly centralized ones like that of Roman Catholics – the authority of a law or image depends ultimately upon its acceptance by the community as a factor in their thought and in their lives. Old and new images are subjected to continuing evaluation of their rationality, their truth, their theological coherence, their adequacy, their ethical probity and effectiveness, and their practicality. This process may last for a long, indeterminate period of time, but it may also be rapid and final. Imagining Jesus as the Messiah is a clear example of an image that was proposed and quickly rejected by most of the Jewish community in the first century of the Common Era, and discussion in the 1960s of God as dead was also either ignored or roundly rejected in Jewish discussions because of its heavy Christian connotations.²⁷ On the other hand, the rabbinic image of God as one who

²⁶ *Numbers Rabbah* 14:4.

²⁷ Even Richard Rubenstein, who denies a God who acts in history, has trouble with the imagery of God as dead because it is, in his eyes and those of all other Jewish writers, much too Christian; see his 1966, ch. 14, with further references to this point in ch. 13.

studies and the Kabbalistic development of the picture of God as the *Shekhinah*, a warm presence with a distinctly feminine feel, are examples of how a new image can become implanted in the consciousness of a community.

Ultimately, the authority of an image of God rests in its ability to evoke experiences of God. An image may have impeccable biblical and/or rabbinic authority, but it will not influence thought and behavior for long if it fails to link people with God. Then it is a broken image, one that no longer functions to remind individuals and the community as a whole of the facts and values embedded in their perspective of reality and to motivate them to try to actualize their vision of what should be. Images come from the devotional needs of the religious individual and community and, when clearly formulated and emotionally alive, they command our allegiance. As Clyde Holbrook has said, “Awe, wonder, adoration, and the elevation of the human spirit are ...[their] milieu, perhaps better confessed in song than trivialized by rote repetition as prose or made the subject of the proddings of an inquisitive reason.”²⁸

Good and Bad Images

We have probed the workings of images, their meaning, truth, and authority. Ultimately, we have no recourse but to think of God in images. The only real question is how we choose the images we use. In that process we must be on guard against images that are ineffective because they do not touch us; those that distort or falsify our experience; and those that undermine the community’s cohesiveness. On the other hand, we must seek images that have an immediately clear meaning (in contrast to creeds and symbols, which can be more enigmatic and lend themselves to multiple interpretations); we want images that evoke the emotions and actions that powerful images should; they must be true to our experience, even if they cannot be totally so; and they must enjoy the community’s validation in thought and action, motivating us to do morally good things, to, indeed, fix the world as much as we can and in as many ways that we can. Above all, we must make sure that our images are not idolatrous, that they do not represent the part for the whole, for that would be to undermine their truth and to give up Jews’ special mandate to be a people true to God.

For your own sake, therefore, be most careful – since you saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire – not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever, having the form of a man or a woman, the form of any beast on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth. And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the Lord your God allotted to the other peoples everywhere under heaven; but you the Lord took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people. (Deuteronomy 4:15–20)

²⁸ Holbrook (1984), p. 223. See also p. 218.

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Augustine and Classical Theism

John Peter Kenney

Labels have a way of beguiling us. As conceptual shorthand, they provide a measure of convenience and a sense of surety to our reflections. But they can also mask complexity, veiling with the ease of taxonomy elements that might warrant further probing. That is, of course, one natural rhythm of human discourse – exactitude followed by “the decay of imprecision” (Eliot 1943, *Burnt Norton*, V, 152). ‘Classical theism’ is one such label, standardly used in analytic philosophy of religion, referring to the traditional notion of God accepted within Judaism, Christianity and Islam. By using the term ‘classical theism,’ a certain conception of God can be sketched in terms of a common set of divine attributes, including transcendence, immutability, eternality, and perfection. And, if any Christian would seem to be a ‘classical theist,’ it would be that paragon of Catholic Christianity, Saint Augustine.

This paper is an abbreviated effort to reflect on the label ‘classical theism’ in reference to Augustine. In doing so I wish to consider what lurks behind that term, or, perhaps more precisely, what is hidden within this act of labeling. My point is not so much to deny the attribution of ‘classical theist’ to Augustine as to reconsider aspects implicit in its use. It may well be that our philosophical vantage point sets us apart, to a considerable degree, from that of Augustine. That is, at least, an initial suspicion that I now propose to explore. To do so within the scope of this short paper we might concentrate on Augustine’s classic account of his adoption of Christian monotheism, *The Confessions*. There are two critical points that warrant reflection as we begin: First, Augustine understands his assertion of classical theism within the larger framework of the ancient practice of philosophy, specifically the practice of contemplation. To understand his theism, we will need to come to terms with that. Moreover, there is a second aspect of his thought that is unavoidable: Augustine does not countenance a sharp separation between what we would call philosophy and theology. There is certainly a spectrum in his thought running from what he

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recognized as philosophical dialectic to theological discourse rooted in scripture. But there is no bright line of separation between philosophy and theology as separate disciplines; that will have to wait until the rise of medieval scholasticism and its subsequent adoption in the Enlightenment (Evans 1980, ch.1). In consequence Augustine's thought is – as it were – an unrent garment, one that requires a broader hermeneutic than is common today among philosophers of religion in order to capture its full range. And, while the abstract notion of 'classical theism' has its uses in contemporary philosophy of religion, there may be much that eludes this category in reading Augustine's more capacious style of reflection.

That Augustine sounds like a classical theist in the contemporary sense of the term seems evident from the prologue to the *Confessions*. Book I begins with a long prayer to God, establishing the rhetorical voice of supplication that characterizes the entire work. Within that prayer the nature of God is forcefully iterated beginning with a list of divine attributes at 1.4.4: most high (*summe*), most good (*optime*), most powerful (*potentissime*), most omnipotent (*omnipotentissime*), most merciful (*misericordissime*), most just (*iustissime*), most beautiful (*pulcherrime*), most strong (*fortissime*), stable (*stabilis*), and incomprehensible (*incomprehensibilis*). The passage also includes a paradoxical array of epithets: most hidden (*secretissime*), most present (*praesentissime*), immutable (*immutabilis*), changing all things (*mutans omnia*), never new (*numquam novus*), never old (*numquam vetus*), always active (*semper agens*), always in repose (*semper quietus*), gathering together but not needing (*conligens et non egens*). Yet God is also intentional and active in relation to his creatures: bearing and filling and protecting (*portans et implens et protegens*), creating, nurturing and perfecting (*creans et nutriendis et perficiens*). The text then emphasizes direct address to God: searching though you lack nothing (*quaerens cum nihil desit tibi*), you love without desiring (*amas nec aestuas*), you are jealous but yet secure (*zelas et secures es*), you repent without regret (*paenitet te et non doles*), you are wrathful but also tranquil (*irasperis et tranquillus es*), you change things without changing your design (*opera mutas nec mutas consilium*), you recover what you find but have never lost (*recipis quod invenis et numquam amisisti*), never in need you rejoice in gains (*numquam inops et gaedes lucris*), never avaricious yet you require interest (*numquam avarus et usuras exigis*), you pay off debts though owing nothing (*reddis debita nulli debens*), you cancel debts without loss (*donas debita nihil perdens*).

Is Augustine merely paying "metaphysical compliments" to God in this text (Whitehead 1925/1967, p.179)? A more generous reading might help to move beyond that judgment, one that is attentive to the larger dimensions of Augustine's theism. To probe these, we might begin with Augustine's own questions, those that directly follow this iteration of divine attributes. Augustine wonders at the close of 1.4.4: "What have we said, my God, my life, my blessed sweetness?" "What does one say when one speaks of you?" The answers lie in the soul's purpose in engaging in such language: to retrace in discourse what had been disclosed in contemplation, to restore the immediacy of the soul's association with its divine source, to find rest and surety after its moral and cognitive wanderings. And this is so because for Augustine the finite human soul does not discover the contours of divinity through

abstract discourse or theory. Nor does it achieve anything of lasting value on its own. It comes to recognize the divine through contemplation, that is, first through moral refurbishment and then through the awakening of its latent capacity to understand – in some limited measure – the divine nature. Both of these changes in the soul are outside the range of its own capacity during its current embodied and ethically compromised state. Contemplation involves turning the soul around from its misplaced love and back towards its natural state of association with God. But only God can accomplish this for the Augustinian soul. Our discourse, our theories about the divine, our construction of philosophical models – these are all valuable propaedeutics to contemplation, but all are nonetheless extrinsic to it.

The *Confessions* is – in part – the account of Augustine's achievement of divine contemplation, its transformative force, and its biographical aftermath. It is also a story about how an imperial court rhetorician, an acknowledged master of language, came to see the limitations of theoretical discourse about the divine. Part of that transformation is due to his encounter with Platonism from which his representation of contemplation is partially derived. He is quite explicit about his debt to Platonism in *Confessions* 7, explaining how it allowed him not just a notional grasp of the idea of transcendence but also the contemplative ascension of his soul to the level of being in the manner of Diotima's narrative of psychic ascension in the *Symposium* (203B ff.). But Augustine is also acutely aware that his own contemplative ascensions, though catalyzed by the *libri Platonicorum*, were unlike that described by the Platonists in several critical respects. Most obviously he came to contemplation of the divine not through the moral and intellectual discipline of philosophy but through the mysterious force of the divine upon him at a moment of personal crisis. Contemplation was for him importunate and unmerited, the product of a disclosure from without the soul not from within. He recounts in the central books of the *Confessions* how he was shattered in those conversionary moments of understanding as he came to immediate awareness of transcendent being.

All this can be seen in two accounts of contemplation found in book seven: 7.10.16 and 7.17.23. Each is an ascension narrative that underscores Augustine's sudden awakening to the inner capacity of the soul and its immediate cognition of a transcendent God. At 7.10.16 Augustine sets out his first account of the epistemic foundations for his commitment to theism. By this point in the autobiography he had explained his spiritual trajectory: from a mixed, pagan/Catholic family background, he had joined the Manichaean religion, a gnostic Christian sect with roots in Persian Zoroastrianism. But its metaphysical dualism and materialism came to be intellectually inadequate, and, at the behest of Catholic intellectuals in the circle of St. Ambrose, Augustine came to read some unspecified Platonist treatises, evidently some of the *Enneads* of Plotinus and perhaps other works from the Roman school, most likely Porphyry. He insists in *Confessions* 7 that these works awakened in him a novel recognition: that there could be a level of reality outside the physical cosmos, one that could be accessed through the interior powers of the soul. The ascension narratives of book seven then take the reader beyond this initial, conceptual recognition to accounts of the actual success of this inner contemplation.

The first of these – at 7.10.16 – is a concise statement of the foundations of Augustine's theism. He tells us that the Platonic books had admonished him to go into his soul to find wisdom, not out into the physical universe. But to do so a divine guide was needed both to lead him and to empower him. He was led to see a non-physical light, an immutable light higher than the mind itself. This transcendent light is the origin and maker of the human soul and it occupies a different plane of reality than its products. It is described in explicit Platonic language as 'being.' The text reads as follows (all translations are my own):

....sed superior, quia ipsa fecit me, et ego inferior, quia factus ab ea. qui novit veritatem, novit eam, et qui novit eam, novit aeternitatem; caritas novit eam. o aeterna veritas et vera caritas et cara aeternitas, tu es deus meus, tibi suspiro die ac nocte! et cum te primum cognovi, tu adsumpsisti me ut viderem esse quod viderem, et nondum me esse qui viderem.

... but it was superior, since it made me, and I was inferior, since I was made by it. Whoever knows truth, knows it, and whoever knows it, knows eternity. Love knows it. Eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity, you are my God. To you do I sigh day and night. And when I first knew you, you lifted me up so that I realized that what I saw was being, and that I who saw was not yet being.

This section sketches the composite elements of Augustinian theism. Contemplation of transcendent reality occurs through divine intervention, by direct assistance and guidance, and not through the intrinsic power of the soul itself. Neither is it a result of the practice of Platonic philosophy or of the disciplined life enjoined upon its adepts. It is instead importunate, catalyzed perhaps by judicious advice, but nonetheless outside a person's control. Contemplation reveals by its character and inner movement the attention of a deeper power. That power opens to the inner discernment of the soul a level beyond the physical cosmos, a level of immutable truth superior to that occupied by the contemplative soul. But it is also a level of reality that had initially created the embodied soul. Augustine's God is then defined in terms of three main attributes: eternal truth, true love, and beloved eternity. Crucially, God is revealed as directly attending to the soul, lifting it up in order that it might have the central revelation of being itself. And in that cognition too comes the consequent insight that the soul is not itself being, but external to being. However extraordinary its sudden access to eternal being may be, the soul is, in the moment of that recognition, also exhibited to be only a creature and a contingent being.

Augustinian theism thus includes several interlocking components that are represented as falling directly out of this initial instance of contemplation. First is the notion of transcendence – of existence outside space and time. Second is the veridicality of being. Both are standard features of late Platonist ontology. But Augustine's text also contains a clear departure from his Platonist sources in the Plotinian school: his pronounced emphasis on the initiative and efficacy of being in its relation to the contemplative soul. The reversal of the telic vector of Platonic theology is especially noteworthy, for the Augustinian soul does not follow a philosophical program leading to the restoration of its transcendence as in Plotinus (Kenney 2005, Part II). It is instead lifted up by its creator, now paradoxically understood to be both eternal being itself and the saviour of the soul. And so for Augustine contemplation discloses both aspects of divinity together and at once.

This text from 7.10.16 is followed with a second account of contemplation, one that reiterates many of these same characteristics at 7.17.23. The context is his overcoming of the Ciceronian skepticism that had become increasingly persuasive to him amidst the cognitive exhaustion that followed his break with Manichaeism. But Platonism has now offered him the certainty of apodictic judgments based on rational grasp of the intelligibles. Yet Augustine realizes that his purchase on this level of being is at best momentary. And, while he now loves the beauty and perfection of being, he lacks any natural capacity to maintain his soul's attention upon it. He tells us that he was now entirely certain (*certissimus*) of the invisible nature of the divine, of God's sempiternal power and divinity. Yet he cannot maintain his soul's contemplation of the divine wisdom, since he was not morally stable enough. What stood in his way was his "weight", that is, the ethical character of his present life, and, more specifically, his sexual habit (*pondus hoc consuetudo carnalis*). The axis of the passage is thus ethical; what prevents the momentary success of contemplation from continuing and deepening is the current moral state of the contemplative soul.

Nonetheless the contemplative soul has some cognitive success because of the divine light that floods it, allowing it to make unqualified judgments about contingent things. The passage charts the soul's interior ascension through levels of being and knowledge: it moves towards the "unchangeable and authentic eternity of truth" (*incommutabilem et veram veritatis aeternitatem*). From bodily sensations through the fallible faculties of perception and empirical judgment, the soul comes to the innermost power, the intellect, which alone has the capacity to draw thought out of the ruts of habit. This is so because the intellect is flooded by the divine light, and so the soul can therein find certainty. At this point the passage asserts that the soul reaches being, "that which is," in the flash of a tremulous glance (*pervenit ad id quod est in ictu trepidantis aspectus*). But, lacking inner moral strength to maintain that level of reality, the soul immediately withdraws back to its customary level of existence in the physical world, now enriched by the memory it bears of the intelligible world. The soul's condition is painful, realizing as it does its diminished status, the result of its fallen state. As Augustine goes on to explain at 7.18.24, that condition could only be remediated if the soul finds strength outside itself in a divine mediator. The divine Word, eternal truth itself, lifts those up who accept this divine power. Thus for Augustine the divine Word acts both as a goal of the soul's inner ascension to beauty and certainty, while also supplying the force to soul for that journey itself. Both aspects prevail at once in contemplation: the transcendence of the divine as well as God's extrinsic movement into the innermost reaches of the human soul. In these texts Augustinian theism emerges as a God is revealed to be both the eternal paradigm of being and the active agent of creation and salvation. In contemplation both aspects of divinity are jointly manifested.

The vision at Ostia in book nine of the *Confessions* (9.10.23-25) is Augustine's definitive account of contemplation, coming as it does after his conversion to Catholicism and his baptism by St. Ambrose in Milan. The text recounts a joint ascension, one that begins and ends in a dialogue with his mother set just days before her death. Their conversation concerns the eternal life of the saints and leads to an

initial conclusion: that bodily pleasures are incommensurate with the joys of eternity. Their souls are then lifted up to being itself (*id ipsum*), passing in sequence through all corporal things and the heavens. Then comes the critical shift away from this cosmic journey of the soul to interior ascension and transcendence of space and time. They go down into the intellective element of the soul through internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at creation, and then beyond that to something deeper still (*et adhuc ascendebamus interius cogitando et loquendo et mirando opera tua. Et venimus in mentes nostras et transcendimus eas,...*). The next stage is especially critical to Augustine's theism. Interior contemplation, catalyzed by God, draws the souls into contact with wisdom itself, which they are described as "touching" (*attingeremus*). The text makes clear that the contemplative souls are now in a direct and immediate relation with being itself, the cause of the lower, created world:

et ibi vita sapientia est, per quam flunt omnia ista, et quae fuerunt et quae futura sunt, et ipsa non fit, sed sic est ut fuit, et sic erit semper. quin potius fuisse et futurum esse non est in ea, sed esse solum, quoniam aeterna est: nam fuisse et futurum esse non est aeternum et dum loquimur et inhiamus illi, attingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis.

And there life is the wisdom through which all things are made, both those which were and will be, but wisdom was not made but is as it was and always will be. Moreover in wisdom there can be no past or future, but only being, since it is eternal, for the past and the future do not pertain to the eternal. And while we talked and panted after it, we touched it slightly by the total force of the heart.

Augustine goes on in 9.10.25 to clarify this joint act of immediate divine contemplation further. He suggests that if all the heavens were silent and even the soul itself were to make no noise, and all language and all signs and all that is transitory were silent, then wisdom could speak not through these finite things but directly. He whom we love in created things would now be seen directly and without any mediation by the ascending soul, freed from all the noise of materiality and temporality. This is the supreme instance of the human transcendence for the embodied soul:

sicut nunc extendimus nos et rapida cogitatione attingimus aeternam sapientiam super omnia manentem

That is how it was at that moment when we extended ourselves and in a flash of thought touched the eternal wisdom that abides beyond all things

This moment of understanding (*hoc momentum intellegentiae*) is a foretaste of eternal life, the initial subject of their mutual discussion. The rhythm of the passage thus moves from discursive reflection to unmediated association with eternal wisdom and then back to temporal discourse. It is, in its entirety, the result of divine intervention, for the contemplative souls are lifted up by God and the immediacy of their connection to the divine is exhibited as a gift. Unitive knowledge of eternal wisdom is therefore exhibited as the ultimate *telos* of the human soul, even though it is not now an aspect of its current capacity. Moreover the human soul has no ontological claim to that level of reality, since no element or aspect of the soul remains connected to eternity as in Plotinus (Kenney 2005, Part I). Nor is the contemplative soul here shown to be metaphysically changed by this interior journey, only displayed for what it is – a fallen creature in need of an extraordinary rendition in order

to discover its divine source. And even having done so it is soon returned once again to the moral vagaries of its temporal life, something Augustine explores in detail in book ten. Contemplation in the *Confessions* thus uncovers far more than might be initially expected. It discloses the perfection of eternity while forcing into stark relief the impoverished condition of the human soul. And it impresses upon the contemplative soul the incommensurability of its station in relation to God and its utter need for divine intervention. But that too is supplied within these successful acts of contemplation, underscoring that the inner nature of God includes both direct attention to human individuals and immediate intervention into their spiritual states. As such the apparent *stasis* of eternal being is augmented by its movement toward souls who seek it. In doing so the divine wisdom recapitulates in part the initial outward vector of creation. This active agency conveys a personalistic dimension to Augustine's account of being and obviates the ontological distance that its permanence might convey. Indeed much more than a glimpse of eternity was thus to be found in that moment of understanding.

These texts from the central books of the *Confessions* offer the reader insight into the theism that Augustine adopted at the time of his conversion to Catholicism and the epistemic foundations of his new theology can be found here. If we step back from them we can perceive in outline how the theism of Augustine is grounded in those contemplative acts wherein the soul was understood to be transformed into a likeness to the divine and was therefore capable – if only briefly – of immediate knowledge of transcendent wisdom. That notion of epistemic isomorphism, of the soul's transformation in order to know the divine, is perhaps the central point of division between contemporary Western philosophy of religion and Augustine or his Platonists sources. It is not just that philosophy was a way of life in antiquity, it was also that the disciplined, philosophic life was regarded as epistemically productive, conducive to a change in the inner self that might then lead to successful contemplation of the divine. As we have seen, Augustine was profoundly influenced by that tradition, although he came instead to a Christian variant of it. The novel Augustinian departure rested on several theses distinct from his Platonist sources. For the soul in the *Confessions* bears no recessive connection to the transcendent realm and no natural likeness to the divine. As a creature, it was made in the image and likeness of God, but, for Augustine, that fact serves both to separate the soul off from its source while suggesting a basis upon which a new association might nonetheless be built. But there is never any possibility that the Augustinian soul harbors an ontological connection to the divine that might serve as the basis for enriched participation in being, as in the *Phaedo* (78b-84b).

Augustine's conception of God is consistent with this understanding of the human soul and the limits of contemplation. Indeed his theism emerged from his efforts at contemplation as recounted in the *Confessions*. But we might now ask in conclusion: is Augustine's theism 'classical'? The answer depends in large measure on the ground rules of discussion. If one is considering only the abstract outline of Augustine's ontology, then his theism might be categorized as 'classical,' according to Hartshorne's well-known taxonomy (Hartshorne and Reese, 1953, p.17). On that representation, 'classical theism' postulates a supreme being as eternal consciousness,

knowing but not including the world. It also privileges the static aspect of the divine, centering the ultimate reality in what is eternal, unchanging, immutable, etc. That is a partially accurate interpretation of the texts under review here from the *Confessions*. But this analysis also proceeds in what might be called a speculative mode, that is, the discussion is an exercise in ontological modeling, assessing the conceptual implications of various theological permutations. This is vividly displayed by Hartshorne's chart of the logically possible notions of deity (Hartshorne and Reese 1953, p. 17). As such this mode of thought would be understood both by ancient Platonists and by Augustine as an exercise in discursive reflection, as a worthy preliminary to contemplation and perhaps as a significant postlude as well. But, as we have seen, the main driver in the ancient project of knowing the divine was not abstract speculation. Knowledge about God or the One was not its fundamental purpose. Rather, unitive intellection was its goal, something the ancients insist can be achieved through inner contemplation. In this sense 'classical theism' captures only the manifest image of a much larger and deeper understanding of our approach to the divine, one that supersedes more limited, abstract representation. To recover what 'classical' theists were attempting to relate requires us therefore to move beyond the conventions of post-Enlightenment philosophy of religion into a much more extensive consideration of the ancient understanding of knowledge of the divine. This brief essay is but a modest gesture in the direction of that restoration of the full measure of 'classical theism.'

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Anselm's Perfect God

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Anselm of Canterbury is well known for his systematic and analytically careful discussion of the nature of God. In the present paper I will defend his methodology, then outline some of the most important basic attributes which he ascribes to God, noting problems and pointing towards Anselmian solutions.¹ (Occasionally I will go a bit beyond what Anselm himself explicitly has to say, but I will alert the reader when I do so.) Anselm begins his analysis of the nature of God with the claim that God is a perfect being, beyond any limitation, “that than which no greater can be conceived” (*Proslogion* 2; Davies and Evans 1998, 87).² His method is to unpack this concept of perfection and ascribe to God, to an unlimited degree, whatever attributes it is simply better to have than not. But this will lead him to analyze some divine attributes in ways that certain contemporary philosophers find alien and to posit some divine attributes which contemporary philosophers have called into question; simplicity and eternality, for example. Some say that the Anselmian picture is too “helenizing”. It conforms to the classical Greek notions of perfection handed down through the Neoplatonists rather than to the biblical God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Anselm, of course, is cognizant of the fact that some of what he intends to say about God may conflict with someone’s *prima facie* reading of the Bible. But everyone who takes the Bible seriously admits that some texts require more than a *prima facie* interpretation.³ The problem is which texts and how to

¹ For a longer (though still introductory) treatment of these issues see my *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2000).

² The same assumption is at work in his *Monologion*, the book he wrote before the *Proslogion*.

³ For example, Roman Catholics have been comfortable with the view that the first chapters of *Genesis* do not necessarily describe seven periods of 24 hours each ever since Augustine wrote his “literal” (though definitely not *prima facie*) interpretation at the beginning of the fifth century. On the other hand, some Protestants, while insisting upon the seven, 24 hours regarding *Genesis*, allow that Jesus’ statement that those who would be saved must eat His body and drink His blood should not be taken in its most apparent sense.

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interpret them. Anselm takes the commitment that God is “that than which no greater can be conceived” as the guiding principle in interpretation. Any text which suggests, at a first glance, that God is imperfect or limited needs a second look.

But what justifies the initial claim about God’s perfection? Anselm himself takes it for granted, but there are at least two avenues by which to defend his starting point. First, there is the philosophical argument that, insofar as the existence of God is amenable to philosophical demonstration, the God which the proofs prove is a perfect and unlimited being. (It has been popular in the last few centuries to claim that the existence of God cannot be philosophically proven. Anselm takes this to be plainly false. A defense of the sundry proofs would take us *far* too far afield, but my own view is that many of them deserve more credit than they have been given recently.) Anselm’s own “single, simple” proof, the famous and infamous “ontological” argument, starts with defining God as “that than which no greater can be conceived”, and claims to show that it is impossible that such a being should not exist. The causal proofs for God, such as Aquinas’ Five Ways, which move from some element of the world to God as the ultimate source of the world certainly point to a God who transcends the limitations inherent within created reality.

Second – and this may be why Anselm does not even think to defend his starting point – a lesser deity than “that than which no greater can be conceived” could not be a proper object of worship. We humans are little beings. Our thoughts are limited. If even we *homunculi* were able to invent a being greater than the one we name as God, then our god would be a very small sort of divinity indeed. And surely not one worthy of our worship. A being worthy of worship must exceed the imaginings of our created intellects (*Proslogion* 15; Davies and Evans 1998, 96). Does that mean we cannot think about God at all? No, we can have concepts which are correct as far as they go. But we must not think we can “wrap our minds around” God in His very nature. So, for example, we can understand and use the concept of omniscience. We understand the meaning of the words when we say that to be omniscient is (at least) to know all the facts. We can see that if someone doesn’t know some fact, then that person is not omniscient. But we can’t “hold” all the facts in our own minds and so we do not know how it is to be omniscient. But, as Anselm says, someone who cannot gaze steadily into the sun, may nonetheless be able to see the sun-light (*Reply to Gaunilo* 1; Davies and Evans 1998, 113).

Anselm is, in fact, rather more optimistic regarding our understanding of God than many philosophers of religion, in that he holds that when we attribute properties to God and creatures we do so univocally. That is, the term means the same thing – it is amenable to the same definition – when applied to God and to creatures. True, we cannot wrap our minds around God’s nature. The “shared” attribute is immeasurably greater in God than in the creature, and moreover, the creature merely *has* the attribute, while God *is* the attribute. It is in some sense identified with the nature of God. For example, the creature may have justice, while God *is* Justice. But nonetheless, the attribute had by the creature and identified with God are in some sense the same thing (Rogers 1997b, 199–215). What sense? Anselm is, I take it, an inheritor of the Augustinian Neoplatonic tradition, in which the divine act of creation entails that the creature “participates” in the nature of the Creator. The attribute in

the creature is but a dim reflection of the reality of God, but it is nevertheless a true reflection (Rogers 1997b, 106–112).

What properties, then, should we attribute to “that than which no greater can be conceived”? Let us start with one which creatures do not share, and which has been dismissed by most contemporary philosophers of religion; simplicity. I start here because an explication of Anselm’s understanding of other attributes is clearer if we grasp at the outset the *prima facie* puzzling claim that all of God’s attributes are one and identical with His nature. Also, Anselm’s “proof” of the necessity of divine simplicity offers an exemplary instance of how he uses perfect being theology – unpacking the concept of perfection – to arrive at his understanding of the nature of God. So we ask; Could it be that God is composed of parts of any kind? (Obviously we do not even need to consider *corporeal* parts, since being a body is intrinsically limiting.) Well, anything composed of parts is, by definition, “pull-apartable”. Perhaps not by anyone in practice, but at least *in intellectu*, in the mind. But for a thing composed of parts to have its parts separated is to be destroyed, or, at best, to be harmed and diminished. That being the case, we can think of something better than a thing composed of parts – something not composed of parts. And so it must be that God is simple (*Proslogion* 18; Rogers 2000, 24–39). The chief contemporary criticism of this claim is that it is just incoherent. How, it is asked rhetorically, can all the different attributes which we ascribe to God, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness, possibly be the same thing and identical with God’s nature? That will be addressed in due course. First two more immediate entailments of divine simplicity.

It follows from the claim that God is absolutely simple that He must be eternal and immutable. Were God’s life stretched out over time like ours, He would be composed of temporal parts – or, at the very least, could be thought to be composed of temporal parts. But God cannot be thought to be composed at all. Eternity is a property that most philosophers of religion, past and present, attribute to God. But “eternal” can mean at least three different things, and we need to say a word about the nature of time in order to explain the three views. Some philosophers have held (either explicitly, or as an unexamined assumption) that only what we perceive as the present moment exists. The past and the future are absolutely non-existent. Whatever the time-travel stories say, you cannot travel in time because your destination in the past or the future just does not exist. Call this “presentism”. If we assume presentism and say that God is eternal, the claim can be spelled out in two different ways. “Eternal” can mean simply that God has always existed and will always exist. This is sometimes termed being “everlasting” or “sempiternal”. So, on presentism, one view is that God is everlasting, but He does change over time. This seems to some to be the more obvious biblical understanding. Doesn’t the Bible say that God created the world and later spoke to Moses and later parted the sea, etc.? But this is not Anselm’s view, since it would entail that God has parts.

It would also entail that God gains and loses properties. For example, we can ask a famous medieval question: What was God doing before He made the world? The question is asked by those who intend to discredit the very idea of the Christian God, a perfect divinity who nonetheless is the Creator. The paradox lies in the fact

that, apparently, before the world was made God was not a creator. Later He becomes a creator. But isn't it a perfection of God's to be a creator? Was He then imperfect before He became a creator? But if He is the sort of being whose nature allows for imperfection, then He is corruptible, and hence is not perfect and unlimited.⁴ A better being can be thought, one which is incorruptible.

A second understanding of "eternal", still assuming presentism, avoids the problem of a mutable God by holding that God is everlasting, but entirely unaffected by the passage of time. He exists at each present moment, and, at each moment, is exactly the same as He was the moment before and will be the moment after. Several of the famous medieval Islamic Aristotelians adopted this position – and were severely criticized for it. And with good reason. It is a position which is impossible to square with any recognizably Islamic – or Jewish, or Christian – belief. The God of Muslims, Jews, and Christians is a God who acts in history, who reaches down into creation and makes a difference in human affairs. But if God is absolutely the same from moment to moment then He does not act in history. It is not the case that He made the world at one time and spoke to Moses at another. He could not even know what time it is *now* since that knowledge would have to change as the hands on the clock go around (Rogers 2007a).

Anselm is absolutely committed to a God who acts in history, and yet he insists upon the simple and immutable perfection of God. He can make sense of this by adopting a different understanding of eternity from the two set out above, an understanding which involves abandoning the presentist view of time in favor of what may be called "isotemporalism". Anselm may well be the first philosopher to make this move (Rogers 2008, 161–168).⁵ Isotemporalism ("iso" being the Greek for "equal" or "same") is the position that it is not the case that only what seems to us now to be the present moment is real. On the contrary, every moment of time – what looks to us now to be the past, present, and future – is equally real. All time exists equally. "Past", "present", and "future", are relative to a given perceiver at a given time. Whatever scientific barriers there may be to time travel, the would-be time traveler in an isotemporal universe is better off than his counterpart in the presentist universe in this respect: If he wants to go from what seems to him to be the present to what seems to him to be the past or the future, his chosen destination *exists*. Should he be fortunate enough to conquer the other difficulties posed by time travel and actually arrive at his destination, that destination, which was past or future when he set out, becomes his new present. On isotemporalism, when we say God is eternal what we mean is that, as the source of all, God transcends the limited perspective of the temporal creature. All of time, each and every moment, is immediately and equally "present", right there for God. He knows it all and acts on it all in one, simple, immutable act (Rogers 2007b; Rogers 2008, 176–184). Any other approach would diminish God.

⁴ Anselm himself does not discuss this question, probably because he held that Augustine's discussion and answer was adequate. Augustine was the most influential philosopher in Anselm's day, and had canvassed the question at length in Book 11 of his *Confessions*.

⁵ Augustine and Boethius hint at it, but neither develops it or explicitly embraces it.

Having set out the more disputed attributes of simplicity and eternity we can turn to three attributes which the majority of philosophers of religion ascribe to God; omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness. Prior to reflection, one might be tempted to define “omnipotence” as the “ability to do anything”, but a moment’s thought shows that this would be too broad. First of all, consider the round square. Even God cannot make such a thing. The logically impossible, such as the round square, is not really a “thing” to be done at all. It is words stuck together by the limited human being, who is simply foolish if he believes the round square to be a doable something. Is God then limited by the laws of logic? Well, no, if by “limited” we mean that they are external to Him and He must conform to them. God is not limited by anything outside Himself at all.

Shall we say, then, that God *creates* or invents the laws of logic? No, for then we would have to hold that He transcends them such that they do not apply to Him. And if the laws of logic do not apply to God then we cannot speak or think meaningfully about Him at all. If, for example, the rule that we cannot hold that something is both the case and not the case in the same way at the same time does not apply to God, then, when we say that He is omnipotent, we could also, simultaneously say that He is *not* omnipotent. But then we cannot have any idea of what He is like at all. We might even say that, although God exists, He does not exist. It would be a strange analysis of divine omnipotence if the upshot were a religion which was in practice indiscernible from atheism.

God neither creates nor conforms to the laws of logic. Rather, the laws of logic are our way of thinking correctly about how reality has to be, and reality is a reflection of the nature of God. So logic is rooted in God’s nature and to say that He “must” conform to it is just to say that God is as He is (Rogers 2000, 94–97). Nor should we say that God can do everything possible. Some instances of doing (“doing” understood broadly) require being limited. I can stub my toe, forget my phone number, regret my past deeds, and sin. God can do none of these things. But in these cases the “ability” is a symptom of weakness, not power. God cannot do *anything* possible, rather He can do anything possible for a perfect and unlimited being (Rogers 2000, 97–98).

On this understanding of omnipotence, God does not need or use anything outside Himself to create the world. There is no preexistent matter out of which He creates. There are no Platonic Forms, timeless propositions, or other abstracta which exist independently of God and which play some role in His creative activity. This claim puts Anselm at odds with many contemporary philosophers of religion who hold that there are abstracta – necessary truths perhaps, or even truths about the free actions of possible agents – which exist independently of the nature and of the will of God.⁶ Anselm insists that absolutely all that exists is God and what God makes. And all that God has made He keeps in being by His thought from moment to moment in His one, eternal act of creation. If God, right now (“now” from our

⁶ Molinists, for example, believe that there are true propositions about what possible free agents would do in possible situations and these propositions are independent of the nature and the will of God. Anselm will have none of that (Rogers 2008, 148–152).

perspective) stopped thinking the fingernail of your left thumb, it would blink out of being. (How this insistence that God is the *Creator omnium* can be squared with human freedom is a complex story which, for my money, Anselm succeeds in telling (Rogers 2008)).

Note that I have moved from God's power to God's thought. Or rather, I have expressed God's power as God's thought. Which brings us to omniscience. Once again, the Anselmian understanding is quite different from that of many contemporary philosophers of religion. "Omniscience" in the contemporary literature is often defined as some variant on "knowing of all true propositions that they are true and of all false propositions that they are false." Now God does know all this, but, unlike human knowers, God primarily knows *things*. God knows propositions about the cat, but more fundamentally, it is His immediately thinking the cat itself that makes it to be. God's power and his knowledge are the same. His action is His thinking. As Anselm sees it, the universe is God's thinking expressed in time and space. Everything that exists is "idea" stuff – which explains why science finds order and beauty at every turn (Rogers 1997a). In discussing the issue of divine simplicity the question was raised whether or not it is coherent to claim that all of God's attributes are the same and identical to His nature. After all, they are different attributes. For example, power is not knowledge. The answer is that *in the creature* power and knowledge are different properties which the creature possesses, but in God they are the same and identical with His nature. God's omniscience is His causal power and the act by which He knows and causes His nature.

A perennial puzzle concerning divine omniscience has been the dilemma of freedom and divine foreknowledge. Surely we want to say that God knows the future. The Bible seems clear that God knows the future. And if such knowledge is possible it would be good to have. God is that than which no greater can be conceived, so He can't be lacking in such knowledge, if such knowledge is possible. But human freedom is important, too. How, if God knows today what you will do tomorrow, can you make a free choice tomorrow? After all, you cannot do other than God foreknows that you will do. And if you "must" do one thing rather than another, how can you be free? Here again, isotemporalism, the theory of time which Anselm pioneers in discussing how a perfect being relates to a changing creation, enables him to solve the problem. What are, from our perspective, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, are all equally real and equally present to God. God knows what you freely choose tomorrow in the same unified act as He knows what you freely choose (use of the present tense is deliberate since *really* all time is just there for God) yesterday and today – He simply sees you choose it. Anselm believes that your choices are not determined and they are truly (though in a very qualified way) generated from yourself, and these are the two requirements for a choice to be free. If you make a free choice tomorrow, the only reason that tomorrow you "must" do what God knows today that you will do is that tomorrow you freely choose what you freely choose – and God knows it. It is your making

the choice tomorrow which makes it the case that you “must” make it tomorrow. But that’s just logic! If you do A tomorrow then you can’t possibly not do A tomorrow. No infringement on free will (Rogers 2008, 169–184).

A final controversial attribute we can look at is divine goodness. The controversy does not have to do with whether or not God is good. Of course He is. But *must* He be good, and how is His goodness to be analyzed? In discussing divine omnipotence I said that God “cannot” sin. He is, on the Anselmian understanding, perfectly good as a matter of necessity. But then, some philosophers argue, He cannot be free in a meaningful way. Anselm responds that that depends on what you mean by “free”. For human beings open options are necessary for freedom. But the more important aspect is “aseity”, from-oneself-ness. In a universe where all that has being is made by God, in order for created agents to be free, it must be up to us which god-given motive we pursue, and so we need the options to ground the aseity of our choices. But God exists absolutely from Himself and so options need not play a role in divine freedom. God “must” do the good, and this is not a limitation on Him (Rogers 2008, 185–205).

But does this mean that there is a moral order, or an order of value, external to God to which He must conform? Of course not. There is nothing in the Anselmian universe besides God and what God makes. Does God then create or invent the laws of morality or the principles of value? This latter suggestion, in its robust version, is known as Divine Command Theory – some action is to be done or avoided simply because God commands that it be done or avoided. The more thoroughgoing Divine Command Theorists, such as William of Ockham, add that God truly could command anything logically possible. For example, it is logically possible that someone should hate God. That means it is really possible that God might command you to hate Him, and if He were to do so then you should hate Him. But this position is fraught with difficulties. It makes morality arbitrary. God might, at the stroke of midnight tonight, reverse the Ten Commandments, in which case tomorrow we should all rob, murder etc. But, at least for many of us, it is almost indubitably obvious that we should not behave that way. Any analysis of the relationship of the moral order to God which would entail that any dreadful behavior which is condemned today might be commanded tomorrow has left the path of reason and needs to be reconsidered. Moreover, if we hope to *mean anything* when we ascribe the attribute of goodness to God, then the term “good” must have more content than just whatever behavior is logically possible. On the Divine Command Theory God can command anything logically possible, making it the good, so that the term “good” can mean almost anything...which robs it of positive content. God neither conforms to an order of value outside Himself, nor does He create or invent one. Rather, created good is a reflection of the nature of God, and God’s goodness *is* His simple act of causal omniscience (Rogers 2000, 126–134). No doubt this is an extremely difficult conclusion to grasp, but you were warned at the beginning. It stands to reason that that than which no greater can be conceived would not be *easy* to conceive.

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Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) on Creation and the Divine Attributes

Ali Hasan

Early in the history of Islam, in the eighth and ninth Centuries, theologians discussed the nature and implications of the divine attributes, and did so with increasing sophistication as the growth of Islam led to a rapid absorption of Greek philosophy. Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111) and Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd (“Averroes”, 1126–1198) continued the debate, developing models of God that they took to be compatible with the Qur'an and the spirit of Islam. Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd disagreed significantly, however, on God's nature and His relation to the world, and on the appropriate way to proceed when philosophizing about God.

Reason, Revelation, and Interpretation

A Muslim who lacks knowledge on matters metaphysical, moral, or spiritual may feel that Islam provides more than enough guidance on its own. There is the Qur'an, God's message to humanity, which is the primary source of guidance; the *sunna* or “tradition”, consisting of reports of the sayings (*ahadith*) and practices of the Prophet Mohammed; and the principles of Islamic law (*Shari'a*) built upon these sources. However, the mention of these sources naturally invites questions about their reliability and interpretation. There is, of course, the question of why we should accept the Qur'an as God's creation. As much as Muslims are unlikely to doubt that the Qur'an is God's word, they are just as likely to claim that we have good reasons to believe that God exists and that the Qur'an is God's message to humankind. There is also the more openly discussed question of how to interpret the Qur'an. A well-known passage in the Qur'an mentions that it contains both “clear” and

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“ambiguous” verses (3, 7). Naturally, there is disagreement regarding which are the ambiguous or allegorical passages, and whether and how to interpret them.¹ The authenticity and interpretation of reports of practices and sayings of the Prophet are also a matter of debate.

Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazali regard demonstrative arguments as secure means to the truth. They both accept the rule that when the conclusion of a demonstrative argument conflicts with a literal interpretation of some passage in the Qur'an, the passage is to be taken figuratively. Consider, for example, the passages that characterize God in overtly anthropomorphic language. There are references to God's sitting on a throne (7, 45; 20, 5), to his face (55, 27) and hands (3, 66), to our perception of him on the Last Day (75, 22), and to his seeing and hearing all (42, 9; 58,1). While there were theologians who took all these descriptions literally, most, including al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd, did not. Beings that have a bodily form, that are perceiving and that can be perceived in the ordinary sense, have characteristics incompatible with a perfect being: they have finite spatial dimensions, are subject to change and decay, and can be affected by other things. Having divested God of such features, however, how much further should we go? Can we even say that God has will, power, and intellect, in any sense that we can understand? For the Qur'an also says that “there is nothing like him” (42, 9), and this (together with the influence of elements in Neoplatonic thought) led some to accept the method of negative theology according to which we can only say what God is *not*. This view leaves much to be desired, and both al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd hold that a positive and awe-inspiring notion of God is available, even if God's nature will in some ways forever be beyond our grasp.

There is, then, a general problem confronting philosophical accounts of God's nature and relation to creation in Islam, the problem of conceiving of that nature in a way that places an appropriate distance between God and humans. On the one hand, we want a notion of God that preserves his transcendent nature, one that is not overly anthropomorphic, or that does not make Him to be too much like us. On the other hand, we want to be able to say something positive and substantive about God, something that we can admire and identify with to some extent. And we want to do this while preserving the harmony of reason and revelation, of philosophy and religion, as much as possible.

Divine Creation

Tahafut al-Falasifa (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), perhaps al-Ghazali's most famous work, is an attack on the Neoplatonic Islamic philosophy of al-Farabi (c. 870–950) and Ibn Sina (“Avicenna”, 980–1037). Although it is a religiously

¹ Passages from the Qur'an are taken from the Arberry (1964) version, with the sura number followed by the verse number.

motivated work intended to show that the philosophers contradicted the central tenets of Islam, the main strategy is to beat philosophers at their own game, to show that their conclusions did not follow from the premises they themselves accept, or to uncover problematic assumptions in their arguments. Far from being dogmatic or unphilosophical, it provides clear explanations and incisive criticisms of many of the philosophers' theses and arguments. In other works, like *Al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad (Moderation in Belief)*, written shortly after *Tahafut al-Falasifa*, al-Ghazali presents positive philosophical arguments for his own view, including arguments for the temporal finitude of the world and the existence of God. Ibn Rushd's *Tahafut al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)* is a detailed critique of al-Ghazali's *Tahafut al-Falasifa*. While Ibn Rushd disagrees with Neoplatonic philosophers like Ibn Sina in some significant respects, the critique is a response to al-Ghazali on behalf of a broadly Aristotelian or Neoplatonic philosophy. In works written relatively late in his life, al-Ghazali develops a mystical view that is similar in some ways to the philosophical views criticized in his *Tahafut*. We will focus primarily on al-Ghazali's more orthodox view as reflected in the *Tahafut* and other closely related works, and turn to his mysticism in the section on "[Al-Ghazali's Mysticism](#)".

Ibn Sina accepted the Neoplatonic theory of emanation, according to which all that exists "flows" or emanates, necessarily, from God's nature. Given that God is eternal and the world and everything in it flows necessarily from His nature, it seems to follow that the world is eternal as well. Some might find it odd to call God the *creator* of the world if the world is eternal. Absent some argument, however, it is far from clear that God's creation of an eternal world is incoherent. After all, many who hold that the world has a beginning in time (including al-Ghazali) claim that it could not persist unless God continually recreates it or preserves its being. On Ibn Sina's emanationist view, creation is a continuous process with no beginning, a process in which God's pure and eternal activity of self-contemplation gives rise to a first intellect. The first intellect thinks of God as the necessary existent, of itself as a necessary consequence of God, and of the difference between the two. These three cognitive acts give rise to three further entities, and the process continues, creating levels of reality of descending perfection until we eventually reach the world of generation and corruption in which we live. God is thus the First whose activity causes all else, and the relation of each cause to its effect is one of necessary connection.

This version of Neoplatonism does have some features that make it very attractive to the Islamic philosophers. God is the only necessary being and the ultimate efficient cause. He is a single, unified being, untainted by the imperfections of our world. But the unity affirmed of God is a radical departure from orthodoxy. While there is a strong emphasis on the unity and oneness of God in orthodox Islam—God is The One or The Unique (*al-Waahid*)—the primary concern is to deny any claim that He has partners or that any share His power. Ibn Sina's concern is that affirming multiple, distinct attributes in God compromises his transcendent, absolute unity, and so holds the stronger claim that divine attributes such as knowledge, power, and will are not really distinct in God. God is an absolute unity; while essence and existence are distinct in all contingent beings, so that in a sense they are all composed

of essence, existence, and accidental qualities, God's existence is part of His essence. There is in fact no real distinction in God between attributes, no real distinction between essence and existence, or even between subject and predicate.

Al-Ghazali agrees that God is the only being necessary in itself, upon which everything else depends for its existence. But he argues that the Neoplatonic philosophers strip God of all positive attributes, and that their claims that He is the agent and maker of the world is mere metaphor, not reality (al-Ghazali 1997, 56). As we shall see, he also disagrees with Ibn Sina in holding, among other things, that the world is not eternal, but has a beginning in time; that the existence of the actual world does not follow necessarily from God's nature, but is rather an outcome of God's free choice to select a particular world from all possible worlds grasped by his intellect; and that connections between apparent causes and effects in the world are not necessary, but rather a result of God's decision to create them "side by side" (1997, 170).

Al-Ghazali argues that the world could not be eternal, for an infinite regress of discrete temporal phenomena generates logical absurdities (1997, 18). For example, if the revolutions of the planets are infinite in number then no sense could be made of the claim that they revolve at different rates. The ratio of the number of revolutions of the Sun to that of Jupiter is 1/12, and of the Sun to Saturn is 1/30. If the revolutions are infinite, they cannot be different in number, contradicting the claim that the planets are revolving at different rates. Given that such temporal phenomena could not be infinite, the world must have a beginning. Since something cannot come into existence from nothing, there must be something eternal which determines that the actual world exists as opposed to not, and that it exists as opposed to any other possible world. Only an agent with the will and power to choose one possibility among many can play that role, and that agent is God.²

Al-Ghazali also defends the coherence of the view that God created time itself (1997, 31–2). He accepts, for sake of argument at least, the Aristotelian view of time as a measure of change, and asserts that what we mean in saying that God is prior to the world and to time is just that he existed without the world, and then existed with the world. The tendency to think of the relation of priority or the relation referred to by 'then' as a temporal relation is due to a trick of the imagination, a trick al-Ghazali compares to that which the imagination plays on us when we attempt to conceive of the world's being spatially finite, with nothing beyond it, and the imagination cannot help but fill in that nothingness with empty space. Despite difficulties of imagination, there is no logical impossibility in the finitude of the spatial world, and similarly no logical impossibility in the finitude of the past.

Al-Ghazali's view of God's creation and preservation of the world is illustrated nicely by his example of the water-clock (1971, 98–102). To make a working water-clock, one must first come up with a design or plan for it, then build it, and finally supply a constant flow of just the right amount of water through the clock. God's creation of the world similarly involves coming up with a design for the world, i.e., selecting one of all possible designs of the world to be actualized, bringing it into existence, and providing it with a constant source of "being". In our case, coming

² See Craig 1979 for a detailed discussion of the Kalaam Cosmological Argument.

up with a design plan and deciding to implement it is something that takes time and effort, and involves deliberation, whereas for God the plan and the decision to execute it is eternal, even if that which is designed and brought into existence is not.

Unlike al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd rejects the traditional view that the world has a beginning in time. It might be thought that this conflicts with the Qur'an. Interestingly, as Ibn Rushd points out, nowhere in the Qur'an does it say that God at one point existed with pure nothingness or that he brought everything into existence from nothing.³ He objects to al-Ghazali's attempt to establish the non-eternity of the world on the basis of the impossibility of an actual infinite. He does not deny, as some modern philosophers would, that positing an actual infinity of discrete entities leads to absurdities. Rather, he relies on the Aristotelian view that there is no actual infinity here, only a potential infinity. While the world has no beginning and no end, this does not make it actually infinite, for the past is no longer and the future is yet to be (Ibn Rushd 1954, 10).

Although Ibn Rushd at one point accepted the Neoplatonic theory of emanation, he ultimately rejects it, for he cannot see how God's thinking only of himself can give rise to anything distinct from God. After all, the philosophers accept that when it comes to God the subject and predicate, the thinker and thought, are identical (1954, 107–8). He attempts to account for the order and activity in our world without regarding the relation between God and the world as one of emanation or direct efficient causation. He defends an Aristotelian theory according to which God is the final and formal cause as opposed to the efficient cause of the immaterial world and, ultimately, of the material world. God is the First Principle who contains in some way the forms of all other things. The immaterial heavenly bodies move out of love of God and out of a desire to emulate His perfect nature, to live up to the standards or principles of their own nature contained in Him. Things in the material world in turn move and act in accordance with their forms, contained in the heavenly bodies. Ibn Rushd likens God's rule over heaven and earth to the rule of a good monarch over a well-ordered state, a state in which all citizens, at various levels of authority, obey His commands (1954, 111).

Divine Will and Omnipotence

We saw above that one reason for thinking that the world is eternal is that the world is a necessary effect of an eternal God. Another reason some Islamic philosophers held this is that otherwise God would have to decide when to bring the world into existence, and no reason could be given for delaying this worthwhile act or for

³ See Ibn Rushd 1961, 16. The Qur'an mentions that God "created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His throne was upon the waters" (11, 7) but this does not imply that everything was created from nothing. Indeed, it suggests that time and God's throne were already in existence. The Qur'an also says that God "lifted himself up to heaven, when it was smoke...so he determined them as seven heavens" (41, 10), implying that heaven was made by giving form to some pre-existing matter.

choosing to create the world at one time as opposed to another. God must surely have a reason for the decision he makes, but no such reason is available. As we have just seen, al-Ghazali's view is that God creates the world and time together. But he grants for sake of argument that time is eternal in order to show that there is no good reason to deny that God could freely decide to create the world at a certain point in time. He gives the example of a hungry man who is presented with two identical dates but is unable to have them both, and so must decide which one to eat, which he has no trouble doing (al-Ghazali 1997, 23–4). Al-Ghazali takes the concept of the will or agency to involve the ability to differentiate and choose between two things, even when there is no reason to choose one over the other.⁴ Why, then, couldn't God have decided to create the world at one time as opposed to another?

Ibn Rushd objects that the man presented with the dates makes a choice between eating a date and not eating at all (1954, 22–3). He makes a choice between two alternatives, whether to eat or go hungry, and he does have a reason to pick one of these alternatives as opposed to the other. Moreover, Ibn Rushd thinks that relying on such examples makes the divine will too much like the human will. In the example, the man lacks something and is affected by the presence of the dates to act. But God has no deficiency and is not affected by anything. That God cannot go wrong or make an inferior or arbitrary choice is no limitation on His will. Al-Ghazali might reply, first, that the man still makes an arbitrary choice between the dates, even if there is a background condition that applies to the man and not to God, the condition of needing or desiring to satisfy his hunger. Second, while God's will is like our own in that it essentially involves the ability to choose between alternatives, this is compatible with affirming that there are significant differences between His will and ours. God does not have emotions like anger, hate, or love in the literal sense of these terms that involve the ability to feel pain and pleasure and to be affected by other things.

Ibn Rushd would complain that this is still unsatisfactory. It makes no sense to speak of an agent as choosing between alternatives when there is no desire for the objects of choice and no resulting change in the agent. God does not have mental states like desire for there is nothing he lacks, and he is unchangeable. If we take seriously how different an eternal and independent being would be from us, we must not think of His will in this way. This is not to say that God has no will or has a will in only a metaphoric sense. For Ibn Rushd, God has will in the most complete and perfect sense, for it proceeds from his complete knowledge and is not limited by the contingencies that apply to our will (1954, 87–90).

This concern with preserving God's transcendence and immutability motivates Ibn Rushd's treatment of the divine attributes more generally. 'Knowledge', 'will', and 'power' are not univocal as applied to God and ourselves, though they are

⁴ As we shall see, however, al-Ghazali denies that we have genuine free will. He could be understood as claiming that our concept of will or agency, of what genuine agency would be for us *if* we had it, is not different from what it is for God, except that His will has a much greater scope by virtue of his omnipotence and omniscience.

analogous and so not utterly equivocal either.⁵ God has these attributes in the most complete sense (Ibn Rushd 1954, 121). He provides the primary or paradigmatic sense of these terms, what Aristotle calls a “focal meaning,” relative to which other, derivative senses of the term as they apply to God’s creatures can be fixed. For example, our knowledge of particulars involves perceiving the world, being affected and changed by it, and an unchangeable being cannot know the world by observing or perceiving it in the way that we do. In order to preserve the immutability of God, philosophers like Ibn Sina seem to limit God’s knowledge to that of universals and abstract principles. Al-Ghazali complains that this conflicts with the Qur’an’s message that God knows everything that happens in the world, including our actions and intentions.⁶ While Ibn Rushd rejects Ibn Sina’s limitation of God’s knowledge to knowledge of universals, he complains that al-Ghazali compromises God’s transcendent and unchangeable nature by making His knowledge too much like our own. God does not know the world by observing or perceiving it directly; rather, he knows the world by knowing His own essence, which contains the essence of all that exists. Even ‘existence’ is not univocal as applied to God and His creatures; that which is self-sufficient, which does not depend on anything else, has perfect existence, whereas all other things exist in a derivative sense (1954, 179; 222–4).

Al-Ghazali is worried that Neoplatonic views strip God of his omnipotence, if not genuine agency or will altogether, by denying God alternative choices. He would no doubt complain that Ibn Rushd’s God is even less like an agent given that He is regarded as the final and formal cause, as opposed to the efficient cause, of the world. On al-Ghazali’s view, God is omnipotent in the sense that he can bring about any state of affairs that is logically possible. It is possible that all the heavenly spheres move in the opposite direction; that the world be larger or smaller than it is; that fire come in contact with cotton without burning it; and that bodies be resurrected after death. While there is an observed conjunction or correlation between certain kinds of causes and their effects, there are no observed or demonstrable necessary connections. To admit the above as genuine possibilities and yet say that God could not actualize them is to say that He is not omnipotent.

Ibn Rushd is very skeptical of our ability to figure out what is possible in this way. We can imagine fire coming into contact with a ball of cotton without burning it, but if it were to actually happen we would seek some explanation for why the cotton did not burn. Perhaps it was wet, for example. But if we stipulate that no such explanation obtains, we would not know whether to say that this is really a case of fire coming into contact with cotton. Similarly, if a decapitated body continues to walk and behave in otherwise normal ways, we would not know whether to call it a ‘person’. On Ibn Rushd’s view, much of what a thing does or is able to do is essential to what it is, and we cannot simply sever the one from the other in the way that al-Ghazali’s thought experiments allow. While the masses rely on imagination, those who are well-trained in thought do not (Ibn Rushd 1954, 153).

⁵ See, for example, Ibn Rushd 1954, 88; 213; 222–3; and 269.

⁶ God knows the weight of every atom (34, 3) and knows our thoughts (50, 1).

Ibn Rushd has a point in warning philosophers not to lean uncritically on imagination, and al-Ghazali himself admits, as we have seen, that the imagination can play tricks on us. It is worth noting, however, that what al-Ghazali needs for his criticism is quite modest: there are *some* non-actual possibilities, some possibilities that God did not actualize, and claiming that He could not have actualized them does seem to be a constraint on omnipotence. On his view, the essence of a thing is independent of its existence, and we can, within certain limits perhaps, rely on our abstract ideas to grasp the essences of things and determine what is possible, regardless of what actually exists. For Ibn Rushd, on the other hand, the existence of a thing is part of its essence, even for things that owe their existence to something else, and nothing is really possible unless it actually exists at some point in time.⁷ Abstract ideas are a guide to genuine or real possibility only if they are grounded in the way things actually are, tied to what actually exists and what causal properties existing things have.

Divine Justice and Omnipotence

In seeking to secure God's agency and omnipotence al-Ghazali runs the risk of leaving little room for causation within the world. According to the dominant interpretation, al-Ghazali accepts the occasionalist doctrine that God is the only true efficient cause, and there are no genuine causal connections between separate created things. It is conceivable and hence possible that a fire come in contact with a ball of cotton without burning it. The apparent observation of a fire's burning a ball of cotton does not involve any observation of a causal connection; all that is observed is that one sort of event follows another. It is God who decides to set these kinds of events "side by side" (Al-Ghazali 1997, 170), and the observed temporal order and regularity misleads us into thinking there is a genuine causal connection between events when in fact no such connection exists. God can and does do more on this view than on the Neoplatonic or Aristotelian views, but the worry is that He does too much and the world nothing at all. As we have seen, Ibn Rushd complains that such a view divorces things in the world from the causal properties essential to them. More troublingly, if God is the sole cause of human actions, it is exceedingly difficult to make sense of our being responsible for our actions in a way that makes rewarding good actions and punishing bad ones legitimate.

There is, perhaps, another interpretation according to which al-Ghazali wanted at least to leave open the possibility of genuine causal connections in the world, while denying that causal connections are *necessary*.⁸ He seems to allow for the

⁷This Aristotelian view of possibility is at odds with common sense, and difficult to motivate. One motivation is that it might seem strange to suppose that humans have some ability that they would never exercise, not even given infinite time. Perhaps the underlying idea is that there is no ability or potentiality in nature without some purpose, and the existence of an ability or potentiality that never was and never will be actualized would be without a purpose.

⁸ See Griffel 2009 for a recent discussion of the debate over al-Ghazali on causation. See also Fakhry 1958; Kogan 1985.

possibility of a contingent causal connection, one that depends in part on God, but that also depends in part on proximate causes. To return to the water-clock analogy, the fact that one has built a water-clock and maintained a constant flow of water through it does not make one the sole cause; the parts of the water-clock have a causal role to play in directing the flow of water so as to represent the correct time. Similarly, the fact that God creates the world in time and provides it with a constant flow of energy or being does not rule out that there are some secondary causes.

This does not completely solve the problem of human responsibility for action, however. In discussing human actions, al-Ghazali uses explicitly causal terminology, characterizing actions as effects of our volitions, volitions as effects of motives and convictions, and these in turn as effects of experiences, external forces, the influence of scripture and revelation, and so on (Griffel 2009, 221). Whether we interpret al-Ghazali as an occasionalist, as an advocate of contingent causal connections, or as agnostic with respect to these two options, it is clear that he followed the Ash'arite school's doctrine of predetermination, and that he took the impression humans have of being genuinely free to be an illusion. He does accept that alternative human choices are possible *in themselves*, but adds that they are necessary *given God's choices* (Griffel 2009, 216). If God determines, whether directly or indirectly, what actions humans end up performing, how could he also *justly* reward good actions and punish bad ones?

One of the earliest scholarly debates in Islam revolves around this question. The Mu'tazallites and Shi'ites held that humans are endowed with free will to choose between good actions and bad ones, and that God's justice *requires* that he reward the former and punish the latter. The motivation for this conception of divine justice is the idea that the standards of good and evil are not merely conventional or arbitrary; they are objective standards accessible to reason. God cannot simply stipulate what goodness and badness consist in; goodness and badness have a more or less fixed character. God's essentially rational and just nature, coupled with this objectivist, rationalist view of morality, implies that he cannot punish the innocent and reward the guilty.

Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arites took this as a challenge to God's omnipotence. After all, there is no difficulty in conceiving of God assigning punishments and rewards in different ways, while there is great difficulty in conceiving of God as making it false that $2+3=5$. The latter, unlike the former, is logically impossible, and so is no constraint on His omnipotence. The rationalist Mu'tazallites would object that God cannot *justly* reward and punish in just any way, much as God cannot make $2+3=7$. Rather than deny that God was moral or just, Al-Ghazali seems to have followed the Ash'arites in identifying morality or justice with His judgment. To do what is right or moral just *is* to act in accordance with God's commands or dictates, and to do what is wrong or immoral just *is* to fail to act in accordance with His commands. One concern with this divine command theory or divine subjectivism about ethics is that moral principles applied in ordinary life do seem to have a rational grounding. Moral actions are ones that contribute to, or at least aim at, what is good, and goodness for humans consists in their happiness and flourishing. While God has greater knowledge about the nature and sources of human goodness than we do, and so is a legitimate authority and source of guidance on moral matters

for that reason, it is strongly counterintuitive to hold that what counts as good or bad is merely a matter of His decree.

Al-Ghazali seems at times to give a different answer.⁹ He apparently concedes, in a way that the Ash'arites do not, that it makes sense to ask why, for what reason, God did not simply create beings who always do good and then put them into paradise, or simply put them there to begin with. His answer is that doing so would not result in the best arrangement, the best possible world. The harms and local imperfections that exist are necessary for the existence of, and our recognition and appreciation of, the greater perfections in the world. Even the creation of impious humans and the corresponding allotment of punishments is part of the best arrangement, for the goodness of the pious and of the reward which is their due is thereby enhanced. Since God freely chooses the best of all possible worlds, our knowledge of this choice arises not from our knowledge of His nature, but from our observation and study of His creations. Insofar as the best of all possible worlds is not trivially whatever world God chooses to create, the standard for what counts as best, including the standards of moral behavior and its consequences in the afterlife, are independent of God's decree. But then, even granting for sake of argument that this does not limit God's omnipotence, the fact that God punishes bad actions and rewards good ones when these are actions predetermined by Him seems again to conflict rather directly with the idea that God is merciful and just, whether essentially or by choice.

Ibn Rushd on Revelation and Truth

Ibn Rushd holds that many demonstrations conflict with the literal or most straightforward interpretation of the Qur'an, and the truth seems far from the ordinary believer's grasp. God cannot literally perceive the world, for perception entails a causal relation; He has knowledge of everything, not by observing the world and its creatures, but by knowing his own essence and the form of the world contained therein; He has will and power over all, but only in the sense that all things "obey" or emulate their abstract forms contained in His nature. 'Knowledge', 'will', 'power', and even 'existence' and 'substance' are not univocal as applied to God and ourselves, though they are analogous and so not utterly equivocal either. We know that God has knowledge and will, but we can't know exactly how or in what way he has such qualities. This view has no hint of anthropomorphism, and it does preserve something of the traditional idea that God is unknowable. But to many, Ibn Rushd's God is too transcendent, too far from the descriptions of Him given in the Qur'an and the tradition.

Departing still further from tradition, Ibn Rushd denies, or is at the very least doubtful, that the individual soul is immortal.¹⁰ Al-Ghazali (1999, 66) holds that the afterlife involves *bodily* resurrection, and Ibn Rushd would agree that the afterlife does not involve our continued existence as purely spiritual individuals. As we have

⁹ See Griffel 2009, 225–234 for an interpretation along the following lines.

¹⁰ See Leaman 1998, 82–116 for a defense of this interpretation.

seen, however, Ibn Rushd rejects apparent conceivability as a guide to possibility, and so the conceivability of bodily resurrection would not be for him a good reason to assert its real possibility. He agrees with Aristotle that individual humans cannot exist without matter, for there would be no way to distinguish different persons without some matter to individuate them. He seems to regard the imaginative faculty in each of us, the ability to think and remember things by use of images, as essential to our individuality and as requiring some physical matter. The less imagistic our mental representations—the more our thinking is abstract and universal—the less we are individuals. To the extent that humans have a spiritual, immaterial soul, it is just *one* immaterial soul shared by all, a soul constituting the form of the human species, and the more we perfect our natures the closer we are to that one soul (1954, 15). Ibn Rushd seems at times to leave open, at least as an epistemic possibility, that multiple souls exist in the afterlife, but he is clearly very far from affirming, even tentatively, the sort of afterlife involving bodily existence and sensory pains and pleasures depicted in the Qur'an (Leaman 1998, 92–96). This lack of enthusiasm, if not skepticism, with regard to individual immortality allows him to avoid the problem of divine justice, at least as it arises for al-Ghazali, but the resulting view is contrary to traditional Islamic thought and to the faith of the ordinary believer.

Ibn Rushd has some things to say in reply to these worries. According to him, only *philosophers*, those who are trained in logic and metaphysics, are qualified to interpret the Qur'an. He distinguishes between demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical forms of reasoning (1961, Ch. 3). Philosophers are able to establish truths by demonstrative arguments. Dialectical or logical reasoning is suitable for use by theologians and lawyers, and rhetorical or persuasive reasoning is the mode of reasoning suitable for the masses. Ibn Rushd regards departures from this division of labor to be very dangerous. Theologians who interpret the Qur'an as they see fit and who present philosophical arguments to the masses are not only likely to arrive at false conclusions, but to undermine the faith of ordinary believers by giving rise to doubts that their minds are ill-equipped to examine in a clear and rational manner. The philosopher knows better than to take the relevant passages literally, but ordinary believers ought to accept these at face value, for they are in that way more likely to become and remain good and moral citizens. It may seem that the motivating factors at work here are too self-interested, for good people do not act merely out of a desire to reap rewards and avoid punishment. However, the self-interested desires need not preclude the development of an interest in the goodness of others for their own sake, and a desire to do one's duty. Indeed, ordinary believers, acting initially out of self-interest, are more likely to develop the discipline and habits of thought and action that lead to their being virtuous persons and good citizens.

But is this not terribly elitist? And haven't we basically split the difference between the philosopher and the ordinary believer, giving the former the impersonal, purely abstract truth, and the latter something that is personal, something that is a means to important moral and social goals, but for all that, something strictly false? Ibn Rushd often speaks of there being more than one way to get to the truth, and this suggests an interesting response to the problem. The idea is a radical and quite modern one: that the philosophical perspective and the religious or theological perspective are independent means to the truth; that demonstrative reasoning and

rhetorical or religious reasoning are each sound forms of reasoning, even though each perspective judges the other to be false. It is controversial whether Ibn Rushd held such a radical view, a view that rejects the law of the excluded middle, according to which every proposition is either true or false. The proposition that God has thus-and-such attributes would be true as judged from one perspective, and false as judged from another perspective. On this view, Ibn Rushd's insistence that only philosophers should interpret the ambiguous passages in the Qur'an is not to claim that the ordinary believer accepts falsehoods, but to deny that the ordinary believer can get to truth by the philosopher's means.¹¹

It is not clear that the solution is a stable one, for demonstrative arguments are supposed to arrive at the truth in a clear and conclusive way, and on the view under consideration the philosopher must be willing to admit that other perspectives that do not employ demonstrative reasoning yield truth not only when they are incomplete or imprecise formulations of truths that can be demonstrated, but even when they conflict with these demonstrations. It strikes me as odd to say that Ibn Rushd's insistence that philosophers should not, for example, think of God in anthropomorphic terms amounts to saying that they should not think of Him in these terms *as philosophers or as employers of demonstrative reasoning*, where this has nothing to do with the superiority of demonstrative reasoning *as a means to truth*.

While reason has its limits, especially in understanding God's nature, Ibn Rushd is confident that much can be understood and demonstrated regarding God and the world. The result, however, is that what the Qur'an says of God and the afterlife is highly allegorical and of practical as opposed to theoretical significance. Many Muslims would welcome the idea that much of the Qur'an is to be interpreted as allegorical and as a guide to life and salvation as opposed to literal truth. But many are also likely to find Ibn Rushd's view to be too radical an interpretation of Islam—a view, moreover, that makes God's nature metaphysically and, for most, epistemically too distant. And so they may find themselves attracted to the thought of al-Ghazali, who attempted (at least until his mystical turn—see below) to remain more clearly within the bounds of orthodoxy. They will then be faced with the problem of making sense of God as having a will, but an eternal and timeless will that chooses without deliberation or desire; and, more generally, the problem of conceiving of God's nature without compromising his transcendence. There is also the problem of squaring omnipotence and predetermination with divine justice. These problems may recommend moving to a subtle position in between Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazali.

Al-Ghazali's Mysticism

Al-Ghazali himself eventually moved to a position in Ibn Rushd's direction, though this move was motivated by a mysticism for which the latter apparently had no sympathy. Al-Ghazali's later works ([1971](#), [1998](#), and [1999](#)) reflect a

¹¹ For a defense of this view, see Leaman [1998](#), 179–96, and [2009](#), Ch. 9.

strong influence of Sufi thought. His autobiography (1999) tells the story of a person who, from a young age, had a burning desire for the truth, and who was dissatisfied with the conformism and blind obedience of authority displayed by those around him. He decided to search for the kind of knowledge that is not open to any doubt. This eventually led to a period of skepticism, probably occurring before setting to work on *Tahafut al-Falasifa*, in which he came to regard not only the senses but even apparently self-evident principles of reason as subject to doubt. These doubts afflicted him like a “sickness” for almost two months until he once again “accepted the self-evident data of reason” not by argument or proof, but rather by “a light which God Most High cast into my heart,” a light which “is the key to most knowledge” (al-Ghazali 1999, 57). Thus, while al-Ghazali generally sees demonstrative arguments as a legitimate source of truth, there is a sense in which, for him, these arguments are secondary to and ultimately depend on a gift of divine grace. Indeed, for him it is the heart (*qalb*), not the intellect (or not the intellect alone), that can provide the highest, most genuine knowledge of God, the sort of knowledge that preserves his oneness and transcendence. This knowledge is essentially experiential, consisting of a “taste” (*dhawq*) of ultimate, divine reality. While our hearts are predisposed to respond to the divine, true knowledge of God requires that we accept the heart’s invitation to seek Him, and develop qualities of character and intellect that make such knowledge possible.

If we have not already succeeded in finding God—if we are, in al-Ghazali’s terms, still “on the way” and have not yet “arrived”—how do we know what qualities we need to develop in ourselves in order to find him? Al-Ghazali’s answer is that we should look to the Qur’an and the Prophet Mohammed for guidance. His treatise on the 99 names of God (1962) is based on the custom of Muslims to recite a traditional list of names taken from the Qur’an, a ritual that the Sufis understood as a way of opening their hearts to God. The Prophet Mohammed recommends not only the recitation of these names, but the development of qualities referred to by them. The Qur’an tells us that God is, for example, The Good, The Benevolent, the Merciful, The Holy, The Faithful, The Flawless, The Powerful, The Just, The Omniscient, and The Patient. We should accordingly develop the corresponding traits of goodness, mercy, benevolence, piety, power, knowledge, patience, and so on in ourselves. Al-Ghazali is explicit that, strictly speaking, the characterizations are ambiguous or equivocal; we cannot have the exact likeness of these attributes as they apply to God (1962, 156). Reflection on the names of God serves to remind us of His transcendence and of the dependence of all on Him, while also guiding us in the improvement of our intellect, character, and actions. In this way, those who seek God prepare their inner self for “arriving”.

Al-Ghazali discusses the different ways people have thought of God and the divine attributes in the famous “veil section” of the *Niche of Lights* (1998), a section devoted to interpreting the following *hadith* of the Prophet: “God has seventy veils of light and darkness; were He to lift them, the august glories of His face would burn up everybody whose eyesight perceives him.” Al-Ghazali classifies people into four main kinds. First, there are those veiled by darkness. These are atheists, including

those who say “with their tongues” that there is no god but God, but who do not truly believe.

The second group are veiled by mixed light and darkness. These all accept some deity but make errors of identification. They include those who are impressed by some light, e.g., that of the beauty and greatness of things in nature, but the darkness of sense perception misleads them, and so they worship idols, fire, nature, the planets, the Sun, or physical light. Others recognize that a true deity transcends the things perceived, but they are still veiled by the darkness of imagination, since they identify the deity with some corporeal being, and so take literally the Qur’anic passages that refer to God as “above” and as “sitting on a throne”. Finally, there are those who deny any corporeality, but are misled by the darkness of “false syllogisms of the intelligence” to affirm that God has will, intellect, and power of the same kind as our own (but with a wider scope).

The third group are veiled by pure light. There are three subdivisions here. The first are those who recognize that the terms for the attributes are not univocal as they apply to God and humans. They refer to God relationally, believing that God is the one who transcends the meaning of the attributes, and the one who is the mover and organizer of the heavens. Those in the second group know that there is a multiplicity of levels in the heavens, that each level has a mover, an angel. They identify God as the unmoved mover of the outermost sphere of the heavens. The third group recognizes that this is not sufficient to preserve God’s oneness and transcendence, and so identify Him not with the unmoved mover of the outermost sphere, but with one who *commands* the unmoved mover, this angel of the outermost sphere, to move all the rest. Al-Ghazali regards the latter subgroup (characterized by views similar to the Neoplatonists al-Farabi and Ibn Sina) as mistaken in thinking that the First who commands and whom all other intellects obey (*al-Muta’*) is God. The philosopher’s God is really a spirit or intellect, an angel at the top of the hierarchy of angels, who issues commands to the rest. The real God freely chooses to create this intellect and provides it with a continual source of being.

Finally, there are those who have “arrived”. They recognize that the philosopher’s God is not transcendent and perfect enough to be the true God. Looking beyond the philosopher’s God, they experience Him directly and see nothing else. Some of these, the “few” or the “elect”, see only God and the soul that perceives God. The “few of the few” or the “elect of the elect” among them no longer see even themselves; they are annihilated and completely absorbed by God.

This is not pantheism, the identification of God with the world or some part of it—the Sufi mystic who in his zeal declares “I am God!” is strictly speaking uttering something that reason knows to be impossible (1962, 157). Rather, it is monism, the view that there is nothing in existence but God. There is a sense in which other things exist, but it is only *metaphorical*. Al-Ghazali motivates this monism partly by appeal to the suggestive language of the Quran, which characterizes God not only as the One (*al-Wahid*), but also as The Real/Truth (*al-Haqq*), The First (*al-Awwal*), and The Last (*al-Aakhir*); “everything is perishing save His Face” (28, 88). Aware that this conflicts with the orthodox view that the heavens, angels, the earth, and other creatures really exist, al-Ghazali offers the following analogy in support of the

metaphorical interpretation.¹² Existence is borrowed from God much as servants may borrow the horses and robes of the King for a festival. Someone who does not know that the King has given these to the servants will take them to be very wealthy, whereas one who knows that they are borrowed sees that it is only the King who is really rich. Analogously, any being that does not have existence essentially must “borrow” it from another, and does not exist except figuratively or metaphorically. Part of the motivation for preserving a perspective that admits of levels of reality and the existence of things on each level is that a pure, simple monism would make most of what the Qur'an and tradition says false.¹³ Al-Ghazali is attempting to bring the mysticism of the Sufis in harmony with orthodoxy by giving the latter a more figurative interpretation.

It is important to keep in mind that this metaphysical picture is not a replacement for the highest knowledge, which is experiential and direct, and which is impossible without a purification of the heart. The picture might provide some guidance, but to the impure or unfaithful heart it will be useless and perhaps even dangerous. Reason is also important, however, for one may easily misinterpret a mystical experience, as mystics who identify themselves with God do. Al-Ghazali may be a mystic, but he is an intellectual mystic.

Ibn Rushd would no doubt agree that such acts as reciting the names of God helps strengthen one's faith and develop one's character, but he is skeptical that there is any mystical knowledge of God. He rejects monism; things other than God do exist, and their existence and essence cannot be separated. He does hold, as we have seen, that the attributes are not univocal as they apply to God and ourselves. But while al-Ghazali's monism takes the created world to have a purely virtual or figurative existence, on Ibn Rushd's view there truly do exist created things. The sense in which we exist is not the same as the sense in which God does, but they are not utterly equivocal either, being analogous and equally legitimate and quite literal uses of the term.

Conclusion

In different ways, Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazali are thus each ultimately led to a view that places a great distance between God and humans. All hint of anthropomorphism disappears, and God's oneness and transcendence is preserved. But the metaphysical distance leads to an epistemic one. An accurate and deep awareness of God is very difficult to attain, and beyond what most ordinary believers ever achieve. In order to bring their models of a unique and transcendent God in line with revelation,

¹² See the passage from al-Ghazali's Persian letter, in Treiger 2007. As Trieger notes, al-Ghazali's idea that other things “borrow” their existence from God seems to be inspired by Ibn Sina, though the latter would deny that the existence that is borrowed is purely metaphorical.

¹³ Indeed, al-Ghazali's cosmology is an elaborate fusion of philosophical and Qur'anic language. See Griffel 2009, 256–7.

Al-Ghazali (after his mystical turn) and Ibn Rushd each take much of the Qur'an and the tradition, including characterizations and at least many of the names of God, as highly analogical or allegorical. To some extent, this is a very natural and welcome philosophical development. Islam is a religion that emphasizes God's transcendence and our inability to know anything, let alone God, in the way that only God can; this helps explains why Islam is so rich in imagery and symbolism. And, as already noted, the Qur'an itself warns that it includes allegorical or ambiguous passages. But al-Ghazali (in his later work) and Ibn Rushd clearly end up with models of God that are such radical departures from orthodoxy that it is no surprise that they each warned against purveying philosophical views to the general public.

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Thomas Aquinas: Model of God

Robert G. Kennedy

Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) was a Dominican friar and sometime professor of theology at the University of Paris. He was instrumental in promoting the reception of Aristotle into Western thinking in the late Middle Ages and, more specifically, in accommodating Aristotelian concepts to Christian theology.

On Aquinas's view, there are, in principle, three distinct sources of knowledge about God: natural reason (which is rooted in the observation of the effects of God's activities embodied in creatures), public revelation (of which the Bible is the most prominent instance) and mystical experience (which, because of its private nature, cannot supply evidence to the science of theology).

Aquinas argued that natural reason could readily attain to the knowledge of God's existence as well as to a limited set of divine attributes (e.g., necessity, eternity, perfection, uniqueness, goodness, intelligence, etc). Public revelation, which he believed it is reasonable to accept, affirms what is knowable by natural reason and supplements it in very substantial ways with knowledge that natural reason cannot attain by itself. As a consequence, there is a distinct science, theology, the principles of which are derived from the data of public revelation.¹ It is the source of its principles, not its methodology, that principally distinguishes theological reflection about God from philosophical reflection.

Medieval thinkers acknowledged the distinction of philosophy from theology but in practice did not embrace it as modernity has. For the most part, at least at the time of Aquinas, they regarded a philosophical foundation as essential to theology, much as mathematics is essential to physics. Or, to put it another way, theological convictions demanded an explanation that would be philosophically coherent. The source of

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 1, article 2. All references in these notes are to works of Aquinas.

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knowledge might be different but the object of knowledge (God, in the case of theology) was one and therefore the truth about that object was also unified.

While it was certainly Aquinas's position that the science of theology was a superior discipline and the most appropriate means of pursuing knowledge about God, he also recognized that not everyone was prepared to accept Judaeo-Christian public revelation as a reliable source of information. As a consequence he devoted some extended attention, at different points in his career, to a consideration of what we might know about God if we set aside public revelation and focused only on what could be affirmed by natural reason.

In doing so, he assumed as a foundation, the logic, the psychology, the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle. As a result, such concepts as potency and act, time and eternity, matter and form as well as Aristotle's theory of causation played a critical role in Aquinas's discussion of the nature of God.

What Can We Say About God?

Any philosophical treatment of the nature of God must address the questions of whether and how it is possible to form a true statement about God. From the beginning, Aquinas insisted that it is impossible for human persons to know God's essence (because our mode of knowing depends upon sensible forms and an immaterial God cannot be known through sensible forms).² Nevertheless, he treats these questions at some length and argues that it is possible to say something true about God in two ways.

First, by negation, where we deny some characteristic of God.³ We may truly assert, for example, that God is not a body, that he is not caused by another agent, that he is not bound by time, and so on. All assertions of this type serve to highlight the sharp difference between God and creation but, of course, they say nothing about what God is. Even so, highlighting the differences between God and creation does tell us something about God.

The second kind of statement we can make about God is analogical, in which we predicate a characteristic of God and of creatures. Since in acting on something outside itself every agent produces effects that are somehow similar to the qualities it itself possesses, Aquinas argued that it is possible to say something true about God, to name God, by reflecting upon some of the characteristics of creatures and inferring something about the cause from what we observe of the effects.⁴ However, he drew a sharp distinction between *what* is signified by the name of an attribute and

² *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 12, article 3. See also *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, question 6, article 4; and *Disputed Questions On Truth*, question 10, article 11.

³ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 13, article 2. See also *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapter 14.

⁴ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 2, article 2. See also *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapters 3, 12 and 29.

the *way* in which the attribute exists in its subject.⁵ In short, the names of perfections (e.g., goodness, wisdom, etc) may be predicated of God and of creatures but the mode of existence of these perfections is radically different.⁶ Therefore, nothing can be affirmatively predicated of God and creature univocally but only by analogy.⁷

God Is Uncaused Cause and Necessary Being

Thomas's starting point in discussing what we can know about God was not a pre-conceived model of a deity but rather observations about the natural world as organized through the lens of Aristotle's philosophy. Indeed, he explicitly rejected the argument offered by his predecessor, Anselm, which is now commonly known as the "Ontological Argument."⁸ He argued that the fact that a concept can be formed in the mind of a being than which none greater can be thought simply does not entail that such a being exists. In attempting to prove that God exists, one cannot begin with a definition of God that entails existence.

Aquinas did, of course, offer arguments in support of the conclusion that God exists (many people are familiar with the "Five Ways" he summarizes at the beginning of the *Summa theologiae*).⁹ Setting aside the question of whether these arguments succeed as proofs, they do nevertheless tell us something about the model of God he had in mind.

God Is Necessary and Eternal

We may begin with arguments from causality. Aquinas accepted Aristotle's division of reality into contingent and necessary beings.¹⁰ Contingent beings are those which are corruptible, which is to say subject to change in their essential form. All of material reality is contingent since nothing material remains the same forever. There are, however, according to Aristotle, necessary beings which by definition are not subject to change in essential form.¹¹ (This does not mean that they exist of necessity but rather that once in being, their essential form cannot change.) For our

⁵ *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapters 32–34.

⁶ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 4, article 3.

⁷ *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapters 32–34.

⁸ *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapter 10.

⁹ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 2, article 3.

¹⁰ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 44, article 1, reply to objection 2. See also *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, book 5, lesson 6.

¹¹ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 47, article 1.

purposes it does not matter that modern thinkers might object to Aristotle's examples (i.e., celestial bodies, prime matter, human souls, etc) since we are not examining the arguments as proofs. To say that something exists necessarily is not to say that it cannot not exist but rather to say that if it does exist, it exists in such a mode that its essential form is not subject to change or corruption.

Looking at the natural world, then, Aquinas argued that reality cannot be composed merely of contingent beings.¹² Such things are naturally generated through substantial change from pre-existing matter and inevitably pass out of existence. A world composed entirely of such beings cannot endure but if it has endured, then it must be causally dependent upon one or more necessary beings. Again, whether or not the argument is persuasive, it drew Thomas to the conclusion that the natural, contingent order is causally dependent upon a necessary being that, unlike other necessary beings, is the cause of its own existence.¹³ This, he said, is the being we commonly call God.

Therefore, natural reason leads us to the conclusion that there exists at least one necessary being, which is the cause of its own existence and also the cause of the existence of all other extant beings, both contingent and necessary. Since this necessary being is without beginning or end, it is therefore eternal (which is to say that it is timeless, that it exists outside of and is not measured by time).¹⁴

God Is Immortal and Unique

Several other characteristics of this being are entailed. All material things are contingent beings, whose existence and activity are causally dependent upon something outside of them. Since this being is the cause of its own existence, it cannot be a body; it must be immaterial. Furthermore, if it is immaterial, it must also be unique.

Individual material beings may be multiple in number but identical in essence. That is, the one essence, or nature, of a human being or a maple tree or a lump of granite may be instantiated in an indeterminate number of individuals. There may be many individuals sharing the same essence (and therefore having the same formal definition) but distinguished by different matter. Even though two human persons belong to the same species (i.e., have the same essential form) they are, as the medievals commonly said, individuated by matter. In the case of immaterial beings, however, there is no matter to be a principle of individuation. Therefore, immaterial beings can only be different from one another on account of their essential forms. And if it is of the essence of a necessary being that it is the cause of its own existence, that necessary being must be unique.¹⁵

¹² *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapter 13, for example.

¹³ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 2, article 3.

¹⁴ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 10, article 2. See also *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapter 15.

¹⁵ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 2, article 3. See also *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapter 13.

God Is Perfect

Aquinas also insisted that God is ontologically perfect.¹⁶ However, by this he understood something a bit different from modern philosophers who speak about divine perfection and “great-making” qualities. He understood perfection not in terms of quantity (or even a sort of faux quantity) or extension but rather in terms of completeness.

The conclusion that God is ontologically perfect depends upon the premise that God is eternal. As a necessary and eternal being, God is changeless. To be more precise, if God is necessary and eternal, there is in God no unactualized potential. Every possibility for being in God’s nature is fully realized; there is in God a complete absence of non-being. Nor can this condition be changed. What is actual in God can never be corrupted to be potential since a necessary being that is the cause of its own existence cannot be acted upon by any other being.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas recognized a difference between an order of knowing and an order of being. In the order of being, causes are ontologically prior to effects (if not always temporally prior) but in the order of knowing we often see effects first and know them better. So it is with God’s causality and perfection. It is a mistake to think that knowing something about the characteristics of a creature permits us to know something about God by extrapolation. Instead, the characteristics of creatures are in some way reflections of the qualities possessed by the creator but like physical reflections they may be (and inevitably are) distorted by the medium. Therefore, it is inappropriate to attribute to God any creaturely characteristic by imagining it either as greatly extended or as simply purged of defects.¹⁷

God Is Good

Aquinas also argued that it is reasonable to conclude that God is good.¹⁸ Now there are several ways of evaluating the goodness of something. As Aristotle insisted, being and goodness are in some sense identical, and so any definition of goodness will somehow entail fullness of being.¹⁹ A thing, therefore, may be called good to the extent that its nature is realized, which is to say that its potential to be the sort of thing it is, is actualized. Most created things can be evaluated according to multiple criteria: in relation to the suitability of the thing for a purpose, its beauty,

¹⁶ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 4, article 1. See also *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapters 16 and 28.

¹⁷ *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapter 29.

¹⁸ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 6. See also *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapters 37–41.

¹⁹ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 5, article 1. See also *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapters 37–38.

its endurance, and so on. A truly excellent object, or person, will be one in which all of the potential belonging to its nature will be actualized.

Or, if we consider it in relation to its cause, a created thing is good to the extent that it resembles its cause. For example, one measure of the goodness of a portrait is the degree to which it really looks like its subject, where the appearance of the subject is the good that the portraitist seeks to approximate.

So, on the one hand, God is good because there is no potential in God that remains to be actualized. God is all that God can be and is necessarily so. On the other hand, God is the cause of goodness in created things and this in two ways. First, God is the cause of both the being and the natures of all created things, contingent and necessary. Whatever being they possess and whatever potential to fulfill their natures is really actualized in them is a result of God's causality. And whatever causes goodness in other things is good in itself. Second, the being of God is in some sense the model for the being and nature of created things. Like a portrait, created things are good to the extent that they resemble the model, which is goodness in itself and not merely goodness by resemblance.

Furthermore, while all of this addresses what we might call the ontological goodness of God, we might infer something more about the goodness of God's will. On Aquinas's view, evil is always a privation, an absence of being. A natural evil, we might say, is a defect or absence of being that deprives a thing of some very important perfection it ought to have. Paralysis or blindness or something of the sort would be such a natural evil. Similarly, a moral evil is a defect in a chosen action, a deprivation of the wholeness or perfection that a good act would have. To speak of an evil person is to speak somewhat metaphorically about a person who deliberately and habitually chooses morally defective actions; to speak of a good person is to speak of someone who habitually chooses well. The morally evil person, in Augustine's phrase, has a divided will, focused on one perceived good and willing to tolerate defective means or consequences in order to achieve that perceived good.

Since God possesses fullness of being, there is no natural evil in God.²⁰ Nor can there be moral evil, since God cannot be inclined to or will to achieve something defective, nor be deceived about what is genuinely good.

God Is Intelligent

One of the marks that distinguishes an intelligent being from one that is not intelligent is the capacity of the intelligent being to possess a form not its own.²¹ That is to say, the non-intelligent being (a stone or a plant, say) possesses its own form and none other. Intelligent beings have a cognitive capacity, which is a capacity to know by possessing in some way the forms of other things in addition to

²⁰ *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapter 39.

²¹ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 14, article 1. See also *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapter 44.

their own. An animal has a limited cognitive capacity since it receives sensible forms, has memory, and so on. A rational being has a distinctly greater capacity to possess not only sensible forms but also abstract forms, that is to understand the essence of things and not merely their sensible characteristics. On Aristotle's theory of knowing, which Aquinas accepted, this means that the rational being is capable of possessing immaterially the essential forms of the things it knows. The capacity to know, therefore, is directly related to the degree that the mode of existence of the being is immaterial. (A sign that some aspect of the mode of existence of the human person is immaterial is the human capacity to know the essence of some things.) The greater the mode of immaterial existence, the greater the intelligence. Thus, God is intelligent and supremely so.²²

But Aquinas also offered several other arguments for God's intelligence, two of which we might briefly review here. One is that characteristics found in effects cannot be absent from the cause. Therefore, if intelligence is found in created beings, it must be possessed in at least the same degree in the creator.²³ A second argument follows from the order of the material world. Many created things (e.g., animals of all sorts) act for an end but nothing can act for an end unless directed to that end by intelligence. Many creatures that act for an end cannot be supposed to comprehend that end and therefore some other intelligence must determine that end for them. This intelligence is God.²⁴

What Does Revelation Tell Us About God?

Aquinas insisted that public revelation, communicated principally but not exclusively through the biblical text, is also a source of knowledge about God. If so, what does this source add to what we may infer from observations of the created order?

In the first instance, revelation affirms what may be known from reason alone. What is clear to educated persons may not be at all clear to the uneducated. Revelation, therefore, may serve to teach what people could but are unlikely to discover on their own.²⁵ Moreover, revelation adds authority and serves to dismiss mistaken judgments.

Second, revelation communicates some things about God that are simply inaccessible to reason alone.²⁶ For example, on the Christian account, revelation communicates that God is a trinity of persons,²⁷ that God is a loving creator, that creation

²² *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 14, article 1.

²³ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 44, articles 1 and 3.

²⁴ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 2, article 3.

²⁵ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 1, article 1. See also *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapters 3–5.

²⁶ *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapter 3.

²⁷ *Disputed Questions on Truth*, question 10, article 13. See also *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapter 3.

had a beginning and is not infinite in duration,²⁸ that God is forgiving and has a plan to restore his friendship with humanity, and so on.

To be sure, revelation, since it uses human modes of communication, is limited by all of the shortcomings of language. It employs analogy and metaphor, stories and all sorts of literary devices to communicate and so it requires interpretation, which prompts another lively arena of discussion.

The third way of knowing about God, mystical experience, entails a direct spiritual encounter with God, not mediated by sensible forms. In principle, for those few who have such experiences, the knowledge received is superior to knowledge grounded in nature or public revelation but it is unsuitable as a source for theology or for other public purposes. The reason for this is that mystical experience (which, one might say, is a form of private revelation) may only be shared with others through language (with all the inherent limitations) but it carries with it none of the authority of public revelation. It is private testimony and never data for theology or doctrine.

Aquinas's Model of God

On Aquinas's account, it is possible to know from reason alone that a necessary being exists that is an uncaused first cause, that this being is immaterial, unique, without unrealized potentiality, and without defect of any kind. Furthermore, reasoning from the characteristics observed in creatures, which are the effects of the actions of this being, we can further conclude that intelligence, freedom, wisdom and other characteristics can be predicated of it but only by analogy. Beyond this, the gratuitous acts of self-revelation of this being can provide us with information that would otherwise be inaccessible by reason alone. Even so, in our current mode of existence it is impossible, in principle, for us to know the essence of God.²⁹

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²⁸ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 46, article 2.

²⁹ *Summa theologiae*, first part, question 12, article 11. See also *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, question 6, article 4.

Impassibility and Divine Love

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Any plausible model of a personal God must present a compelling account of divine love for humanity. Is divine love better depicted by a model of God who impassibly experiences infinite joy or one who suffers along with His¹ creatures? Advocates of each model argue that their conception provides a better depiction of a loving deity. In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas penned his model of an impassible God,² claiming He eternally experiences infinite joy without suffering. However, some recent religious thinkers argue that the doctrine of divine impassibility necessarily entails divine apathy that is incompatible with love.

Charles Hartshorne offers this influential argument against impassibility:

...to say that God is totally free from dissatisfaction or sorrow, that he always achieves absolute or maximal satisfaction, is to say that he has no wishes, preferences, or purposes toward us. Really he is just *neutral to what we do with our freedom, indifferently full of value, satisfied, perfect, regardless of our acts*....To love means to take the joy of another as occasion of one's own joy, his sorrow as occasion of one's own sorrow. The Thomistic God has no sorrow, only joy—and this joy owes nothing to ours.³

At the heart of Hartshorne's objection is the claim that impassibility entails indifference towards humanity. Similar criticisms have also been offered more recently by theologians such as Clark Pinnock⁴ and Nicholas Wolterstorff.⁵

¹In deference to the long standing traditions of Western theism all references to God will be capitalized and will use masculine pronouns. Nothing further should be inferred from this deference.

²While some of my arguments will be applicable to different accounts of impassibility, I focus my defense on the Thomistic presentation of impassibility, which I believe is the strongest version of the doctrine.

³Hartshorne (1943), p. 54.

⁴Cf. Pinnock (2001).

⁵Cf. Wolterstorff (1990), 196–240.

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In contrast, I argue that Aquinas does not commit himself to an unloving, indifferent, or unresponsive view of God. I proceed by examining the Thomistic view of the passions to clarify his account of divine impassibility. Second, I summarize the passibilists' objections to impassibility. Finally, I respond to these objections and demonstrate that an impassible God could express love by responding to and uniting with humanity in the midst of suffering in a more attractive way than the passibilists' alternative model.

Thomistic Impassibility and Joy

Many contemporaries mistakenly assume that Aquinas equates ‘passions’ with ‘emotions.’ Many passibilists⁶ interpret Aquinas’s use of ‘passion’ as synonymous with ‘emotion,’ which leads them to equate divine impassibility with divine apathy. However, it is important to realize that the Thomistic account of the passions is shaped by Aristotelian philosophy rather than by contemporary psychology. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that while Aquinas describes three senses of the concept of ‘passion’ shaped by the commitments of ancient Aristotelian philosophy none of them are synonymous with our contemporary concept of ‘emotion.’⁷

Aquinas explains his first usage of ‘passion,’ “Taken in the first sense, then, passion is found in the soul and in every creature, because every creature has some potentiality in its composition, and by reason of this every subsistent creature is capable of receiving something.”⁸ The Aristotelian concept of ‘potential’ refers to the limitations of each being’s ability to change or be changed by outside influences. Therefore, Aquinas notes that every created thing is mutable within the limitations of its potential and therefore can be involuntarily acted upon from outside of itself through passion. In contrast, he does not attribute passions in this sense to God since he describes Him as a purely actual being whose potential has eternally been fulfilled. As a perfect being God has no need to and no way to improve and is therefore immutable. Furthermore, God cannot be broken down into more basic constitutive parts. Due to these differences with creatures this first sense of ‘passion’ should not be attributed to God.

Aquinas’s second sense of ‘passion’ is connected to corporeality. “Taken in the second sense, however, passion is found only in bodies, and the contrariety of forms or qualities only in beings subject to generation and corruption. Hence only such beings can properly suffer in this sense.”⁹ For this sense of the term ‘passion’

⁶ Although there are different nuances to each of these thinkers’ objections to Aquinas, for sake of brevity I will address them together as ‘passibilist objections’ as much as possible.

⁷ Accordingly, in Richard Creel’s excellent discussion of the doctrine of impassibility he describes the essence of impassibility as, “the property of being insusceptible to causation.” Therefore, we can see that the medieval view of impassibility is not about whether or not God can experience emotion, but about the nature of divine power. Cf. Creel (2002), 314.

⁸ Aquinas (1999), 26.1.

⁹ Ibid.

Aquinas establishes a connection between corporeality and the passions. Physical substances can grow, diminish, and be involuntarily acted upon, but God cannot. This use of ‘passion’ is inappropriate to ascribe to God since it cannot be attributed to any immaterial being. Since even possible models of God do not attribute corporeality to Him no one in this debate believes He is ‘possible’ in this sense.

Aquinas explains a final, figurative sense of the word ‘passion.’ “But in the third sense, in which the term passion is taken figuratively, the soul can suffer in the sense that its operation can be hampered.”¹⁰ This sense of the term ‘passion’ is inappropriate to attribute to God since His operations cannot be hampered, especially not by something outside of Himself as implicit within Aristotle’s concept of the passions. To claim that an all-powerful God could be involuntarily hampered would be absurd for if something could hamper God, He would be less than all-powerful. Furthermore, it seems that even possibilists are not arguing that God can be hampered, although it is not always clear what they intend to claim when attributing something analogous to our embodied experiences like ‘pain’ and ‘sorrow’ to an immaterial God.

While Aquinas does not attribute passions to God in these senses he does not use the word ‘passion’ synonymously with ‘emotion.’ Instead, Aquinas implies that whatever approximates emotion for God is qualitatively different from anything within the ancient Aristotelian category of the passions. This claim is hardly unique to those who advocate impassibility. Even possibilists do not claim that God is ‘grieved’ in that tears form in His eyes, that God suffers as pain is recognized by His central nervous system, or that there is a lack of pleasurable hormones in His brain. Obviously, God’s immaterial and omnipotent nature creates challenges for any description of divine emotions.

Furthermore, it is important to understand Aquinas’s motivations for refusing to attribute passions to God. The category of the passions he embraces from Aristotle has an association with weakness. Experiencing a passion involves being involuntarily acted upon from outside one’s self. Accordingly, Aristotle offers the example that even a good natured human can be acted upon and overcome by her circumstances causing her to lose her temper involuntarily.¹¹ This example portrays exactly the type of involuntary reaction to circumstances that Aquinas refuses to associate with God. He is never surprised by unforeseen circumstances that lead to unintended reactions that are ‘out of character.’ God may respond to new circumstances, but His response is one that is determined by His eternal, essential nature. Therefore, even in responding to new circumstances God is not passively acted upon by those circumstances.

Consider the biblical story of the barren woman Hannah who desires to have a child, petitions God through prayer, and ultimately has her prayer answered and desire fulfilled.¹² Aquinas’s way of addressing narratives like this one is to emphasize continuity in the divine character. God’s eternal care for Hannah is such that if in these circumstances Hannah prays to have a child, He will grant that request. Yet, Aquinas denies that prayer brings about a change in God’s character. God was not

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Cf. Aristotle (1941), 10a6–10.

¹²Cf. *The Holy Bible* (1984), 1 Samuel 1.

indifferent to Hannah's plight before her request. He did not gain new information through her prayer. He did not suddenly become persuaded by her prayers as if He had previously been unwilling to aid her. He is the same essentially loving and all powerful God before, during, and after this event. Aquinas wants to emphasize that God is not like some fickle parent who is indifferent towards his children unless they speak persuasively or manipulate his emotions.

Therefore, while Aquinas does not attribute passions to God in their strictest sense, he does attribute certain passions to God in their cognitive, evaluative, and motivational components. For example, Aquinas describes God Himself as an object of His own joy,

Again, joy and delight are a certain resting of the will in its object. But God, Who is His own principal object willed, is supremely at rest in Himself, as containing all abundance in Himself. God, therefore, through His will supremely rejoices in Himself.¹³

Aquinas describes joy as the resting of the will in a good object and attributes eternal, infinite joy to God since He is an object of His own enjoyment. God correctly recognizes Himself as perfectly good and therefore receives infinite joy from union with His own infinite goodness. If God experiences less than infinite joy this lack would indicate either that He is inadequate to fully satisfy those whose will rests in Him or that He is deficient in His evaluation of Himself. Yet, there are serious drawbacks to either of those two possibilities. If God does not receive infinite joy from his unity with Himself, then humans should not hope to experience such joy through their connection with God. And if God is deficient in His evaluation of Himself then He is less than omniscient.

While Aquinas insists that God experiences infinite joy from unity with His own perfection, he simultaneously portrays God as taking joy in every other good. Aquinas explains, "Moreover, each thing takes joy in its like as in something agreeable...Now every good is a likeness of the divine good, as was said above, nor does God lose any good because of some good. It remains, then, that God takes joy in every good."¹⁴ God's experience of infinite joy in Himself is compatible with simultaneously experiencing joy in every other good. He recognizes and enjoys all goods, especially since any genuine good is a reflection of God's goodness. Since all genuine goods stem from God's own goodness this fact protects Aquinas's deity from any charge of apathy, because God's joy in Himself *entails* that He also experiences joy in every good in creation since they reflect His own goodness.

This portrayal is contrary to the possibilist's claim that impassibility entails indifference towards creation. Finally, for Aquinas 'being' itself is goodness, which implies that all existent things are good to at least some degree.¹⁵ Since all things are good to the degree that they exist and they; therefore, reflect the divine goodness God necessarily takes joy in all other things while also taking perfect joy in Himself.

¹³ Aquinas (1975), I.90.

¹⁴ Aquinas (1975), I.90.

¹⁵ Aquinas (1920), I.5.

The Contemporary Challenge

While Aquinas's account does not deny that God has emotions it has not yet been demonstrated that an impassible, unchangingly joyous God can be appropriately responsive to humanity's plight. As we have seen, one important passibilist objection is that divine impassibility portrays God as uncaring. Hartshorne argues,

If God is not better satisfied by our good than by our evil acts, and less well satisfied by the acts we do perform than he would have been by those better ones we might have performed, then it is simply meaningless to say he loves us; and the problem of what the value and purpose of our existence are is without religious answer.¹⁶

Pinnock similarly objects, "If God undergoes no change, can have no real relations and is unaffected by the world, the world is hardly relevant to God and it makes little difference whether we love him or not or even exist."¹⁷ Such objections claim that if God's level of satisfaction is not influenced by human action, then God is essentially apathetic towards humanity.

A related, but distinct objection argues that Thomism's depiction of God is inferior to a model of God whom suffers along with creation, implying that impassibility thereby leaves us with an inadequate model of God. For example, Wolterstorff compares an impassible God to a deplorable narcissistic doctor who delights in her own good work, but is fundamentally apathetic towards her patient's well-being.

What gives her delight is just her inner awareness of her own well-doing. . . . it makes no difference to her whether or not her advice maintains the health of the healthy and whether or not her proffered concoctions and cuttings cure the illness of the ill. What makes a difference is just her steadiness in well-doing; in this and in this alone she finds her delight.¹⁸

Obviously, a joyously self-satisfied doctor is narcissistic and morally inferior to one who suffers along with her patients. If such a doctor is indefensible, how can an impassible God be defended?

Coherent, Religiously Adequate, and Morally Attractive Thomism

The idea that God is beyond emotion is often viewed as religiously unattractive and ultimately pernicious. For example, Pinnock cites Millard Erickson's claim:

It seems indubitable, in light of the number and variety of biblical texts attributing emotions of several kinds to God, that impassibility in the sense of God being utterly devoid of any feelings cannot be accepted. However these emotions are to be understood, God is simply not without them.¹⁹

¹⁶ Hartshorne (1944), 295.

¹⁷ Pinnock (2001), 117–8.

¹⁸ Woltersorff (1990), 225.

¹⁹ Erickson (1998), 161–4, cited in Pinnock (2001), 89.

Indeed, while there may be difficulties with attributing non-emotiveness to God in a generic version of theism, any biblically compatible account of theism faces even more daunting challenges in explaining the numerous references to divine emotion. However, while Aquinas does not believe that God experiences passions, he does seem to believe that God experiences emotions. If God experiences emotions or something analogous to them these concerns can be addressed without abandoning the doctrine of impassibility.

The *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* presents four major accounts of emotions: the Cartesian view, the Jamesian view, the behaviorist view, and the Aristotelian/Thomistic view. First, the Cartesian view claims that “emotion is a mental item like a sensation, which is infallibly classifiable in the having of it.”²⁰ Second, the view of William James argues that “without palpable ‘bodily symptoms’ emotion would merely be detached observation, and thus not emotion at all”²¹ Third, the behaviorist view is “that an emotion is nothing more than engaging, or being liable to engage, in certain sorts of behaviour”²² Finally, the Aristotelian/Thomistic views “make cognition, motivation, or evaluation central” to the question of what constitutes an emotion.²³

The only account of emotion on which an impassive God cannot have emotion is James’s view since it requires corporeality. Since God is capable of having mental items, behavior, cognition, motivation, and evaluation He can have emotions according to the other three accounts. God has cognition and mental items in that He knows things.²⁴ God has behavior in that he acts.²⁵ He has motivations since everything He wills is guided by love.²⁶ God makes evaluations in that He values things in proportion to their goodness.²⁷ Therefore, the Thomistic God has emotions as construed by the major philosophical viewpoints so long as corporeality is not necessary for emotions.

While critics might acknowledge that the Thomistic model of impassibility has conceptual space for some divine emotion, they might object that there is something morally or religiously inadequate with God’s impassible, infinite joy that continues regardless of the quality of human action.²⁸ The Hartshornian objection to impassibility claims that the divine level of joy ought to reflect His degree of pleasure with human actions and; therefore, it ought to increase or decrease based upon the quality of humanity’s actions. Hence, the Thomistic depiction of God as continually experiencing infinite joy is incompatible with genuine love since it must entail that He does not really care about how humans use their free will.²⁹

²⁰ Honderich (1995), 224.

²¹ Ibid, 224.

²² Ibid, 225.

²³ Ibid, 225.

²⁴ ST I.14.

²⁵ ST I.22.

²⁶ ST I.20.

²⁷ ST I.20.3.

²⁸ See fn 3 and Hartshorne (1943), 54.

²⁹ Aquinas (1975), I.90.

However, God's infinite joy in Himself does not entail that He is not better satisfied by humanity's better actions than worse actions. What makes this objection misfire is its failure to distinguish between God's overall amount of joy and the amount of joy He takes in particular things. Since God is an object that can provide an infinite amount of joy He experiences an infinite amount of joy from union with Himself, but it does not follow that He experiences no joy from other things. Instead, what follows is that when God does not experience joy from other things in the universe, His union with Himself continues to provide an infinite amount of joy thereby preventing any net loss in His overall amount of joy. Since God takes joy in every good, the Thomistic claim is that the *content* of divine happiness is contingent upon human choices, but the overall *degree* of God's happiness is not.³⁰

Perhaps, what is objectionable with the doctrine of impassibility is not that such a deity's joys are unaffected by our choices as Hartshorne and Pinnock argue. Instead, someone might think that a being who takes infinite joy in Himself while the world is full of suffering is morally inadequate. As Wolterstorff suggests, just as an ideal doctor ought to be saddened by the suffering of her patients rather than taking joy in her own work, perhaps God ought to suffer with humanity. The motivation behind this objection is reasonable since any human who took herself as the ultimate object of joy would be narcissistic. Such 'joy' is deplorable since it is based on an over valuation of the self. Taking supreme joy in a less than perfect object is mistaken, especially when that object is a prideful self. However, taking supreme joy in God is acceptable both for God and humanity, since as the perfect, infinite, and ultimate good He actually is the appropriate source of both human and divine supreme joy.

Yet, even if God is correct in viewing Himself as an appropriate object for experiencing infinite joy, the nature of love requires that the lover cares about the beloved's suffering. Any account of love that allows the lover to abandon the beloved to suffering displays the very indifference that critics attribute to divine impassibility. But is the Thomistic portrayal of God really like Wolterstorff's doctor who is completely self-satisfied with the goodness of her own actions and thoroughly indifferent towards sufferers? I think not.

Consider Aquinas's account of love.³¹ He believes the lover wills both the good for the beloved and union with the beloved.³² In the case of divine love these desires are related since the ultimate good for humanity is union with God. Interestingly,

³⁰ Richard Creel summarizes this position well claiming, "What we affect is the 'texture' of God's happiness, not the intensity or purity of it. Some people see this position as preposterous. They will not have a God whom they cannot enhance or wound – whose happiness they cannot manipulate... This strikes me as an unhealthy attitude. If we love someone, we should want them to be able to be happy without us – even though we would prefer that they be happy with us. To desire otherwise seems more indicative of megalomania and insecurity than love" (1986, 145–146).

³¹ For an in-depth examination of Aquinas's account of love Cf. Silverman (2010), 43–58.

³² ST II-II.27.2.

Wolterstorff does not mention the Thomistic God's desire for union with humanity. He oversimplifies Aquinas's account of love claiming, "...the tradition held that God loves only in the mode of benevolence [rather than sympathy]."³³ While Wolterstorff is correct that Thomistic love requires benevolence and does not attribute suffering to God, Aquinas's account of love goes beyond simple benevolence. While humans often love by uniting with one another in shared suffering,³⁴ instead the Thomistic God loves those who suffer by offering them union with Himself so that they can share His impassible joy.

These two ways of uniting God with humanity offer a stark contrast. The passibilists' type of union brings suffering to God, thereby 'bringing God down' to the level of humanity. In contrast, Aquinas's solution offers humanity the opportunity to unite with God's infinite joy. The wise intuition behind the passibilists' challenge is that the lover does not simply abandon the beloved to suffering. However, God does not have to suffering alongside humanity to unite with us in hard times. Instead, He can enable creatures to unite with his joy and freedom from sorrow in the midst of their challenges.

Which kind of loving God is preferable to those in intense suffering? A possible God would reduce human suffering by empathizing and suffering alongside those who suffer. However, the Thomistic God would offer the sufferer union with His infinite joy and perfection. Through that union He would offer supernatural joy in the midst of earthly struggles and ongoing eternal joy through union with Himself in the afterlife. If offered a choice between suffering along with God as a divine co-sufferer and having suffering alleviated through union with a God who is the source of infinite joy it is unclear why anyone would prefer the former. The possible God cares for humanity, but has inferior relational resources to alleviate human suffering. Since He does not experience infinite joy He cannot alleviate suffering through unity with that joy.³⁵ In contrast, the Thomistic God seeks to lift humanity out of suffering through unity with Himself.

The Thomistic view implies something quite striking and optimistic about ultimate reality. It claims that if one was united to God and able to experience the full implications of that union, nothing would be able to move that person from perfect joy. This view does not deny the existence of evil, earthly tragedy, or misfortune, but claims that union with the goodness of God is a source of infinite joy that can transcend and overwhelm any sorrow.

³³ Wolterstorff (1990), 224.

³⁴ Significantly, Aquinas acknowledges that humans often empathize with one another in their suffering and approves of this practice as an expression of mercy, presumably because humans, unlike God, cannot offer access to impassible joy through union with themselves to lift others out of suffering. Cf. ST I-II.38.3.

³⁵ Of course, a possible, impassible, or non-emotional God each could presumably eliminate suffering through divine fiat. The relevant question here; however, is which model of God gives a more attractive account of the relational resources He has for interacting with the world.

Conclusion

Aquinas's portrayal of God as both lover of humanity and impassably joyful is coherent, religiously adequate, and attractive. Divine impassibility and divine indifference towards humanity are radically different concepts. Thomism merely claims that God does not experience the Aristotelian conception of passions, but does not claim that He fails to experience anything analogous to emotions. There are important considerations motivating Thomas's doctrine of divine impassibility including the belief that possibility requires embodiment, mutability, potency, or some other trait incompatible with divine perfection and omnipotence.

While some thinkers incorrectly depict the Thomistic account of impassibility as entailing divine indifference towards creation, Aquinas's model of God allows for emotions under every major account that does not portray emotions as requiring corporeality. Furthermore, the Thomistic model of an impassible God depicts Him as actively caring for creation, desiring the good for creation, taking joy in all of creation, willing union with creation, and seeking to alleviate creation's suffering through union with Himself. Therefore, it is difficult to see why anyone would judge this model of an impassibly joyous God to be religiously inadequate.³⁶

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Descartes on God and the Products of His Will

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Descartes begins his *Meditations on First Philosophy* with a number of remarkable claims about what is possible. He argues that it is possible that God is a deceiver (AT 7:21), that it is possible that God does not exist and that we arrived at our “present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events” (*Ibid.*), and that it is possible that there is an evil demon who is constantly manipulating our minds to regard what is false as utterly evident and true (AT 7:22).¹ As commentators noted almost immediately, Descartes’ epistemological project is in serious trouble if he establishes in the First Meditation that it is possible that we are mistaken about what is most evident to us.² In subsequent Meditations, Descartes will use his mind to try to demonstrate results, but if it is possible that his mind is defective, he cannot be sure that those results are to be accepted. Perhaps most worrisome, in the Third Meditation he proceeds to argue that a benevolent God exists and that this being would not have created our minds to be certain about things that are nonetheless false (AT 7:40–52). It is remarkable to think that Descartes could have failed to see the problem here.

There are passages elsewhere in Descartes’ corpus that appear to entail the existence of the possibilities that are advanced in the First Meditation and also other possibilities as well. Descartes appears to go so far as to argue that there are no limits on God’s power and thus that *anything* is possible. Some of the relevant (and extremely striking) passages are these:

You ask me by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total

¹ Here and in the following I use ‘AT’ to refer to the pagination in Adam and Tannery 1996. For all translations I am using Cottingham et al. (1984, 1985, 1991).

² See for example Antoine Arnauld, *Fourth Objections* (AT 7:214) and Marin Mersenne, *Second Objections* (AT 7:124–25). For more contemporary statements of the worry, see Loeb 1992 and Nelson and Newman 1999.

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cause. ... You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply – that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal.³

I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3.⁴

God did not will... that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary, it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise.⁵

God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore... he could have done otherwise.⁶

Commentators have appealed to these passages to argue that Descartes is committed to the view that anything is possible for God and thus that he is committed to the view that anything is possible simpliciter.⁷ It is possible that two and three could have added to something other than five; it is possible that the radii of a circle could have been unequal; it is possible that an evil demon has been allowed to deceive us; it is possible that God does not exist at all.

There is no question that the above passages paint a certain picture of the contents of Descartes' system. Descartes not only holds that there are minds and bodies, but he also appears to hold that there is such a thing as possible reality and that there exist possibilities that are not actualized. If there are such entities in Descartes' system, they do not exist automatically but depend on God for their creation. Descartes holds very generally that

If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, law, and every reason for anything's being true and good. If this were not so, then... God would not have been completely indifferent with respect to the creation of what he did in fact create.⁸

Descartes makes similar claims in the Third Meditation (AT 7:45) and “To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630” (AT 1:152), and he says very specifically about possible reality that

Our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact impossible, but not to be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible.⁹

³ “To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630,” AT 1:151–52.

⁴ “For [Arnauld], 29 July 1648,” AT 5:224.

⁵ *Sixth Replies*, AT 7:432.

⁶ “To [Mesland], 2 May 1644,” AT 4:118.

⁷ See for example Frankfurt 1977, 44–46 and 50–53, and Wilson 1978, 125.

⁸ *Sixth Replies*, AT 7:435.

⁹ “To [Mesland], 2 May 1644,” AT 4:118. See also *Fourth Replies*, AT 7:219.

Here Descartes is not yet conceding that God has created any possible reality, but he is insisting that any such reality does not exist independently of God's creative activity. When God is deciding on the details of the universe that He is going to create, He is not confronted with a set of possibilities that already exist on their own. Possibilities do not exist alongside Him, as things to which He needs to be responsive. The issue that I want to discuss in this paper is whether or not Descartes' God creates any possible reality: possible eternal truths that would make trouble for Descartes' view that the actual eternal truths are necessary,¹⁰ and any other possible reality that could be actualized but is not.

We might start by considering those things that are uncontroversially to be included in the Cartesian system. Descartes of course holds that there exist mental and physical substances and also modifications of those substances. He demonstrates the existence of mind-independent physical reality in the Sixth Meditation, and he demonstrates the existence of (at least one) mind in the Second.¹¹ In addition to minds and bodies, and as we have already seen, Descartes' ontology contains eternal truths:

All the objects of our perception we regard either as things, or affections of things, or else as eternal truths which have no existence outside of our thought. ...I recognize only two ultimate classes of things: first, intellectual or thinking things, i.e. those which pertain to mind or thinking substance; and secondly, material things, i.e. those which pertain to extended substance or body. Perception, volition and all the modes both of perceiving and of willing are referred to thinking substance; while to extended substance belong size (that is, extension in length, breadth and depth), shape, motion, position, divisibility of component parts and the like.¹²

Here we have a statement of the substance dualism for which Descartes is so famous, and Descartes also reveals (perhaps surprisingly) that eternal truths are not anything above and beyond mental and physical substances (and their modifications). They do not exist outside of our thought, and more specifically they are modifications of mental substances. For Descartes, truths are ideas that conform to reality,¹³ and so *a fortiori* eternal truths are ideas. Insofar as they exist as discrete, where for example the eternal truth that one and two are three is not identical to the eternal truth that the radii of a circle are equal, eternal truths are ideas in finite minds and not ideas in a divine mind (or a mind that is perfectly simple and all of whose "parts" are identical¹⁴). Like any other true ideas in finite minds, eternal truths are

¹⁰ And that is Descartes' view. See for example "To [Mersenne], 6 May 1630," AT 1:150; *Sixth Replies*, AT 7:432; and "To Elizabeth, 6 October 1645," AT 4:308. Commentators like Frankfurt (1977) have argued that if Descartes holds that God is the free author of the eternal truths then Descartes is committed to the view that eternal truths are not necessary.

¹¹ See AT 7:78–80 and AT 7:23–27. For parallel demonstrations, see *Principles of Philosophy* II:1, AT 8A:40–41, and also *Principles* I:7, AT 8A:7.

¹² *Principles* I:48, AT 8A:22–23.

¹³ "To Mersenne, 16 October 1639," AT 2:597.

¹⁴ See for example *Principles* I:23, AT 8A:14, and "To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630," AT 1:153, but there is a further discussion of divine simplicity below.

creatures of God,¹⁵ which is just what Descartes says in the passages about the dependence of eternal truths on God's freedom and power. Eternal truths are also eternal, of course, but Descartes unpacks their eternality in terms of their unchangingness.¹⁶

Descartes' system clearly contains minds and bodies and eternal truths, but it also appears to contain a number of additional creatures: alternative eternal truths that God could have created; the series of possibilities that is posited in the First Meditation; and indeed the vast (and presumably unlimited) number of possibilities that God considers in selecting the much smaller subset that constitutes the world that He makes actual. There is no question that if we import a common-sense libertarian conception of freedom into our interpretation of Descartes' claims about God's power, possibilities abound. On such an interpretation, if God is free in His creation of the essence of a circle, and if He is free to make it not the case that the radii of a circle are equal, then there exists the possibility that the radii of a circle are equal, and there exists the possibility that the radii of a circle are not equal. If God could have made two and three add to six or anything else, then there exists the possibility that two and three add to six, and there exists a possibility for every other imaginable sum. The same would then apply in the case of God's creation of this world over any possible other.

Descartes' claims about God's freedom in creation might seem straightforwardly libertarian to some readers, but Descartes goes out of his way to offer his own Cartesian definition of divine freedom, and we would be remiss if we did not keep it in mind. He writes,

As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen, for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so.¹⁷

Here Descartes is stating quite explicitly that what it is to say that God is free is to say that God is indifferent and that there is nothing that is independent of God that puts any pressures or limits or constraints on His creative activity.¹⁸ God is free, but not in the sense that He confronts possibilities from which He must select. Descartes is not automatically working with a libertarian conception of divine freedom, and so we must look to the texts to locate the conception that he in fact assumes. When we do we find that Descartes looks a lot like his contemporary Spinoza:

¹⁵ The Fourth Meditation, AT 7:62. See also "To Princess Elizabeth, 21 May 1643," where Descartes speaks of primitive notions which are implanted in us by God (AT 3:666) and which are "the patterns on the basis of which we form all our other conceptions" (AT 3:665). See also Nolan 1997, 171 and 188.

¹⁶ *Fifth Replies*, AT 7:381, and also Chappell 1997, 123–27.

¹⁷ *Sixth Replies*, AT 7:431–2. See also *Principles I*:51, AT 8A:24.

¹⁸ See also Bennett 1994, 641–43; Nelson and Cunning 1999, 144–5; Cunning 2002; Cunning 2003, 81–2; and Cunning 2010, Chap. 8.

There is no problem in the fact that the merit of the saints may be said to be the cause of their obtaining eternal life; for it is not the cause of this reward in the sense that it determines God to will anything, but is merely the cause of an effect of which God willed from eternity that it should be the case. Thus the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of His omnipotence.¹⁹

If Descartes understands divine freedom in terms of indifference, there is a straightforward and easy way to understand the passages in which he speaks of God's freedom in creating the eternal truths. Descartes says that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, but in Cartesian terms that is just an application of the view that God is indifferent with respect to His creation. Descartes says that God is free to make it not true that the radii of a circle are equal, but that is just to say that God was indifferent in His creation of the eternal truth relating circles and their radii. Descartes says that eternal truths about triangles are necessary and that their necessity is not antecedent to God's creative activity. That is exactly what we should expect to Descartes to say if he holds that God is the wholly indifferent cause of all reality including eternal truths. Descartes says that we ought not say that God cannot make one and two add to something other than three. Indeed we ought not say this, because it is imperative when we do philosophy that we refrain from affirming confusion, and it is confusion to affirm that there are things that exist independent of God's creative activity and that might circumscribe or limit it.

Descartes also says in one of the passages that because nothing determines God to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, that therefore He could have done the opposite. This claim also makes perfect sense in terms of Descartes' understanding of divine freedom. The first thing to note is that, strictly speaking, Descartes holds that divine freedom is to be understood in terms of indifference, and so the claim that God could have done the opposite is again just the claim that nothing determines God to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together. The second thing to note is that in the comments that Descartes makes immediately afterward, we find a reminder that we are mistaken if we understand God's freedom in terms of alternate possibilities from which He selects. Indeed, Descartes writes that

if we would know the immensity of his power we should not put these thoughts before our minds, nor should we conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and will; the idea which we have of God teaches us that in him there is only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure. (AT 4:119)

This is a remarkable passage. Descartes is saying that God's activity is perfectly simple and singular and thus that God's activity does not consist in considering ideas (in His intellect) and then subsequently actualizing them with His will. If God wills that contradictories cannot be made true together, that does not mean that God considers and then rejects the possibility that contradictories can be made true

¹⁹ Sixth Replies, AT 7:432. See also Spinoza, *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being* I.iii, in Morgan and Shirley 2002, 50–53.

together. The possibility does not automatically exist, and if it is a necessary truth that contradictories cannot be made true together, we have evidence that the possibility was never in fact created. Hence we should not put before our minds the idea that there really exists the possibility that contradictories can be true together. We should not put it before our minds because it is fictional and confused. We can imagine it, but we can imagine a lot of things, and imagination is not the mark of the true.²⁰

Commentators have already defended the more encompassing thesis that there is no room for possible reality in Descartes' philosophical system. One route to this thesis is to focus on Descartes' commitment to the doctrine of divine simplicity and argue that, unlike Leibniz, Descartes does not think that God has distinct faculties of intellect and will. We have already seen a passage in which Descartes speaks to the simplicity of God's activity, and there are other passages that entail that, for Descartes, whatever is the object of God's intellect is also the object of His will and creative power.²¹ Descartes writes,

there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills, and accomplishes everything.²²

In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually.²³

If God's intellect has ideas of A, B, C, and D, He creates A, B, C and D if understanding and willing and creating are all the same thing in God. We might assume that God has ideas of things that do not exist, perhaps because we assume that we have such ideas. There seem to be things that could exist instead of A, B, C and D, and indeed things that are not compossible with A, B, C and D. But again, we can imagine a lot of things that are fictional, and possibilities are no exception. For Descartes, everything of which God has an idea is actualized, and anything of which God does not have an idea is nothing at all.

Another route to the thesis that there is no possible reality in Descartes' system starts from the doctrine that God is wholly immutable. Descartes derives the doctrine from God's essential perfection:

It will be said that if God had established these [eternal] truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. 'But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable.' – I make the same judgement about God. 'But his will is free.' – Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp.²⁴

We understand that God's perfection involves his not only being immutable in himself, but also his operating in a manner that is always utterly constant and immutable.²⁵

²⁰ See for example *Second Replies*, AT 7:145 and 130–31; *Principles*, "Preface to the French Edition," AT 9B:7; and Cunning 2010, chapters one and three.

²¹ Nelson and Cunning 1999, 138–9.

²² *Principles* I:23, AT 8A:14.

²³ "To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630," AT 1:153.

²⁴ "To Mersenne, 15 April 1630," AT 1:145–46.

²⁵ *Principles* II:36, AT 8A:61.

If God is immutable, then all that exists aside from God is the actual series of creatures that God creates, and the series does not include possible reality. The reasoning for this Cartesian conclusion is straightforward. Alternative possible realities do not automatically exist alongside the series, for they only exist if God actually creates them, and if God does not create them then they are not part of the fabric of the universe. But God wills the single series of creatures for eternity:

Now that we have come to know God, we perceive in him a power so immeasurable that we regard it as impious to suppose that we could ever do anything which was not already pre-ordained by him. ...[H]e not only knew from eternity whatever is or can be, but also willed it and preordained it.²⁶

If God is eternal and His will is eternal and wholly immutable there at no point exists the possibility that His will change course and produce an alternate series, and so there do not exist any alternative possible series.²⁷ God is of course the author of all reality and thus the author of any actual and possible reality that there might be, but it turns out that the latter sort of reality is non-existent.²⁸

Another way to reach the thesis that there is no possible reality in Descartes' system is to emphasize that a God that is perfectly simple has no parts and that what seem to be its parts are really identical and so equally essential to it.²⁹ We might assume that Descartes is working with a common-sense conception of freedom and omnipotence and therefore holds that if God is free, there are decrees that God makes that are not tied to His essence and that He does not have to make. But the Cartesian God is different:

Concerning ethics and religion,... the opinion has prevailed that God can be altered, because of the prayers of mankind; for no one would have prayed to God if he knew, or had convinced himself, that God was unalterable.... From the metaphysical point of view, however, it is quite unintelligible that God should be anything but completely unalterable. It is irrelevant that the decrees could have been separated from God; indeed, this should not really be asserted. For although God is completely indifferent with respect to all things, he necessarily made the decrees he did.... We should not make a separation here between the necessity and the indifference that apply to God's decrees; although his actions were completely indifferent, they were also completely necessary. Then again, although we may conceive that the decrees could have been separated from God, this is merely a token procedure of our own reasoning: the distinction thus introduced between God himself and his decrees is a mental, not a real one. In reality the decrees could not have been separated from God: he is not prior to them or distinct from them, nor could he have existed without them.³⁰

²⁶ *Principles* I:40–41, AT 8A:20.

²⁷ See Cunning 2003, 79–92, and Cunning 2010, 193–94.

²⁸ Note that Alanen (2008, 367–70) concedes that it is incomprehensible how God could create possible reality if God is simple, immutable, and eternal, but she argues that for Descartes God is incomprehensible. I certainly appreciate Alanen's concern here, but insofar as Descartes is making God the subject of philosophical investigation – where we arrive at views about whether or not He is a deceiver, or is omnipotent, or is the author of all reality – Descartes does not think that God is incomprehensible. Commentators actually presuppose that for Descartes God is comprehensible, when they conclude (for example) that he thinks that God is omnipotent in that He is the author of all reality and can make eternal truths false.

²⁹ See Walski 2003, 39–42.

³⁰ *Conversation with Burman*, AT 5:166.

This passage is taken from Franz Burman's notes from an interview that he had with Descartes in 1649. Burman could have made up the quote, perhaps, but the reasoning that he attributes to Descartes is strikingly Cartesian. Descartes does not ever come out in his published writings and say that he is a full-blown necessitarian, though he says things that entail it, and it is clear why he would avoid such topics. He famously withheld publication of *Le Monde* when he learned of the condemnation of Galileo.³¹ Descartes would have violated his own stoicism, and his efforts at achieving equanimity,³² if he had advertised all of his scientific commitments. The same sensibility would apply in the case of a commitment to necessitarianism, if not more strongly.

One thing that we still need to do is address the evidence in the First Meditation that there are unactualized possibilities like that God does not exist or that there is an evil demon. The first thing to say here is that Descartes' meditator advances a lot of claims in the *Meditations* – for example, that what we know best we know either from or through the senses (AT 7:18); that we should use imagination to get to know our minds better (AT 7:27); that general perceptions are apt to be more confused than particular ones (AT 7:30); and that bodies really have qualities like color and taste and sound (AT 7:30) and heat (7:41, 43–44). None of these claims is advanced by Descartes, but instead they are the deliverances of a meditator who is reporting what he sees to be true from his first-person point-of-view, but whose intellect has not yet been emended. Thinkers like Glaucon, Hylas, and Simplicio might proceed along the same lines, but they do not thereby reveal to us the views of Plato, Berkeley or Galileo. When we do philosophy, we often have thoughts at the start of inquiry that are unconsidered and confused, and later we come to recognize a priori truths that are unimpeachable and that inform us that the thoughts that we had before we were careful were not particularly telling. Descartes' meditator makes epistemic progress and recognizes the obvious truth of various primary notions of metaphysics,³³ and concludes from them that God exists necessarily, that God cannot deceive, that God would not allow a demon to manipulate our minds, that everything depends on God for its existence, and that truths like two and three add to five are necessary. Because God is a necessary existent who is the author of all reality, we can thereby conclude that there does not exist the possibility of divine deception or of God's nonexistence, or the possibility of alternative eternal truths, and hence that God did not author these. Any such possibilities do not exist automatically alongside God, and because He does not create them they do not in fact exist. Like Spinoza, Leibniz or any other figure who is properly identified as a rationalist, Descartes does not construct his philosophical arguments from claims that are grounded in the senses or imagination, and claims that are known by “purely mental scrutiny” (AT 7:31) start to emerge in the Second Meditation and beyond. The First Meditation is not evidence of anything but the commitments of a person who is

³¹ See Gaukroger 1995, 290–92.

³² See Rutherford 2008.

³³ *Second Replies*, AT 7:156–7.

moving slowly and awkwardly away from a non-Cartesian paradigm.³⁴ Descartes writes the *Meditations* from the first-person point-of-view because it is imperative that we come to see the truth for ourselves,³⁵ but at the start of inquiry we are not in the best position to see (and report) how things really are.

I want to conclude with an extended discussion of a recent attempt in the literature to argue that a necessitarian reading of Descartes is a nonstarter.

In a recent paper, Dan Kaufman argues that in Descartes' system there are necessary truths and contingent truths and that there is no further explanation of the necessity of the former than that God freely created some truths as necessary and others as contingent.³⁶ Kaufman argues that for Descartes

the eternal truths are necessary precisely because God wills that they are necessary. ...[T]o expect more of an explanation from Descartes is to expect something to which we are not entitled. The explanation that we receive from Descartes is *all the explanation we can get* from him.³⁷

Kaufman admits that the view might seem puzzling, and indeed he compares it to another view that has elicited a similar response – the Augustinian doctrine that divine foreknowledge does not preclude the possibility of libertarian freedom because, even though we cannot avoid doing what God knows we will do, what God knows we will do is act freely.³⁸ But Kaufman argues that the Cartesian view should not be met with “incredulous stares.”³⁹ Descartes of course holds that every creature is completely dependent on God for its existence, and so if there are necessary truths in Descartes’ system, then God must be the author of their necessity.⁴⁰

But another reason that Kaufman gives up on offering a further explanation of the necessity of Cartesian eternal truths is that he considers various attempts to make sense of their necessity and concludes that they all fall short. First, Kaufman considers the view that the reason why they are necessary is that (1) God wills them and (2) God’s will is immutable. Kaufman is of course right to argue that, even on the most charitable interpretation, an argument along these lines “does not establish the *necessity* of the eternal truths; it merely establishes their *immutability*.⁴¹ Just because two and two are immutably four, they are not necessarily four. If two and two are immutably four, they are not necessarily four if it is possible that they could have been immutably otherwise.

Kaufman also dismisses a second interpretation that would purport to explain the necessity of eternal truths in Descartes’ system. This interpretation helps itself to what Kaufman calls the “Immutability-Necessity” Principle: for any x, if x is

³⁴ See also Cunning 2010, chapter one.

³⁵ See Appendix to *Fifth Objections and Replies*, AT 9A:208.

³⁶ Kaufman 2005, 1–19.

³⁷ Ibid., 17–8.

³⁸ Ibid., 18.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 17–18.

⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

immutable, then x is necessary. One of the problems with this interpretation, of course, is that it is not clear why anybody in their right mind would subscribe to the principle. If the immutability of the eternal truths only establishes their immutability and not their necessity, then it is not the case that for any x , if x is immutable, then x is necessary. But the real problem that Kaufman sees with the second interpretation is that it “is had at too high a cost.”⁴² The cost is that it does not leave room for Descartes to make a distinction between truths that are necessary and truths that are contingent, and in particular it does not allow Descartes to hold that the free actions of creatures are contingent. Kaufman sets up his worry as follows. First, he allows that Descartes holds that in God there is a single and perfectly simple act by which He wills the series of creatures for eternity.⁴³ Eternal truths are creatures and are true at every moment, but non-eternal truths are true only at particular times. Kaufman then highlights that if God wills a single series for all eternity and if His will is immutable, then it is an immutable truth that two and two are true for all eternity, and it is an immutable truth that (to use Kaufman’s example) Deaton receives a sandwich at t_1 .⁴⁴ It is also an immutable truth that Deaton engages in the mental act of deciding to eat a sandwich at t_2 (if it is in fact a truth that he decides to do so). On the interpretation that employs the Immutability-Necessity Principle, then, “Descartes is committed to the necessity of all temporally-indexed propositions.”⁴⁵ But “it is clear that he believed that there are some propositions that, while true, are not necessarily so, i.e., they are contingent,” and “Descartes certainly wants to hold that the free actions of creatures are contingent.”⁴⁶ Below I consider the evidence that Kaufman offers here. For now I am just recording the view.

If eternal truths are going to be necessary truths in Descartes’ system, they will have to be truths that are authored by God, and it will have to be the case that in Descartes’ system there do not exist possible alternative eternal truths. I argued earlier that Descartes’ God does not create any possible reality and thus that possibilities are not among the creatures in the Cartesian system. But nor is there any room for possibility as a constituent of God:

I have many potentialities which are not yet actual, [but] this is all quite irrelevant to the idea of God, which contains absolutely nothing that is potential.⁴⁷

[P]otential being... strictly speaking is nothing.⁴⁸

If Descartes’ God is simple and wholly active, of course He contains nothing at all that is potential. As we have seen, He does not author any possible reality either. For Descartes, possibility reality does not get authored, and it does not reside in God, so it is a fiction. Thus we secure the fruits of

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 9–10.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷ The Third Meditation, AT 7:47.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

frequent reflection upon Divine Providence: we should reflect upon the fact that nothing can possibly happen other than as Providence has determined from all eternity. Providence is, so to speak, a fate or immutable necessity, which we must set against Fortune in order to expose the latter as a chimera which arises solely from an error of our intellect.⁴⁹

There is no potential being in God, and possibilities do not automatically exist side-by-side the series that God in fact produces, for something exists only if He produces it. God wills a series of creatures for eternity, and there does not exist the possibility that His will could have been otherwise for eternity.

It is somewhat surprising actually that Kaufman does not accept the view that in Descartes' system there does not exist the possibility that God's will could have been otherwise for eternity. In his 2002 paper he states the view that all that Descartes means in saying that God could have created alternative eternal truths is that there exist no non-divine influences that constrain God in His act of creating the eternal truths that He in fact made.⁵⁰ But this is not to say that in Descartes' system there thereby exists the possibility that God's will could have been otherwise for eternity. It just means that God wills what He wills and that there is nothing independent of God that has any bearing on that. It is just to make a point about God's independence, and not about any real possibilities that exist or that God wills and creates. It is not to add the existence of a possibility to Descartes' system. The view that God is supremely independent in creating the eternal truths does not by itself entail the existence of unactualized possibilities. Why is Kaufman so confident that in Descartes' system there exists the possibility that God's will could have been otherwise for eternity?

The reason why Kaufman places this possibility into Descartes' system is that if the possibility does not exist in Descartes' system, then Descartes is a necessitarian. But as Kaufman insists,

Descartes may be willing to live with the *immutability* of things. What he cannot systematically live with is the *necessity* of all things.⁵¹

Surprisingly, though, Kaufman offers almost no evidence for this view. First, he says that Descartes holds that some truths are contingent in the sense of being not necessary:

it is clear that he believed that there are some propositions that, while true, are not necessarily so, i.e., they are contingent. For example, the propositions that 'Descartes had a body', 'the wax smells like flowers', 'anything other than God exists', etc., are contingently true according to Descartes.⁵²

Noteworthy is that Kaufman is not quoting Descartes here, but just supposing that it is obvious that Descartes would identify these as non-necessary truths. He says that if Descartes does not do so then "he would commit himself to unwanted consequences."⁵³ The idea is presumably that it *is* obvious that these

⁴⁹ *Passions of the Soul* II:146, AT 11:438.

⁵⁰ Kaufman 2002, 36–7.

⁵¹ Kaufman 2005, 11.

⁵² Ibid., 8.

⁵³ Ibid.

are not necessary truths, and that as a reasonable person, Descartes would agree. But that is not evidence, and it is certainly not systematic evidence.⁵⁴ Indeed, systematically speaking Descartes would refrain from advancing the first two claims as philosophical truths, as they violate the Fourth Meditation rule that we should refrain from affirming what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive. Descartes holds that, strictly speaking, things like wax and flowers do not have a smell, and that what we clearly and distinctly perceive to pertain to particular bodies are general features like extension and flexibility – features that are known through the intellect alone and not through the senses.⁵⁵ Kaufman insists, though, that “Despite the fact that Descartes rarely uses the term ‘contingent’, it is clear that he believed that there are some propositions that, while true, are not necessarily so.”⁵⁶ Descartes does rarely use the term ‘contingent’, and when he does he is not committing himself to the view that there are truths that are not necessary. He speaks of things as having possible and contingent existence, and identifies possible and contingent existence with the dependent existence had by creatures in contrast to the independent existence had by God.⁵⁷ Spinoza speaks of possible and contingent existence in similar terms, but that is not evidence that Spinoza is not a necessitarian.⁵⁸ There is indeed just a small number of texts in which Descartes speaks of contingency, but even these do not entail that his system contains unactualized reality.⁵⁹

Kaufman also offers the datum that Descartes “certainly” holds that the free actions of creatures are contingent. Here he does not offer much evidence either. Instead of locating passages in which Descartes makes clear that human behavior is not necessitated, Kaufman points to passages in which Descartes appears to leave little room for contingency, and says that “despite” these passages Descartes holds that the free actions of creatures are contingent.⁶⁰ For example, there is the famous passage in the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth:

[God] would not be supremely perfect if anything could happen in the world without coming entirely from him... [P]hilosophy by itself is able to discover that the slightest thought

⁵⁴ This would be similar to arguing that a reasonable person would hold that finite creatures are efficacious and therefore that Malebranche cannot really hold that God is the only cause, and so we must go back and interpret the relevant parts of his system accordingly.

⁵⁵ See also Simmons 2003, 575–79, and Cunning 2010, 181–86.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *First Replies*, AT 116–7; *Second Replies*, AT 7:166; *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, AT 8B:361; *Principles I*:51–52, AT 8A:24–25. See also Nelson and Cunning 1999, 141–43.

⁵⁸ *Ethics*, Part IV, definitions three and four. See also Koistinen (2003).

⁵⁹ Note also that Kaufman (2005, p. 11, note 32) cites the *Passions of the Soul* II:146 passage in which Descartes says that providence is a ‘fate or immutable necessity,’ but he argues that because *Passions of the Soul* emerged out of Descartes’ correspondence with Elizabeth, and because Descartes speaks of providence as immutable to Elizabeth, he should not be read as speaking of providence as immutable necessity in *Passions of the Soul*, even though he refers to it as such.

⁶⁰ Kaufman (2005), 8.

could not enter into a person's mind without God's willing, and having willed from all eternity, that it should so enter.⁶¹

Commentators have cited this passage (along with others⁶²) as evidence for the view that Descartes has a compatibilist view of freedom.⁶³ Taken in isolation the passages do leave room for the Leibnizian (and quite non-libertarian) view that human actions are contingent in that they do not *have* to occur, even though once God puts us into existence we cannot do anything other than what He preordains that we will do. But that is not a kind of freedom that would allow us to avoid error at the moment that it is about to occur. If the passages are taken in the context of the larger systematic evidence that Descartes holds that will and intellect are identical in God and that there does not exist the possibility that God's will could have been otherwise for eternity, they entail that finite volitions are necessitated.⁶⁴ What we need is some evidence to the contrary.

Perhaps the reason why Kaufman is supposing that it is so obvious that Descartes takes the free actions of creatures to be contingent is that the Fourth Meditation reflects the view that God is not perfect if it is not possible for His creatures to avoid error.⁶⁵ Descartes' meditator certainly accepts a version of this view, and it is a view that will have to be addressed, but as we have seen Descartes' meditator expresses a lot of views in the *Meditations*, and in many cases these are not views that we

⁶¹ "To Princess Elizabeth, 6 October 1645," AT 4:314.

⁶² For example, in "To Princess Elizabeth, 3 November 1645" Descartes says that '[The] independence which we experience and feel in ourselves... is not incompatible with a dependence of quite another kind, whereby all things are subject to God' (AT 4:333). See also *Principles I*:40–41, AT 8A:20.

⁶³ Sleigh et al. (1998), 1208–12; Loeb (1981), 144–6.

⁶⁴ C. P. Ragland (2006) has argued that there are a number of texts in Descartes' corpus that cannot be read except as evidence that Descartes holds that human actions are contingent. As Ragland expresses the view, the passages entail that Descartes is committed to the principle that at the time of action human agents have a two-way power to do or not do. For example, Ragland cites Descartes' claim in *Principles I*:37 that "when embracing the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not do otherwise" (AT 8A:19; Ragland 2006, 389). But by itself such a text is evidence of hardly anything. A compatibilist will certainly allow that it is true it is possible for a person to "do otherwise," but what it is for that to be possible will be analyzed in compatibilist terms. For example, it is possible in the sense that if the person had different beliefs and desires the person would have chosen otherwise. To understand what a philosopher means in making the claim that it is possible for X to do otherwise, we need to read the figure systematically, but Ragland is assuming that in the *Principles I*:37 passage Descartes is not only saying that it is possible for us to do otherwise but that what it is for it to be possible for X to do otherwise is to have a two-way power. Another passage that Ragland (387) offers as evidence for the view that Descartes holds that human agents have a two-way power is from *Principles I*:40–1. There Descartes speaks to the difficulty of reconciling human freedom and divine preordination, and indeed Descartes would best be understood as a libertarian if he thought that the relevant tension was between God's preordination of all events and our two-way power to do or not do, but noteworthy is that what Descartes actually says (AT 8A:20–21) is that it is our *experience* of freedom and independence that is difficult to reconcile with divine preordination. See also Cunningham 2010, chapter five.

⁶⁵ AT 7:54–55. See also Walski 2003, 43.

should attribute to Descartes himself. Like all of the views of the *Meditations*, they are the views of Descartes' meditator as he engages in philosophical reflection from the first-person point-of-view on the way to becoming a full-blown Cartesian.⁶⁶ If the meditator engages in yet further reflection, some of which might take place after working through the *Meditations*, he will appreciate that God is a necessary existent who is simple and immutable and utterly independent, and the cause of all reality. The meditator will notice things that he was not in a position to recognize in the Fourth Meditation, even though the conceptual entailments were all sitting there and waiting to be seen:

Joining himself willingly entirely to God, he [a person who “meditates on these things and understands them properly”] loves him so perfectly that he desires nothing at all except that his will should be done. Henceforth, because he knows that nothing can befall him which God has not decreed, he no longer fears death, pain or disgrace. He so loves this divine decree, deems it so just and so necessary, and knows that he must be so completely subject to it that even when he expects it to bring death or some other evil, he would not will to change it even if, *per impossible*, he could do so. He does not eschew the permissible goods or pleasures he may enjoy in this life, since they too come from God. He accepts them with joy, without any fear of evils, and his love makes him perfectly happy.⁶⁷

[t]he first and chief of [the truths most useful to us] is that there is a God on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense and whose decrees are infallible. This teaches us to accept calmly all the things which happen to us as expressly sent by God. Moreover, since the true object of love is perfection, when we lift up our minds to consider him as he is, we find ourselves naturally so inclined to love him that we even rejoice in our afflictions at the thought that they are an expression of his will.⁶⁸

there is nothing to show that the present life is bad... [and that] True philosophy, on the contrary, teaches that even amid the saddest disasters and most bitter pains we can always be content, provided that we know how to use our reason.⁶⁹

Descartes is clear that death and afflictions are part of the immutable order, and error is not the end of the world either.⁷⁰ Certainly we have to engage in a lot of reflection to reach the point where we recognize all of this, clarifying and then refining our results each in terms of the other: “to reach such a point we have to be very philosophical indeed.”⁷¹ Thus we have Descartes’ final reconciliation of the problem of error – a reconciliation that would have made little sense to the Fourth Meditation meditator, and which Descartes very appropriately presents later on.⁷² The Fourth Meditation lays out the will-compelling reasons that help us to recognize that we will avoid error so long as we refrain from affirming what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive, but we do not need to have libertarian freedom to recognize the force of these reasons, and we certainly do not need to demonstrate

⁶⁶ See *Appendix to Fifth Replies*, AT 9A:208–9, and Cunning 2010, chapter one.

⁶⁷ “To Chanut, 1 February 1647,” AT 4:609.

⁶⁸ “To Princess Elizabeth, 15 September 1645,” AT 4:291–92.

⁶⁹ “To Princess Elizabeth, 6 October 1645,” AT 4:315.

⁷⁰ See also Cunning 2010, chapter five.

⁷¹ “To Clerselier, 2 March 1646,” AT 4:355.

⁷² Here I am borrowing from the language of Arnauld in *Fourth Objections*, AT 7:215–16.

(what is false) that it is inconsistent with the perfection of a divine being that all of our volitions are wholly dependent on His will. There is no worry that Descartes is ambivalent in his adherence to the new mechanistic science when we read his Second Meditation claims about colors and sounds and his Third Meditation claims about heat. We could attribute to him the concerns that launch the Fourth Meditation, even though the entirety of his metaphysical system insists that we should not; or else we could attribute those concerns to his fumbling meditator.

Given that Kaufman offers almost no evidence for the view that Descartes is not a necessitarian, one final speculation is that he is assuming that Descartes rejects necessitarianism as a matter of theological doctrine. However, Descartes actually says almost nothing about what he accepts as a matter of theological doctrine. When pressed, he makes every effort to avoid theological issues altogether. For example, the question of how an omni-benevolent God can damn people for eternity

is a theological question: so if you please you will allow me to say nothing about it.⁷³

What you say about the production of the *Word* does not conflict, I think, with what I say; but I do not want to involve myself in theology....⁷⁴

Descartes does say that if the deliverances of reason conflict with the deliverances of divine revelation, “we must still put our entire faith in divine authority rather than in our own judgement.”⁷⁵ However, he also holds that divine revelation and clear and distinct perception in fact never conflict and that, because clear and distinct perceptions are true, the claims of theology must be made to square with them.⁷⁶ If a given clear and distinct perception conflicts with a tenet of theology, we should take a second look at the tenet and attempt to reinterpret it:

The six days of the creation are indeed described in Genesis in such a way as to make man appear its principal object; but it could be said that the story in Genesis was written for man, and so it is chiefly the things which concern him that the Holy Spirit wished particularly to narrate, and that indeed he did not speak of anything except in its relationship to man.⁷⁷

If the reconciliation of philosophy and theology turns out to be too difficult, Descartes will affirm clear and distinct perceptions and leave the theology to someone else. But clear and distinct perceptions entail that God wills a single series for eternity and that there does not exist the possibility that God’s will could have been otherwise. Descartes may not go to great lengths to advertise this view, given his interest in avoiding theological controversy. But it his view, nonetheless.⁷⁸

⁷³ “To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630,” AT 1:153.

⁷⁴ “To Mersenne, 6 May 1630,” AT 1:150.

⁷⁵ *Principles* I:76, AT 8A:39.

⁷⁶ “Letter To Father Dinet,” AT 7:581, 598. See also *Appendix to Fifth Objections and Replies*, AT 9A:208.

⁷⁷ “To Chanut, 6 June 1647,” AT 5:54. See also Cunning 2010, chapter eight.

⁷⁸ Descartes might be even more a Spinozist than this. Annette Baier has pointed out (in conversation) that in the Sixth Meditation Descartes identifies God and nature, and that in the Fourth Meditaton he speaks of God has having an imagination (which would require that He is extended). In the Sixth Meditation Descartes writes, “For if nature is considered in its general aspect, then

There are a number of different interpretive options for making sense of Descartes' view that God has created necessary truths. One is to argue that because truths that could have been otherwise are not really necessary, Descartes does not think that the eternal truths are necessary. With Frankfurt, we might argue that all that Descartes means to say in claiming that eternal truths are necessary is that finite minds are constructed to regard them as necessary even though they are not.⁷⁹ Finite minds are wrong in their assessment that the eternal truths are necessary, but, as Frankfurt develops the view, a finite mind's certainty about something is just that – the certainty of a finite mind. It is not an indication of how things actually are from an objective point-of-view, and indeed for all we know there is a radical gap between what we are able to find completely certain and what is really true.⁸⁰ Frankfurt's view can handle all of the texts in which Descartes says that eternal truths are necessary, but it faces a host of problems. One is that the view is self-contradictory in that it supposes that there is one claim whose absolute truth we do recognize – namely that God is omnipotent in such a way that He can do anything, even the logically impossible. This claim generates Frankfurt's entire reading. Another (related) problem is that the view has to allow that it is false that human beings are compelled to see the eternal truths as necessary, because if the view is right our rational faculties in fact enable us to arrive at the result that they are not necessary at all. A third problem is that the view does not allow Descartes to be a systematic philosopher. It allows Descartes to hold that God is omnipotent, but it does not allow Descartes to make his understanding of omnipotence be systematically sensitive to his other systematic understandings of things like simplicity, immutability, and independence.⁸¹

A second way of attempting to make sense of Descartes' creation doctrine is to argue that God created the eternal truths as necessary, even though in His system there exists the possibility that He could have done otherwise.⁸² God freely created the eternal truths as necessary, end of story. A third way is to explain the necessity of Cartesian eternal truths in terms of divine immutability and the fact that Descartes' God is the author of all reality. In Descartes' system, God does not create the possibility that His will could have been otherwise, and so it is not possible that His will could have been otherwise. His will can only be as it in fact is. We thereby understand the necessity of the eternal truths, God's omnipotence and independence, and God's creation of all reality by a single immutable and eternal act. A distinction

I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God" (AT 7:80). In the Fourth Meditation he writes, "if I examine the faculties of memory or imagination, or any others, I discover that in my case each one of these faculties is weak and limited, while in the case of God it is immeasurable" (AT 7:56). There is also of course the famous passage in *Principles* I:51–52 where Descartes says that strictly speaking God is the only substance and that finite minds depend on Him for their existence (AT 8A:24–25). Baier will point out that that makes Cartesian creatures sound a lot like modifications.

⁷⁹ Frankfurt 1977, 44–46.

⁸⁰ Frankfurt 1997, 50–53.

⁸¹ See also Cunning 2010, chapter eight.

⁸² This is Kaufman's view, and also the view in Curley 1984, 569–597.

between God's actual will and alternative ways that His will could have been is "merely a token procedure of our own reasoning." But Kaufman says that "it is clear that," and that "certainly," Descartes holds that there are truths that are merely contingent and not necessary. He says that "what [Descartes] cannot systematically live with is the *necessity* of all things." Kaufman provides almost no evidence for this view. Indeed the only view that Descartes' actual system can absorb is that there does not exist the possibility that things could be other than they are. That does not mean that God's power is limited or that there are things that God cannot do. His power would be limited if there existed possibilities that He cannot actualize, but He does not create any possible reality.

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Part III

Neo-Classical Theism

Introduction to Neo-classical Theism

Kevin Timpe

Classical and Neo-classical Theism: What's So *Neo*?

It is obvious from the title that neo-classical models of the divine nature are described as such in reference to their departure from classical theism. But, as often happens with similar terms such as neo-conservative or neo-orthodox, it's not always completely obvious exactly what is supposed to be *new* about such views, as the Greek prefix suggests. I begin thus, as this volume as a whole does, with classical theism. I'll show how a number of models which get labeled neo-classical are attempts to be continuous, in at least one sense, with classical theism while introducing new ways of conceiving the divine nature which warrant calling them *neo*-classical models.

The exemplar of classical theism in the tradition of perfect being theology is Anselm's famous (or perhaps infamous) 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived.' In describing classical theism in this way, I mean for this description to include what is usually called 'perfect being theology'. However, for reasons that will become apparent below, there are reasons to prefer using the title 'classical theism' over 'perfect being theology' for our present purposes. For Anselm, as for the vast majority of the medievals, God is by definition the most perfect being. More specifically, he understands God to be a being which is 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' and, as such, must have certain perfections. We may also refer to these perfections as great-making attributes or properties. The exact list of these attributes varies somewhat, but it historically has included unity, self-sufficiency, immutability, atemporality, immateriality, perfect power, perfect knowledge, perfect goodness, and necessary existence. While there is debate about the extent of the great-making attributes, as well as the proper understanding of the

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attributes themselves, in describing God as ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’, one is predicating of God the entirety of the great-making attributes, whatever the exact list ultimately comes to. Furthermore, since God is not just great but ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’, He not only has these attributes, but has them to the highest possible degree.¹ That is why, on such views, God is not just potent but omnipotent.

Furthermore, according to classical models, God has these attributes in a very special way—He has them necessarily. The reason for this is as follows. It is better to have a great-making attribute necessarily than simply to have that attribute. So, if a being were perfect in knowledge but only accidentally or contingently so, then that being could have been more perfect. But, according to classical theism, such a being wouldn’t be God; God thus must necessarily have perfect knowledge. And so on with the other attributes. If these considerations are what characterize classical models of God most generally, then it may seem that what differentiates a *neo-classical* view is that it departs from perfect being theology so described. That is, it may seem as if neo-classical models of God are models which deny that God is a perfect being in some way or other. But to say this would be to misconstrue a number of views that fall under the neo-classical banner.

I shall give two reasons for resisting this characterization of neo-classical views. First, as Katherin Rogers notes,

To my knowledge it is the case that in all the debates between various conceptions of the nature of God, none of the participants argues for a God whom they judge to be *less* than the best. For example, the process theologians who argue against the traditional view that God is eternal and immutable hold that it is neither possible nor desirable that God should be so transcendent. God is best in virtue of being engaged with the created universe and capable of becoming better than He is. *That God is the best seems taken for granted. What that means is the subject of debate.*²

A few pages later, Rogers continues: “If it is the case … that the vast majority of philosophers who attempt to describe God take their own version of the divinity, whatever it may be, to be the best possible, then it could be argued that in a sense almost any philosopher who is talking about God is doing perfect being theology.”³ And though I have not conducted an exhaustive survey of philosophers of religion, Rogers’ point here seems correct.

So, rather than claiming that God is less than a perfect being, most scholars who offer neo-classical models of God want to affirm that God is in fact a perfect being. Where they differ from classical theists, however, is primarily in terms of *how* we

¹ This is, in one sense, loose speak; for as Thomas Williams indicates in his introduction to the previous section, classical theism has also traditionally embraced divine simplicity, according to which “God does not have a variety of features or attributes [including properties] that are distinct from God’s nature and from each other” (page ??, this volume). For ease of explication, however, I ignore this complication. For similar reasons, it is technically incorrect to speak of divine *attributes*, insofar as simplicity entails, for example, that God’s perfect power is identical with His perfect goodness. I ignore this complication as well.

² Rogers (2000), 2 (concluding italics added).

³ Ibid., 4.

should understand the nature of a perfect being. Neo-classical models of God claim that it is impossible for God to possess all of the great-making attributes to the highest degree in the way held by classical models. (And if this is so, it follows that it is impossible for God *necessarily* to possess all of the great-making attributes to the highest degree in this way.) Proponents of neo-classical models argue for this claim in a number of ways. One strategy is to argue that the great-making attributes are mutually inconsistent, so that a being who has one (or a set) of the great-making attributes is precluded from having another, or at least precluding from having the other to the highest degree.⁴ So, for example, one might argue that possessing perfect goodness precludes one from being able to do certain sorts of actions, namely evil actions, thereby contradicting perfect power. If this is so, then it is impossible for God to have all of the great-making attributes to the highest degree. Instead, such theorists claim, God has all of the great-making attributes to the degree that is maximally mutually consistent. (I shall return to an recent example of such a view shortly.) For this reason, it is better to speak of classical and neo-classical models of God as differing according to *how* they understand the divine nature vis-à-vis perfections, rather than to say that only classical models are versions of perfect being theology.

There is second set of related considerations which also favor rejecting the implicit claim that neo-classical models of God are those according to which God is less than perfect. Consider whether the term ‘God’ is taken as a proper name or as a definite description. The latter approach tends to be more common in philosophical theology, especially among classical theists. If, following Anselm again as our exemplar of a classical model, one thinks that what it means to have the title ‘God’ properly ascribed to a being is just for that being to satisfy the description ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’, then on this approach any being which could be thought to be greater would fail, by definition, to be God. Thus, if ‘God’ is understood as a definite description in the way that Anselm seems to understand it, neo-classical models of the divine nature simply fail to be *about God*. But the debate between a classical theist and a neo-classical theist are arguably not to be understood as an argument about which of two purported beings exists, but rather about how to properly understand the nature of one and the same being—a point which many classical theists, such as Rogers, are willing to admit:

If one party to the discussion of a particular attribute holds that the views of the other party are demeaning to God, then the one who takes ‘God’ to be a description may say that what the opposition has called ‘God’ is not really God at all, whereas the one who takes ‘God’ to be a proper name may say that the opposition has offered a picture of God which is entirely at odds with the reality.⁵

Thus, following William Alston, it would perhaps be better for us to take ‘God’ to be a proper name rather than a definite description. He thinks that there at least two practical advantages of doing so:

First, the primacy of direct reference provides a reassurance that God can be successfully referred to by the weak and foolish as well as by the wise and proud.... Second, the prospects

⁴For examples of such arguments and references to others, see Nagasawa (2008), 581f.

⁵Rogers (2000), 5.

for taking radically different religious traditions to all be referring to and worshiping the same God are greatly increased.⁶

Unlike Alston, it's not clear to me that having all religious traditions use 'God' to refer to the same being really is a benefit. But insofar as the primary debate between proponents of classical and neo-classical models of God is about the nature of God, it is a benefit if the term used for the object whose nature is contested is available to both parties in the debate. But if 'God' is taken to be a proper name rather than a definite description, thereby preserving the debate about how the divine nature should be understood, then it doesn't immediately follow that neo-classical views are those which deny that God's nature is perfect. They simply call for a different understanding of what divine perfection amounts to.

A Parallel

At this point it may be helpful to consider a different theological disagreement which is parallel in some important ways.⁷ The parallel I have in mind is the distinction between orthodox and heterodox views in theology. Please note that I am not equating classical theism with orthodoxy and neo-classical theism with heterodoxy; rather, I'm simply suggesting that an understanding of the developmental issues with respect to the orthodox/heterodoxy distinction can help us understand how neo-classical forms of theism develop from classical forms. In this discussion, I'll focus specifically on Christian theology, and for two reasons. First, it is the theological tradition with which I am the most familiar. Second, the overwhelming majority of contemporary philosophy of religion has been done either from within or engaging Christian theology. While I suspect that other theological traditions have similar developmental issues, these two facts give me good reason for limiting my discussion to Christian theology. More specifically, I'll focus on one particular controversy within the history of Christian theology, namely the Arian controversy of the fourth century.⁸

As Rowan Williams notes in his excellent book on the controversy, “‘Arianism’ has often been regarded as the archetypal Christian deviation, something aimed at the very heart of the Christian confession.... Arius himself came more and more to be regarded as a kind of Antichrist among heretics, a man whose superficial austerity and spirituality cloaked a diabolical malice, a deliberate enmity to revealed

⁶ Alston (1989), 115.

⁷ Of course, the two cases are not parallel in all ways.

⁸ There are numerous other examples. To mention just one other, the theologians Bernard of Clairvaux, Alexander of Hales, and Bonaventure (among others) were not heterodox despite rejecting the immaculate conception of Mary for the simple reason that the immaculate conception was not dogmatized until 8 December, 1854 by Pope Pius IX. For an insightful discussion of these issues, see Adams (2010).

faith.”⁹ Though common, such a portrait is historically false. While it is true that “‘Arianism’ was that which ‘Catholicism’ rejected or left behind,”¹⁰ Arius neither set out to undermine orthodox Christian theology nor (at least early in his career) was he at odds with official orthodoxy. Regarding the first point, Arius and his followers considered themselves to be orthodox. Indeed, it was his desire to give an acceptable account of true Christian belief which led Arius to deny that the Son was coeternal with the Father. Regarding the second point, which is the more important for our present purposes, until the first council of Nicaea, Arius’ understanding of the divine nature had not yet been found wanting in an authoritative and binding way. As Williams’ discussion clearly shows, it is important to keep in mind that until the council both “‘Arian’ and ‘Catholic’ were coeval as Christians engaged in the definition of the very idea of normative faith.”¹¹ It is not the case that the boundaries of what counted as orthodox theology were firmly and clearly drawn in advance of the council; the council instead drew boundaries that were not previously there. Again, to quote Williams: “Before Constantine, the Church was simply not in a position to make universally binding and enforceable decisions. From Nicaea onwards the Church decided, and communicated its decisions, though the official network of the empire; it had become visible to *itself*, as well as to the world, in a new way.”¹² On one level, the council of Nicaea is the Christian Church deciding what was to count in the future as orthodox. But it would be inappropriate to hold those prior to the council to a standard that came into existence only as a result of the council.¹³ And it should be kept in mind that all the major parties involved in the Christological debates leading up to Nicaea were attempting to offer orthodox theologies; that is, both sides had the same goal in mind. The question was *how* to give such an account.

Vague Boundaries

Likewise, proponents of both classical and neo-classical theisms are trying to give an account of the divine nature that preserve the central elements of perfect being theology. Some forms of what otherwise can be considered neo-classical theism have become well enough established, at least in their broad contours, that they have

⁹ Williams (2001), 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Ibid., 24. As Lewis Ayres and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz similarly write, “the emergence of orthodoxy after the second century involved not the fighting off of ‘heresies’ that threatened the apostolic faith, but in many significant cases the overturning and labeling as heresy of previously accepted beliefs,” Ayres and Radde-Gallwitz (2008), 865.

¹² Williams (2001), 90. See also 234ff.

¹³ My general point is reinforced even more by remembering fourth-century Arian emperor Valens, who decreed that Arian theology was orthodoxy and the Nicene theology was heretical. Arian was again declared heterodox at the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

come to be seen as models in their own right. Examples here include process and open models, which are treated separately elsewhere in this volume. Bringing the previous discussions together, I propose that we understand neo-classical models of God to be that family of models which (a) deny that it is possible for God to possess all of the great-making attributes, as traditionally understood, to the highest degree, but are instead in nearby possible space, and (b) aren't sufficiently well-defined at present to be considered standalone models in their own right.¹⁴ Given condition (b), forms of process theism and open theism are sufficiently well-defined that they are not taken to be neo-classical in the sense at issue here. Condition (a) is, of course, vague insofar as it doesn't specify how much a model needs to depart from the Anselmian exemplar of classical theism. But this too seems right, as the degree to which a view is neo-classical as opposed to classical will likely be one of degree, rather than one of kind; thus for some views it will be vague as to whether they are classical or neo-classical. So the term 'neo-classical models', as with the related term 'classical models', will refer to a family resemblance class, rather than a class with completely sharp and defined boundaries.

An excellent exemplar of neo-classical theism, so understood, can be found in a recent paper by Yujin Nagasawa.¹⁵ In his "A New Defense of Anselmian Theism," Nagasawa aims to defend a new view of God which he says is broadly Anselmian in orientation—that is, a species of perfect being theology. Commenting on the title he notes (rightly in my view): "I do not, however, imply by the use of the term that Anselmian theism is entirely compatible with everything that Anselm himself says. It might well be the case that, ultimately, the version of theism that I defend is not something that Anselm would endorse."¹⁶ At the heart of his article is the denial of one way of understanding the divine nature—a way that is a typical example of a classical model—and its replacement with a different, neo-classical modal. The understanding of the divine nature that Nagasawa says the perfect being theist need not accept is exemplified by what he calls the 'OmniGod Thesis', according to which God is necessarily omniperfect—that is, necessarily omnipotent, necessarily omniscient, and necessarily omnibenevolent.¹⁷ In its place, he advocates for the 'MaximalGod Thesis', according to which "God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence."¹⁸ Nagasawa argues that

¹⁴The term 'neo-classical theism' is often affiliated with the work of Charles Hartshorne, who once said that "Classical theism is for me false a priori, a tragic error" (1982, 17). My use of the term 'neo-classical' differs from Hartshorne's for reasons spelled out in the above paragraph.

¹⁵Another similar discussion can be found in Oppy (2011). The reader should note, however, that Oppy criticizes Nagasawa's neo-classical model in the final section of his paper.

¹⁶Nagasawa (2008), 578f.

¹⁷Ibid., 579. He continues: "the thesis does not imply that these are God's only attributes or even that they are all of his main attributes. Indeed, most proponents of the omniGod thesis think that God has many other important attributes, such as independence, timelessness, incorporeality, immutability, omnipresence, and so on. In this paper I set aside these attributes for the sake of simplicity" (*ibid.*).

¹⁸Ibid., 586.

“Although the MaximalGod thesis is consistent with the OmniGod thesis, it does not imply that God is unquestionably an omniperfect being.”¹⁹ His argument that the truth of the MaximalGod Thesis does not entail the truth of the OmniGod Thesis need not concern us here. What is important for present purposes is how the MaximalGod Thesis that Nagasawa endorses illustrates a neo-classical model of the divine nature. For God, on this view, is still a perfect being despite not being necessarily omniperfect; he is perfect because he necessarily has the maximally consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence.

Four Neo-classical Arguments

The four papers in this section all deal with motivating and defending neo-classical models of the divine nature, as defined above. The section opens with John Allan Knight’s “Descriptivist Reference and the Return of Classical Theism.” Knight begins by discussing the recent history of philosophical theology, and the parting of ways between analytic philosophers and theologians which happened during the 1950s and 1960s. While the turning away of theologians from analytic philosophy is often described as a result of the dominance of the Logical Positivists—more specifically the falsification criterion of meaning and their views on the meaningless of religious language—Knight argues that the real culprit was the underlying descriptivist view of reference which persisted even after the demise of Positivism. After laying out the broad contours of descriptivist views of reference, Knight shows how such a view underlies Anthony Flew’s influential account of religious language. Whereas many philosophers of religion sought to meet Flew’s objections head on (and soon came to reject the Positivist assumptions upon which it rests), many theologians turned instead to liberation theology which provided a different way of thinking about religious language. While there was merit to this change, it also means that many theologians are unfamiliar with the radical change that philosophy of religion—and analytic metaphysics more generally—underwent since the 1970s. Knight shows how Saul Kripke’s contributions to modal logic and possible world semantics played a key role in this change, as did his rejection of descriptivist theories of language. Knight ends by describing how one influential contemporary philosopher of religion, William Alston, used Kripke’s rejection of descriptivism to advance a revisionary interpretation of traditional Christian theological claims. While Knight doesn’t claim that Alston offers a neo-classical model, he does show how the changes in the ethos of analytic philosophy of religion opened up the space in which neo-classical models have come to flourish.

Klaas J. Kraay’s “Divine Unsurpassability” more directly argues for the need for a neo-classical model of God. Rather than being lead in a neo-classical direction by *a posteriori* considerations of the problem of evil (as is Nagasawa), Kraay is

¹⁹ Ibid., 587.

motivated primarily by an *a priori* argument against classical models of God. According to an influential argument defended by a number of philosophers, but most notably by William Rowe,²⁰ a classical model of God's nature cannot be correct. This argument begins with the rejection that there is a best possible world (or equally best set of worlds). According to the 'No Best World' assumption:

For every world w that is within God's power to actualize, there is a better world, x , that God has the power to actualize instead.

Rowe and others use the 'No Best World' assumption to argue against the existence of God as follows:

- (P1) If it is possible for the product of a world-actualizing action performed by some being to have been better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is possible for that being's action to have been better.
- (P2) If it is possible for the world-actualizing action performed by some being to have been better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is possible for that being to have been better.
- (C) Therefore, if the 'No Best World' assumption is true, then there does not exist a being 'than which nothing greater can be conceived'.²¹

Kraay mentions a number of ways in which the proponent of a classical model of God could respond to this argument. First, one could reject the 'No Best World' assumption; but if that move is to preserve a classical model of God, one is committed to the counterintuitive Leibnizian claim that the actual world is the best possible world. A second line of response is to argue that the conclusion that God exists, understood along is classical model, is more reasonable than either (P1) or (P2). The difficulties here, however, are well known. The most natural response is then either to argue against either (P1) or (P2). Kraay outlines a number of such arguments and finds none of them convincing. But, even if the 'No Best World' argument succeeds, it doesn't disprove theism, but only theism understood along a classical model. The argument can be seen as showing the need for a neo-classical conception of God.

The first two articles in this section thus provide motivation for neo-classical models of God, versions of which are advanced in the remaining articles in this section. Yujin Nagasawa's "The MaximalGod and the Problem of Evil" extends his earlier neo-classical approach, described above. After briefly outlining his reasons for preferring the MaximalGod Thesis to the OmniGod Thesis, he shows how this model can deflect the problem of evil. (Nagasawa focuses here only on the logical problem of evil, but his discussion also provides a general understanding of how he'd respond to the evidential version of the problem of evil as well.) Rather than arguing against the soundness of the logical problem of evil, as most classical philosophers of religion like Alvin Plantinga do, Nagasawa argues that even if it is

²⁰ See, most fully, Rowe (2004).

²¹ Technically, the argument does not need the 'No Best World' assumption to be actually true, but only possibly true to refute the classical Anselmian model of God which it targets. However, this need not concern us at present.

sound, the logical problem of evil does not establish the non-existence of a perfect being. The most that it does establish is that God is not an omniperfect being; but this leaves untouched the MaximalGod Thesis. Nagasawa then differentiates his approach from other responses to the problem of evil which deny that God is a perfect being by, for example, abandoning either omnipotence or omnibenevolence. In contrast, the MaximalGod response leaves it an open question whether or not God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent once these attributes are understood neo-classically. Such a response is advantageous to the perfect being theist insofar as it allows one to resolve the problem of evil without committing oneself to specific intensities of divine power and goodness. Nagasawa's essay concludes by showing how the viability of responses to the problem of evil which do give up omnipotence or omnibenevolence also support neo-classical replies based on the MaximalGod Thesis.

The final reading in this section, Daniel Dombrowski's "Infinity, the Neo-classical Concept of God, and Oppy," explores the relationship between finitude and infinitude in our understanding of the divine nature, an issue that is at the heart of the classical/neo-classical distinction. While Dombrowski's own understanding of God's nature is informed by process theology (treated more fully in the next section of this volume), the considerations he raises in this article primarily motivate the need to revise the classical model of God, thus opening the way for either a neo-classical or process model. (It also reinforces the point made earlier that the boundaries of neo-classical models are vague.) Via a discussion of Zeno's paradoxes and Kant's first antinomy, Dombrowski argues that issues related to infinity are significantly more problematic than many philosophers, including many philosophers of religion, realize. He also thinks that classical models have overemphasized the role the infinite plays in a proper understanding of God's nature. However, insofar as the infinite plays a more restricted role in neoclassical theism than it does in classical theism, the problems arising from infinity do not plague all models of God equally. God, Dombrowski claims, should not be understood as the maximally infinite in the way that classical models typically presuppose.²²

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Descriptivist Reference and the Return of Classical Theism

John Allan Knight

For several decades, analytic philosophers of religion have published works in traditional areas of theology in steadily increasing numbers—numbers now sufficient to constitute a new academic subdiscipline, “analytic theology,” following the name of a recent collection of essays (Crisp and Rea 2009; see also Wood 2009). This situation is curious, since many of the contributors to the new analytic theology are, by training and institutional setting, analytic philosophers. Not long ago, relations between Christian theology and analytic philosophy were best characterized as adversarial, and many theologians considered analytic philosophy to be at best irrelevant, and at worst hostile to Christian theology (Wolterstorff 2009, esp. pp. 155–157). How could the situation have changed so radically and so quickly? In this essay I suggest theologians turned their attention away from analytic philosophy around 1970, with the advent of liberation theology. By that time, the falsification controversy had led many theologians to conclude that further engagement with analytic philosophy was unlikely to bear fruit. This controversy focused on theological language—specifically, whether language about God could be meaningful. What caused so much difficulty in this controversy was the descriptivist approach to language (both the reference of names and other referring expressions and the meaning of words and sentences). Yet descriptivism’s dominance began to crumble just when theologians turned away from a dialogue with analytic philosophy. Most, therefore, missed the possibilities opened up by its decline. As theologians moved on to other pressing issues, philosophers of religion took up traditional topics in philosophical theology. One of the things that allowed them to do this was the decline of descriptivism’s dominance. So first I will briefly recall the falsification controversy; then I’ll mention theologians’ turn to liberation theology; finally, I’ll briefly discuss the demise of descriptivist reference in order to suggest

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its influence on the revival of classical theism under the new moniker, “analytic theology.”¹

Critics of western theistic religion had, of course, been publishing critiques long before the falsification theorists. But falsification theorists such as Antony Flew sought a more thoroughgoing critique. They argued that claims about God could not be assigned any meaning at all, because there was no way to identify the referent of the term “God.” And because the referent of God remained indeterminate, statements about God remained strictly meaningless. Many theologians and philosophers of religion saw the falsification challenge as a straightforward application of the falsifiability principle to theological or religious statements. Their responses, therefore, tended either to criticize the falsifiability principle, to argue that religious or theological statements were not straightforward assertions of fact, or to analyze theological and religious language from the point of view of the later Wittgenstein. But the challenge posed by falsification theorists ultimately relied less on the falsifiability thesis of logical positivism than on the descriptivist requirements specified by Bertrand Russell for successful reference. Russell’s analysis of reference was certainly assumed by positivists, but its influence persisted after the demise of the falsifiability thesis (at least as a universal criterion of linguistic meaning). And Russell’s view of language (which included his descriptivist theory of reference) remained dominant long after the demise of logical positivism as a viable philosophical project. In my view, the dominance of descriptivist reference contributed significantly to the feeling among many theologians that continued engagement with analytic philosophy was unlikely to be fruitful. Understandably, most turned their attention elsewhere. Yet this shift in attention occurred just as descriptivist reference began to lose its dominant place among analytic philosophers of language.

Space prevents a full discussion of the semantic project of Russell. Instead, I will repeat Scott Soames’s excellent summary of the descriptivist understanding of language that was dominant until about 1970. Then I will describe Russell’s two further epistemological commitments that, together with the descriptivist project, made analytic philosophers seem unlikely collaborators to theologians in the 1960s and 1970s. Descriptivist reference was part of what Soames calls the “reigning

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff has argued that analytic philosophers’ widespread surrender of severe Kantian limits on what can rationally be thought and asserted is what allowed them to take up traditional topics in philosophical theology. Theologians, meanwhile, remained under Kant’s yoke (Wolterstorff 2009). I don’t wish to dispute Wolterstorff’s account, because I take what he says about Kant and his impact on theology to be largely correct. But in my view Wolterstorff underemphasizes the importance of the falsification controversy and the descriptivism that the falsification theorists assumed. Wolterstorff does not discuss the falsification controversy itself, but he does discuss the positivist criterion of meaning and the notion of empirical verifiability (later falsifiability) crucial to it. He notes that the downfall of positivism removed “a formidable obstacle to the development of philosophical theology” (Wolterstorff 2009, p. 157). These were indeed assumed by the falsification theorists, but, as I shall suggest here, descriptivist reference and its demise, which Wolterstorff does not discuss, was equally important.

conception of language” prior to 1970, and Soames describes its four central presuppositions as follows:

- (i) The meaning of an expression is never identical with its referent. Rather, the meaning of a substantive, nonlogical term is a descriptive sense that provides necessary and sufficient conditions for determining its reference. For example, the meaning of a singular term is a descriptive condition satisfaction of which by an object is necessary and sufficient for the term to refer to the object, whereas the meaning of a predicate is a descriptive condition satisfaction of which by an object is necessary and sufficient for the predicate to be true of the object.
- (ii) Understanding a term amounts to associating it with the correct descriptive sense. In the case of ordinary predicates in the common language, all speakers who understand them associate essentially the same sense with them. This is also true for some widely used ordinary proper names—such as *London*. However, for many proper names of less widely known individuals, the defining descriptive information, and hence the meaning associated with the name can be expected to vary from speaker to speaker.
- (iii) Since the meaning of a word, as used by a speaker, is completely determined by the descriptive sense that the speaker mentally associated with it, meaning is transparent. If two words mean the same thing, then anyone who understands both should easily be able to figure that out by consulting the sense that he or she associates with them.
- (iv) Further, since the meaning of a word, as used by a speaker, is completely determined by the descriptive sense that he or she mentally associates with it, the meaning of a word in the speaker’s language is entirely dependent on factors internal to the speaker. The same is true for the beliefs that the speaker uses the word to express. External factors—like the speaker’s relation to the environment, and to the community of other speakers—are relevant only insofar as they causally influence the factors internal to the speaker that determine the contents of his or her beliefs (Soames 2005, pp. 1–2).

This descriptivist view of language was well established by the time the falsification controversy broke out in the middle of the century,² and it posed significant difficulties for theologians seeking philosophical defenses of their theological positions. Compounding the problem was the related role played by descriptions in Russell’s account of knowledge. The combination of his accounts of language and knowledge formed a unified program that made the theological situation urgent in the middle of the century.

²By 1950, Strawson and other ordinary language philosophers, under the influence of Wittgenstein’s intermediate and later thought, had begun to challenge Russell’s views. By 1970, other philosophers, such as Donald Davidson, Keith Donnellan, Michael Dummett, Peter Geach, Paul Grice, David Kaplan, Saul Kripke, Ruth Barcan Marcus, Hilary Putnam, W.V.O. Quine, and others, were raising challenges from other quarters. Nonetheless, descriptivism remained the dominant view prior to 1970.

For Russell, the basic epistemological concept is that of “acquaintance,” which is a momentary qualitative experience of sense data. To stand in a relationship of acquaintance is to stand in a *non-propositional, immediate relation* to an object.³ “Object” here does not include physical objects, but it is not strictly limited to sense data.⁴ Acquaintance is immediate knowledge—not mediated by a description or by any other conceptual apparatus. Because it is immediate, it is not through acquaintance that we know any other physical object. Acquaintance thus stands in contrast to the second basic epistemological relation, that of description. “We have descriptive knowledge of an object when we know that it is the object having some property or properties with which we are acquainted; that is to say, when we know that the property or properties in question *belong to one object and no more*, we are said to have knowledge of that one object by description, whether or not we are acquainted with the object” (Russell 1910–1911, p. 127, emphasis added). Obviously, for most of the important things we know, our knowledge is by description,⁵ and Russell therefore held that “common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions” (Russell 1910–1911, p. 114).

Russell’s view clearly spells trouble for the knowledge of God. If we can know only some universals, sense data, and possibly ourselves by acquaintance, then insofar as we can know anything of other beings, it can only be by description. And this applies *a fortiori* to God, who (at least usually), incites no sense data at all. More importantly, even to have descriptive knowledge of God, we must be able to specify one or more properties, with which we are acquainted, that belong *only* to God. Russell imposes a twofold requirement, therefore, on anyone who purports to have knowledge of God: first, there must be some property or properties that are unique to God, and, second, the alleged knower must have knowledge of that property or those properties by acquaintance. At least at first glance, this would seem to rule out properties such as omnipotence, of which knowledge by acquaintance is hard to come by.

Further, in order to *refer* successfully to some object or being, we have to have some knowledge of the object to which we are attempting to refer. And, since we can know other beings only by description, in order even to refer successfully to God, we will have to satisfy Russell’s two requirements for descriptive knowledge. This will mean that we must have knowledge of some descriptive condition that is both necessary and sufficient to pick out God as the unique referent of the term “God.”

For Antony Flew, these descriptivist requirements meant that reference to God could not succeed. To make his point, he adapts John Wisdom’s story of a Believer and a Sceptic, who happen upon a garden in the middle of a woods. The Believer

³ “I say that I am *acquainted* with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, that is when I am directly aware of the object itself. When I speak of a cognitive relation here, I do not mean the sort of relation which constitutes judgement, but the sort which constitutes presentation” (Russell 1910–1911, pp. 108–28).

⁴ “We have acquaintance with sense-data, with many universals, and possibly with ourselves, but not with physical objects or other minds” (Russell 1910–1911, p. 126).

⁵ “Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions. That is to say, the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description” (Russell 1910–1911, p. 114).

thinks a gardener must tend the garden; the Sceptic does not. In Flew's adaptation, the two friends undertake further empirical investigation using bloodhounds, electric fences, etc., but there is no direct sign of the gardener.

Yet still the believer is not convinced. 'But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.' At last the Sceptic despairs, 'But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?' (Flew 1955, p. 96).

This parable is illuminating, Flew argues, because it is typical of theological utterance: a Believer, he says, will not allow any fact that the friends are able to observe to count against his belief that a gardener exists. But just this feature, Flew concludes, means that the Believer's putative assertion that an invisible gardener tends the garden is really no assertion at all.⁶

Flew conflates two distinct issues here—verification (or falsification) and reference. It's one thing to argue that whatever one says about God can't be verified (or falsified) and thus shouldn't be believed; it's another to argue that a putative reference to God can't succeed.⁷ But for Flew, if an assertion cannot be falsified, then it does not really assert anything and is strictly meaningless.⁸ Flew argues that statements about God are much like the Believer's statement about the invisible gardener. Theological utterances, he says, may seem like assertions, but since the theist won't allow any empirical observation to count decisively against them, such putative assertions are not really assertions at all, but are meaningless.

What allows Flew to conflate these two issues is descriptivism—which includes theories both of meaning and of reference. When Flew argues that theistic statements don't count as assertions because the people who make them don't allow anything to count against them, what he's saying is that they fail to fulfill the descriptivist requirements for meaningful language use. His argument actually makes two claims, it seems to me. First (to adapt his language about the gardener), when he argues that theists can't distinguish God from an imaginary god or no god at all, he's saying that theistic claims do not set out any descriptive condition that will allow us to determine that "God" refers to God and not to anything else, such as an imaginary god.

Second, Flew is arguing that, even if reference to God could be established, theistic claims do not set out necessary and sufficient conditions that will allow us

⁶ As Flew puts it, "if there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not really an assertion" (Flew 1955, p. 98).

⁷ Notice that Flew makes a subtle assumption that the Believer is unlikely to share—namely, that if there is no *observable state of affairs* that *p* denies, then there is no *state of affairs at all* that *p* denies. But whatever the Believer may assert about the gardener being invisible, etc., surely there is at least one state of affairs that the Believer denies—namely, *that there is no gardener*.

⁸ Here, of course, Flew is following the verificationist (later falsifiability) theory of meaning developed by logical positivists. As a theory of meaning, it fell out of favor even among most positivists. More can be said about verificationism, of course, and it should be kept distinct from descriptivist reference. But I do think that they work together to some extent in Flew's usage. I try to indicate this in what follows.

to test whether the claim is true or not. This, I think, is the point Flew is trying to make in the following example:

Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children.... But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic ... but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made—God's love is ... “an inscrutable love”, perhaps.... But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God's (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say “God does not love us” or even “God does not exist”? (Flew 1955, pp. 98–99).

There are at least two ways to interpret what Flew is saying here. Flew might have used the example to argue against the reasonableness of the belief that God loves us. On this interpretation, the lack of empirical evidence of God's concern deprives the belief in God's love of (at least some of) its epistemic justification. But this is not the way Flew uses the example. In Flew's usage, the example suggests that the qualifications made to the statement that God loves us have eroded the statement to the point “that it was no longer an assertion at all” (Flew 1955, p. 98). If it is no longer an assertion, that is because it can't be assigned a meaning. And the reason that Flew thinks the statement lacks meaning is that it does not describe a set of conditions that must be satisfied for the statement to be a true one.⁹

In the later 1950s and 1960s, a number of prominent theologians and philosophers took the falsification challenge to be very serious. Many major theological journals, as well as journals devoted to philosophical theology or philosophy of religion, published essays regarding the controversy (see, e.g., Evans 1971; Hick 1960; High 1972; Howe 1971; Mavrodes 1964; McKinnon 1966; Ogden 1968; Smith 1967; Winston 1963; Wainwright 1966). Prominent theologians and philosophers of religion either addressed Flew's challenge directly or discussed the most prominent responses (see., e.g., Burkle 1964; Copleston 1967; Hick 1960; McKinnon 1970; Nielsen 1963; Ogden 1968, 1974; Torrance 1972; Wernham 1967). Seminary journals published articles discussing the controversy directly or reviewing books by the participants (see., e.g., Allen 1971; Cotton 1969; Miller 1971; Wilburn 1969). Several leading journals devoted entire issues to the controversy,¹⁰ and a number of books appeared collecting essays relating to the controversy (see, e.g., Ayers and Blackstone 1972; Mitchell 1971; Ramsey 1971; Santoni 1968). Monographs appeared as well (e.g., McKinnon 1970; Ramsey 1974), and clergy and members of religious orders weighed in on the controversy, as well as scholars (e.g., Atkins 1966; King-Farlow and Christensen 1971; Trever 1963).

⁹ Flew challenges his interlocutors to set out such conditions: “I therefore put to the succeeding symposiasts the simple central questions, ‘What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?’” (Flew 1955, p. 99).

¹⁰ *Religious Studies* and *Religion in Life* published issues focused primarily on the falsification controversy. *Church Quarterly Review* and the *Canadian Journal of Theology* both published a number of articles throughout the mid-1960s on the controversy (for representative articles, see McPherson 1969; Ferré 1963; Ross 1963; Nielsen 1965).

Responses by liberal theologians tended to be a version of one of two sorts. The first sort can be characterized as generally noncognitive, arguing that religious or theological utterances are never straightforward assertions, though they may often seem to be. Instead, they are to be understood symbolically, or as expressions of an intention to follow a certain way of life, or as expressions of an internalized spiritual principle. R.M. Hare, for example, famously argued that religious statements are expressions of our “*bliks*,” or fundamental attitudes toward the world (Hare 1955). The second sort of response can be characterized as generally cognitive, arguing that some religious or theological utterances are indeed straightforward (and meaningful) assertions. Some argued that theological assertions could in principle be falsified, but that in fact they have not been (or at any rate not all of them). John Hick, for example, argued that statements about God could indeed be falsified or verified, but only after we die (Hick 1957, 1960). Others argued that such assertions are meaningful because there are things that count as evidence against them, despite their invulnerability to *conclusive* empirical falsification. Basil Mitchell, for example, acknowledged that evil counts as evidence against the truth of the assertion that God exists and is omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent. Thus, such an assertion is meaningful as an assertion even though a theist may not be disposed to allow evil or suffering to count as decisive evidence against it (Mitchell 1955). Still others argued that God’s necessary existence, derived from a transcendental analysis of human experience, met all the descriptivist requirements for successful reference.¹¹ Yet none of these responses challenged Flew on a crucial fundamental supposition—namely, that the descriptivist understanding of language was correct. Liberal theology, that is, assumed that if religious or theological assertions are to be meaningful, they must meet descriptivist requirements.

On the other hand, some followed the later Wittgenstein, arguing that sentences acquire their meaning purely through their use in a language game. For these writers, insisting on a theory of reference was not only unnecessary, but a fundamental theological and philosophical mistake (e.g., Holmer 1978; Phillips 1970, 1971). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, then, apparently unaware of critics of the reigning descriptivism, theologians who took seriously the challenge of showing how religious language could be meaningful were faced with two options. They could follow descriptivist theorists and argue that theological assertions met descriptivist requirements either because the “true” referent of such assertions was not a transcendent being, but something else (the antirealist option) or because of some other, more “realist” argument. The second option was to follow Wittgenstein (as postliberals were ultimately to do), but at the time most saw this option as another version of antirealism.

At the time, neither of these options was appealing. The time was therefore ripe for a new perspective on language, and this is what liberation theologians provided. For them, the most important questions regarding language concerned its role in ideological distortions that oppress the poor and powerless and support the privileged

¹¹ This is one way to read Schubert Ogden’s title essay in Ogden (1966).

position of the dominant classes. Their writings burst onto the theological scene before theologians became familiar with critics of descriptivism such as Kripke. James Cone published *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969 and *A Black Theology of Liberation* a year later in 1970 (Cone 1969, 1990). The next year, 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez published *Teología de la liberación, Perspectivas* in Peru, and its English translation appeared 2 years later, in 1973 (Gutiérrez 1973). The important demands of liberation theology served to shift attention away from philosophical discussions of religious language and fed a growing tendency to view analytic philosophy as unhelpful to theology. By the early to mid-1970s, the attention of North American theologians was turning to the urgent pleas of liberation theologians, and the conversations between theologians and analytic philosophers grew less frequent and less urgent.¹²

It's too simplistic, of course, to say simply that theologians turned their attention elsewhere. The number of publications discussing the falsification controversy in particular and religious language more generally waned significantly in the 1970s. But those theologians who had been discussing the issue didn't simply stop thinking about it. Instead, as a result of the work of thinkers like Ian Ramsey and Frederick Ferré, it became clear that large parts of natural languages are used to do things other than make assertions about the world. This in turn led to discussions not only about the nature of religious language, but about the nature and task of theology itself.

Schubert Ogden illustrates the point nicely.¹³ He was significantly involved in the falsification debates in the 1960s and early to mid-1970s. Among other things, he published article-length reviews of Flew's *God and Philosophy* and Alastair MacKinnon's influential *Falsification and Belief*, and a critique of D.Z. Phillips's Wittgensteinian approach to religious language (Ogden 1968, 1974, 1975, 1977). His criticisms of Flew, however, did not address descriptivist understandings of language, and by the late 1970s he was no longer addressing such problems.¹⁴ Instead, by the late 1970s, he was addressing, *inter alia*, problems raised by liberation theologians (Ogden 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982). Ogden was not alone in

¹²There is, of course a fuller historical story to tell that would include much more than disenchantment with analytic philosophy and the appearance of liberation theology. Sociological factors were also at work, as were other impulses within theology, including neo-orthodoxy, demythologization, the “death of God” and others. Further, the sketch provided in the text reflects primarily a North American perspective. Theological engagements with both analytic philosophy and liberation theology varied significantly in British, French, German, and other contexts.

¹³David Tracy provides another example of the migration of theological discussion away from the concerns of analytic philosophers. Published in 1975, his influential *Blessed Rage for Order* contained a substantial discussion and analysis of the falsification controversy. Most helpful for Tracy is the work of Ian Ramsey and Frederick Ferré (see, e.g., Ferré 1961, 1963, 1968, 1969; Ramsey 1964, 1965, 1971, 1974). These works are all cited in Tracy (1975), p. 136 n.3. Rather than challenging the descriptivism that underlies the falsification challenge, Ramsey and Ferré provide Tracy with the theoretical resources to argue that religious language responds to a certain kind of situation. Namely, it is “limit-language” that describes “limit-experiences,” which are qualitatively different than empirical experiences (Tracy 1975, pp. 123–24, 146–56).

¹⁴Ogden's later writings on language involved his criticism of Charles Hartshorne over literal and analogical divine predication (Ogden 1984).

this, either.¹⁵ In the early 1970s, books and articles began to appear in very large numbers addressing issues raised by liberation theologians.¹⁶ At the same time, the number of books and articles addressing philosophical issues in religious language steadily declined.

The appeals by liberation theologians for a new direction in theology were entirely legitimate and, many would say, overdue. Yet the timing of this development roughly coincided with the rise to prominence of influential thinkers who dramatically changed the landscape of analytic philosophy of language. For example, Donald Davidson's proposal on linguistic meaning was published in 1967, John Searle's *Speech Acts* in 1970, and Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* in 1972 (based on lectures given in January of 1970). These works, along with others by philosophers such as W.V.O. Quine, Peter Strawson, Michael Dummett, Paul Grice, David Kaplan and others,¹⁷ were revolutionary in Anglo-American philosophy of language, but their timing meant that they had little impact on theology. When other questions regarding language returned to the theological scene, it came primarily via developments in continental philosophy—either through hermeneutic theorists such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur or deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida—rather than developments in Anglo-American philosophy of language. Such continental theorists have had an important impact on theology. Nonetheless, because theologians had in large part turned away from dialogues with analytic philosophers, it was left mostly to philosophers themselves (at least those interested in religion) to explore the theological possibilities opened up by the revolution in analytic philosophy that was well under way by 1970.

William Wood maintains that, as a result of Saul Kripke's work “philosophers have turned away from analyzing language and toward theorizing about the essential properties of things in the world—and also the essential properties of God” (Wood 2009, p. 948). Clearly metaphysics has undergone a revival in the last several decades, due in significant part to Kripke's contributions to modal logic and possible world semantics. Kripke, of course, was not the only one working on a revival of metaphysics, nor the only one contributing to the development of modal logic and possible world semantics. And these developments contributed to a renewed interest in traditional topics in philosophical theology. Yet these developments were appropriated mostly by philosophers rather than theologians. Certainly one of the most prominent has been Alvin Plantinga, whose famous restatement of

¹⁵ In Tracy, too, we can see increasing engagements with liberation theologians. Compare, e.g., *Blessed Rage for Order*, published in 1975, with *The Analogical Imagination*, published in 1981.

¹⁶ Besides the publications of liberation theologians themselves, theologians from industrialized countries published numerous articles and books discussing liberation theology (e.g., Brown 1969; Herzog 1972; Kee 1973; Moltmann 1973; Ogletree 1971; Ruether 1972; Stott 1971). Other examples could be cited; a search for the phrase “liberation theology” on the ATLA Religion Index yields only two publications between 1960 and 1969, compared with 742 between 1970 and 1979.

¹⁷ These are, of course, only a few examples of philosophers publishing important work in philosophy of language in the 1960s and 1970s. Alas, consideration of the contributions of philosophers like Keith Donnellan, Gareth Evans, Peter Geach, Ruth Barcan Marcus, Hilary Putnam, (and others) is beyond the scope of this paper.

the free will defense to the logical argument against the existence of God from the fact of natural evil made heavy use of possible world semantics and modal logic. His restatement of Anselm's ontological argument used these developments as well (Plantinga 1974a, b).

Yet Kripke also helped revolutionize the theory of reference, and philosophy of language has remained an active field, despite lack of consensus over such basic issues as meaning or reference. This “other half” of Kripke’s work was also important to the revival of analytic philosophy of religion out of which the current work in analytic theology has grown. In the years surrounding 1970, a number of philosophers began to attack the reigning descriptivist consensus. One of the most widely read publications in this attack was Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity*, which attacked descriptivist analyses of the reference of proper names and suggested an alternative picture.¹⁸ Several objections are possible to such descriptivist theories, but two will suffice to show why Kripke (among others) thinks they will not do. The first has to do with referential circularity. Descriptivist theories typically require that the descriptions associated with a referent pick out the referent in a way that is ultimately non-circular. Suppose, for example, a person uses the name “Einstein” to refer to Einstein, but the only description of which he is aware that applies to Einstein is “the discoverer of relativity theory.” Suppose further that the only thing the person can say about relativity theory is that it was discovered by Einstein. Descriptivist theorists will typically hold that reference has failed in such an instance (see, e.g., Christian 1964, pp. 28–31). Kripke insists, however, that such a person *does* refer to Einstein. If such a person is asked who Einstein is and replies, “Einstein is the discoverer of relativity theory,” his reference will succeed on Kripke’s view, and his assertion will have meaning. The second objection involves a person who knows only a small number of descriptions of a person x , none of which *uniquely* pick out x . Suppose, for example, I say “Dr. Busby is a reputable dermatologist,” when the only things I know about Dr. Busby are that she practices in Chicago, she is a dermatologist, and she is reputable. Descriptivist theorists would typically say that reference has failed because such descriptions apply to a number of individuals. Again, however, Kripke insists that I have indeed referred to Dr. Busby. If I do not meet the requirement of any descriptivist theory, so much the worse for the theory.

Kripke does not deny that names or descriptions that satisfy the requirements of descriptivist theories—of unique, non-circular definite descriptions—can in fact refer. Yet names can refer even when they don’t meet such requirements. Kripke consequently provides an alternative “picture”—often called a “causal theory of

¹⁸I don’t want to exaggerate Kripke’s role in the attack on descriptivism. A number of philosophers have argued that Marcus, in fact, originated many of the ideas commonly attributed to Kripke (e.g., Smith 1995; see also Fetzer and Humphreys 1998; for an example of Marcus’s work, see Marcus 1961, 1993). Without taking sides in this debate, I discuss Kripke’s work here simply because I take it to be more widely known than that of the other critics of descriptivism, such as Marcus. Others were raising questions about descriptivism as well, including Donald Davidson, Keith Donnellan, Michael Dummett, Peter Geach, Paul Grice, David Kaplan, Hilary Putnam, W.V.O. Quine, Peter Strawson, and others.

reference”—which holds that a name picks out a person or object in something like the following way:

An initial ‘baptism’ takes place. Here the object may be named by ostension, or the reference of the name may be fixed by a description. When the name is ‘passed from link to link’, the receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it (Kripke 1972, p. 96).

More can be said about the limitations of descriptivist reference. But Kripke’s comments should suffice to indicate a few reasons why it is preferable to adopt a view that allows referring expressions to refer directly to their referents.¹⁹

Two of the most important figures in the revival of analytic philosophy of religion, Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, clearly were influenced by Kripke’s work. For his part, Alston adopts Kripke’s “picture” of reference, but radicalizes it a bit further (Alston 1988).²⁰ On Alston’s account, the “initial baptism” can occur by ostension, through a description, or through “labeling something presented in experience” (Alston 1988, p. 108). In the ordinary case, one can perceive an object presented in experience and ostensively indicate that object as the referent. This same kind of initial baptism occurs when the referent is God, though in this case some additional machinery is required to communicate to others the identity of the referent of “God.” This is an important and difficult issue, because obviously ostension is not available for fixing a reference to God. Alston does not articulate just how this additional machinery might be structured or might function, but simply suggests “that the communal worship, and other practices, of a religious community provide resources for this...” (Alston 1988, p. 108).²¹ Alston calls this kind of non-descriptivist reference “direct reference.”²²

¹⁹ Recently, several theorists have attempted to revive descriptivism. Among other things, these theorists believe that Kripke’s direct reference or “causal” theory of reference does not deal adequately with Russell’s puzzle over vacuous definite descriptions (e.g., Jackson 1998; for a description and extended critique of this revival, see Soames 2005).

²⁰ It may be that Alston takes his own view not to be a modification of Kripke’s, but simply that he is simply drawing out some explicit conclusions that are implicit in Kripke’s picture (cf. Alston 1988, p. 108).

²¹ Alston suggests that by learning to participate in the practice of prayer, worship, confession, reception of the sacraments, etc., we learn what it is like to experience God. Alston (1988, p. 109). But this is as much as Alston says on the topic, and therefore “many more details need to be filled in before we have a full-blown view” (Alston 1988, p. 108).

²² Alston prefers direct reference for several reasons, some of which are the difficulties with descriptivist reference pointed out by Kripke. Fundamentally, however, Alston believes that direct reference is usually (if not always) more basic than descriptivist reference, for at least two reasons. First, nearly all definite descriptions used to fix a reference will themselves contain one or more singular referring expressions. Such descriptions almost never involve purely qualitative predicates. Second, when one is using a description to fix a reference, one is using a fairly complicated referential apparatus. Alston takes the use of such an apparatus to presuppose the capacity to refer by some means other than by descriptions (Alston 1988, pp. 109–10). Further, “where the direct reference mechanisms are in place they will determine reference unless the subject makes special efforts to counteract this ...” (Alston 1988, p. 112).

Alston maintains that the enterprise of theology looks quite different depending on how one takes reference to work in relation to God. On descriptivist theories, the most basic subject matter of theology is provided by whatever concepts are included in the descriptions that uniquely pick out God. Theological claims are then worked out by reasoning from this basic set of concepts. This is one way to characterize the way someone like Schubert Ogden does theology. He begins with an argument for the reality of God, an argument grounded in a transcendental analysis of human experience. This analysis leads him to conclude that every human action or experience necessarily affirms a basic faith in the value of our lives. And because this basic faith must have an objective ground in reality, he argues, God must be such as to validate our basic faith in the worth of our lives (Ogden 1966, p. 37). This leads him to a revisionary interpretation of a number of traditional Christian teachings.²³

On a direct reference theory, however, theology begins with a being that is perceived in individual and communal experience. Natural theology, Alston believes, will play a larger role on the first approach (that of descriptivist reference) than on the second, while tradition and religious experience will play a larger role on the second approach (Alston 1988, p. 116).²⁴ On this second approach, theology can proceed in a more traditional way, so that the idea of a special revelation is not inherently problematic. Experiences of God, or accounts of perceived divine activity or characteristics, can become the objects of philosophical and theological reflection without their having to cohere with a set of descriptive conditions required in advance for successful reference. Reflections on such issues have become more commonplace over the last several decades (for recent examples, see Rea 2009), especially in venues such as the journal *Faith and Philosophy* (e.g., Adams 2004; Wierenga 2004),

²³ His model of God is a good example. On the classical or traditional account, God must be impassible or unaffected by anything in the world, including anything I might do. But in Ogden's view, if God remains utterly unaffected by anything that happens to me or anything I do, then my existence is a matter of indifference to God. And this is just to say that, on the classical view, I make no difference to God, that I am utterly insignificant. If my fundamental faith in the final significance of my existence is to have a ground in reality, this ground cannot be in a God to whom I am finally insignificant. For this reason, Ogden believes that a concept of God as relative, or related to God's creatures will always be superior to a concept of an impassible God. Ogden thus endorses Hartshorne's "dipolar" model of God, in which God has two poles, an absolute pole and a relative pole (Hartshorne and Reese 1953; Ogden 1966, pp. 47–48; see also Hartshorne 1948). The relative pole is the more inclusive pole, in that God is really, internally related to every created being. Moreover, God is internally related to every instant in the life of every creature, in the sense that God is really affected by every event in the life of all God's creatures (Ogden 1966, pp. 48–49). In this sense God is supremely, or unsurpassingly, relative. The absolute pole describes the fact that God is "absolute relativity." That is to say, God is related to all God's creatures absolutely; God's internal relatedness to reality is not a contingent fact, but is an absolute fact that nothing could possibly change (Ogden 1966, p. 60). But this absolute pole is a formal or abstract one, which is "simply the abstract structure or identifying principle of his eminent relativity" (Ogden 1966, p. 65). God, therefore, is dipolar; "at once supremely relative and supremely absolute" (Ogden 1966, p. 48). This neoclassical model of God grows directly out of the descriptive conditions Ogden uses to refer to God in the first place.

²⁴ I should note that Alston does not rule out natural theology; indeed, he engages in it himself.

and we can even see this second approach on display in reflections on the absence or hiddenness of God (e.g., Moser 2002).

Alston has argued for giving a substantial role to perceptions of God in not only the formation but also the epistemic justification of religious beliefs. And central to his argument is his “theory of appearing” in which individuals can perceive God directly when God appears to them, without the requirement of mediating inferences. And because, on Alston’s view, we can refer to God directly (and not only descriptively), such perceptions can function to provide at least *prima facie* justification for beliefs about God (Alston 1991). And such beliefs can include more or less classical models of God (as in Plantinga’s case), or a middle way between classical and neoclassical models (as in Alston’s case) (e.g., Alston 1984; Plantinga 1980, 1986).

In the development of analytic philosophy of religion into what may be called analytic theology, we are seeing theology conducted closer to this second way of proceeding (on a direct reference view) than to the first way (on a descriptivist reference view). This development was led by philosophers, and theologians are beginning to follow in their footsteps. It has led to nuanced reflections on traditional theological issues such as the Incarnation (Adams 2004), the Trinity (e.g., Brower 2004; Leftow 2004; Marshall 2000; McCall and Rea 2010; Wierenga 2004), the nature of sin (e.g., Plantinga 2000, pp. 199–240), the nature of religious experience and its contribution to theology (e.g., Gellman 2001; Sudduth 2009), divine revelation (Swinburne 1992), the doctrine of the atonement (McCall and Rea 2010; Plantinga and Feenstra 1989; Swinburne 1989), the nature of faith (e.g., Buckareff 2005; Pojman 2003; Pruss 2002), divine inspiration of the Bible (Crisp 2009), the idea of hell (Buckareff and Plug 2005; Sider 2002), and the problem of evil (Adams 1999; Rogers 2002). Here I’ve suggested that three sets of influences helped to bring this about. First, the work of Kripke and others in philosophy of language (and metaphysics) opened up new avenues of philosophical reflection on traditional topics of philosophical theology; second, the falsification controversy contributed to the widespread view among theologians that engagement with analytic philosophy was unlikely to be fruitful; and finally, attention to liberation theology contributed to the delay of many theologians in returning to these traditional topics. The time is ripe for theologians to return to a conversation that is already fascinating.

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Divine Unsurpassability

Klaas J. Kraay

Introduction

Traditional versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all maintain that God is a perfect being. Famously, Anselm understood this doctrine to mean that God is a being than which none greater is conceivable. Assuming that conceivability does not exhaust possibility, a more robust expression of this doctrine holds that God is a being than which none greater is possible. Proponents of the latter say that, necessarily, God is unsurpassable with respect to various attributes, such as power, knowledge, goodness, and wisdom. This may be termed essential divine unsurpassability—henceforth EDU—and a faith which upholds it may be termed EDU-theism.

The best-known arguments against EDU-theism are *a posteriori*. Commonly grouped under the heading “problem of evil”, they claim that this doctrine is untenable, given certain facts about suffering. These arguments are notoriously controversial. I set them aside in what follows, however, in order to consider a different, *a priori* criticism. This purports to be a swift and total *reductio* of EDU-theism, given some plausible claims. Moreover, if EDU is non-negotiable (as many theists believe) then this argument’s target is theism itself. I first set out this argument, and I then distinguish and evaluate four replies.

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The A Priori Argument Against EDU-Theism

Some theists have held, with Leibniz, that there is exactly one best of all creatable worlds. But many disagree, and hold that for any world God can create, there is a better world that God could have created instead. Philip Quinn (1982), Stephen Grover (1988), William Rowe (1993, 2004), and Jordan Howard Sobel (2004) have argued that this latter view precludes EDU-theism. Their central intuition is this: if, no matter which world God creates, there's a better creatable one, then no matter what God does, God's action in creating a world is surpassable. And if God's action in creating a world is necessarily surpassable, then God is necessarily surpassable.¹

This intuition can be formalized with reference to the following set of propositions:

- NBW For every world w that is within God's power to actualize, there is a better world, x , that God has the power to actualize instead.²
- P1 If it is possible for the product of a world-actualizing action performed by some being to have been better, then, ceteris paribus, it is possible for that being's action to have been better.³
- P2 If it is possible for the world-actualizing action performed by some being to have been better, then, ceteris paribus, it is possible for that being to have been better.
- G There possibly exists a being who is essentially unsurpassable in power, knowledge, goodness, and rationality.

Critics of EDU-theism urge that since this set is inconsistent, and since P1 and P2 are plausible principles, those who endorse NBW ought to reject G. This amounts to an *a priori* argument for the impossibility of EDU-theism, given NBW.⁴

¹ Grover has recently distanced himself from this latter claim, noting that the former alone is problematic for theism (2004: 103, 105).

² Strictly speaking, possible worlds can neither be created nor destroyed, so convention has it that worlds are “actualized”. God cannot refrain from actualizing a world: even if God creates nothing, the resulting world (populated only by God and whatever other uncreated necessary existents there are) is the actual world. In what follows, I assume—for simplicity only—that all worlds have objective axiological status, that all worlds are commensurable and comparable, and that there are no ties.

³ Two clarifications are in order. First, this proposition may sound consequentialist, but it is not wedded to any particular account of the relationship between the goodness of outcomes and the goodness of actions. For more in this vein, see Conee (1994: 821). Second, the consequent of P1 claims that it is possible for an action to have been ‘better’, and the consequent of P2 claims that it is possible for a being to have been ‘better’. While Rowe (1993, 2004) understands these claims to concern moral surpassability, Sobel (2004: 468ff) takes them to concern rational surpassability. Everything below is consistent with both interpretations.

⁴ It is important to see that this argument does not reduce to the traditional problem of evil. First, as noted, it proceeds entirely *a priori*, while arguments from evil generally contain at least one a posteriori premise about the existence, scope, or distribution of evil. Second, this argument concludes that an essentially unsurpassable God is impossible—a much stronger conclusion than arguments from evil can warrant. Third, this argument could be advanced even if evil were metaphysically impossible. It is an argument from improbability, rather than from evil.

Replies to the A Priori Argument Against EDU-Theism

How might the theist reply? Four ways are briefly sketched below. First, the EDU-theist might reject NBW (the ontology assumed by this argument) and instead hold, with Leibniz, that there is a unique best of all worlds that God can actualize.⁵ But the difficulties facing this move are well-known. There are a priori concerns: it is widely assumed on this view that God would actualize the best world, but in doing so, would God really act freely?⁶ (And if not, is God's choice really a good one?) There are also familiar a posteriori concerns: if there is a best of all actualizable worlds, why doesn't this one seem to be it?⁷

Second, the EDU-theist might defend G. The argument against EDU-theism is ambitious: it seeks to show that no such God is possible on NBW. But the theist might try to reverse the argument: she might claim that G—a modest proposition—is better-supported than P1 and P2. How might she defend G? Of course, a good argument for the actual existence of an essentially unsurpassable deity would do, since this would establish a fortiori that such a being is possible. Alternatively, she might try to justify the inference from conceivability to possibility in this context, granting that an essentially unsurpassable deity is conceivable. Finally, following Plantinga (2000), she might argue that G can be a properly basic belief for the theist, given certain conditions. If any such strategy makes it reasonable for the theist to maintain G over P1 and P2, then the argument against EDU-theism fails. This response is unlikely to satisfy the EDU-theist, however, since it fails to diagnose any specific defect in the argument against EDU-theism.

Third, the EDU-theist might sacrifice her commitment to EDU (in other words, concede $\sim G$) in order to save her theism. She might concede that G is precluded by the conjunction of P1, P2, and NBW, and grant that the latter three are plausible. But she might then construct an account of divine perfection that does not involve EDU, or some other notion of God altogether.⁸ This move is unlikely to please most traditional monotheists, however, since they typically consider EDU non-negotiable.

Finally, the most natural response for the EDU-theist is a direct attack on P1 or P2. Any such move, however, must provide independent reason for rejecting one of these principles: it is question-begging to reject their conjunction merely because it precludes G (granting NBW).⁹ An attack on P1 or P2 may take one of two forms: it may suggest that their conjunction is unmotivated (or defeated) by reflection on human cases,¹⁰ or it may allege that their conjunction is implausible in the divine case. The remainder of this paper considers only the latter alternative, only with respect to P1.

⁵ Grover (1988) recommends this. Alternatively, one might hold that there is more than one unsurpassable actualizable world.

⁶ Rowe (2004: 74–87) criticizes Robert Adams' (1972) famous argument for the claim that God is free to actualize a world other than the best one.

⁷ I do not mean to suggest that these concerns are unanswerable, but they are powerful and must be taken seriously by the defender of EDU-theism.

⁸ For example, see Hasker (2004) and Kraay (2005b).

⁹ This charge is developed against Morris (1993) and Langtry (1996) in Kraay (2005a).

¹⁰ Hasker (2004) takes this route.

I first outline a recent objection to P1, and offer a reply. I then develop a modified objection to P1, and offer a reply. I will show that the theist is best advised to pursue an altogether different response to P1, or an objection to P2, or one of the other replies outlined above.

An Objection to P1 Based on Libertarian Free Will

The theist might object to P1 by appeal to considerations about free will. Brian Leftow, for example, argues that P1 objectionably assumes that God has complete control over the axiological status of the product of his world-actualizing action.¹¹ He points out that the moral worth of actions performed by free creatures in that world is an important contributor to the overall axiological status of a world. But given libertarian freedom, which many theists accept, it follows that this significant determinant of the overall status of a world is, quite simply, beyond God's control.¹² Accordingly, it is possible for the product of God's world-actualizing activity to have been better, even though God's action (in actualizing the world and the libertarian-free moral agents it contains) could not have been better.¹³ If this is plausible, P1 can be rejected.

Reply to the Objection to P1

The objection assumes that (a) it is possible for God to create libertarian-free agents, and that (b) this is a good thing for God to do, all else equal. Further, it assumes that (c) there are no actualizable worlds lacking such creatures that surpass all the worlds which contain them.¹⁴ (Otherwise, one would not expect God to create libertarian-free

¹¹ “All of these arguments assume that God has complete control over how much good he does by creating. Only in this way can Rowe and Leibniz take it that differences in worlds' goodness must express differences in their creators' wisdom or goodness. If a creator need not get quite the world it wants, then even if two equally wise and good creators try to actualize just the same states of affairs, they need not get the same resulting world. If they need not, it is just false that different worlds entails different moral [or rational] stature” (Leftow 2005a: 168).

¹² “In many cases, the difference in worlds' moral value consists in creatures' right and wrong acts, or the moral good inherent in creatures' doing certain acts. In these cases, divine activity can account for the whole moral difference between worlds only if it can wholly account for creatures' doing what they do. It wholly accounts for this iff God causes creatures to act” (Leftow 2005a: 172). And, of course, if creatures have libertarian freedom, then it is false that God causes creatures to act.

¹³ Suppose that the actual world contains libertarian-free creatures who all could have done much better, morally, than they did. If so, this world could presumably have been better—in other words, the antecedent of P1 is true. But thus far we have no reason to think the consequent of P1 true: God's action in actualizing this world and the free agents it contains need not be impugned by the creatures' misuse of their freedom. So goes the argument against P1 in Leftow (2005a, b).

¹⁴ Leftow appears committed to this, although he concedes that some worlds without libertarian-free creatures surpass some worlds which contain them (2005b: 280).

agents, in which case the objection is moot.) These assumptions may be controversial, but I grant them in what follows, since they are widely held by theists. Accordingly, libertarian freedom is presumed below.

This objection aims to depict a scenario according to which the antecedent of P1 is true, while its consequent is false. But how are considerations about creaturely freedom supposed bear on the antecedent of P1, which concerns the product of a divine world-actualizing action? The objection contends that the better creaturely actions are, *ceteris paribus*, the better this product will be. Notice, however, that this assumes the product of a divine world-actualizing action to be the entire world under consideration, including the actions of creatures.

This assumption, however, is illegitimate: the actions of creatures are not properly considered part of the product of God's world-actualizing action.¹⁵ Libertarian actions are—by definition—outside God's control.¹⁶ This is why, standardly, God and creatures are taken to be collaborators in the actualization of a world: both play a role in determining which world is actual. God is responsible, *inter alia*, for a world's being the way it is prior to the introduction of creatures, and God is also responsible for the introduction of such creatures: all this properly counts as the product of God's world-actualizing action. But when such creatures are introduced and act freely, they also help make it the case that one world rather than another is actual, and such determinations count as the product of their world-actualizing actions, not God's. The resulting world, then, is partly the product of God's actions, and partly the product of creatures' actions.

If this distinction is plausible, then the objection to P1 described in the preceding section fails. The actions of libertarian-free agents can indeed affect the overall axiological status of a world, as the objection supposes. But this is irrelevant to the antecedent of P1, which refers to the product of God's world-actualizing action. The question is not whether the product of God's world-actualizing action can be better in virtue of what libertarian-free creatures do: the question is whether the product of God's world-actualizing action can be better in virtue of what God does. So far, then, we have no reason for rejecting P1.

A Modified Objection to P1

Perhaps this distinction between divine and creaturely contributions to world-actualization can motivate a modified objection to P1. Theists standardly hold that while God could prevent, eliminate, or reduce certain evils in a world by fiat, God might refrain

¹⁵ A rough analogy: the actions of libertarian-free children are not properly considered part of the product of their parents' child-actualizing action.

¹⁶ Of course, these actions are under divine control in that God could destroy such creatures, or fail to create them—but this sense of ‘control’ is not relevant. Leftow (2005b) considers Molinism: the doctrine according to which there are unalterable contingent truths (known by God) about how libertarian free creatures would act in various possible circumstances. On Molinism, God can control creatures' actions without causing them: by actualizing the world in which his favoured creaturely counterfactuals of freedom obtain. But Leftow (2005a: 174) urges that Molinism precludes genuine creaturely moral responsibility, and is hence unacceptable to theists.

from doing so, given sufficient reason. This position is common in the vast literature on the problem of evil. For example, a theist might say that God refrains from preventing, eliminating, or reducing certain evils by fiat in order for (or, more weakly, in order to allow) creatures to prevent, eliminate, or reduce these evils. Similarly, theists often maintain that while God could introduce or augment certain goods in a world by fiat, God might refrain from doing so, given sufficient reason. For example, a theist might hold that God refrains from introducing or augmenting certain goods, in order for (or in order to allow) creatures to introduce or augment these goods.¹⁷ Perhaps this is a model of how the product of God's world-actualizing activity (narrowly construed to exclude the world-actualizing contributions of creatures) could have been better, without it following that God's action could have been better overall.

Reply to the Modified Objection to P1

The modified objection to P1, like its predecessor, purports to offer a model according to which the antecedent of P1 is true, while its consequent is false. But the model illustrates just one respect in which the product of God's world-actualizing action could have been better, without it (purportedly) following that God's action could have been better overall. Here's the problem: it's plausible to think that there are other respects in which the product of God's action could have been better, and that in at least one of those respects, God's action would have been better overall.¹⁸ If so, the modified objection to P1 fails.

To see why, grant everything the EDU-theist suggests in the modified objection. Grant that God has sufficient reason for failing to introduce or augment certain goods (or for failing to prevent, eliminate, or reduce certain evils). Suppose, indeed, that God does so in order for (or in order to allow) creatures to do their part better.

¹⁷ Stories along these lines are sometimes called theodicies, sometimes defences (depending on whether they are asserted to be true, or merely possible). They are typically criticized for failing to specify a sufficiently plausible account of how God is, or might be, justified in doing less than God can. I set such criticisms aside here, since in the next section I will show, on purely formal grounds, that these stories cannot establish that P1 is false.

¹⁸ Consider Leftow's variant of P1:

(7a) Necessarily, for all xy , if in W x actualizes world W and in W^* y instead actualizes W^* , and W^* is a morally better world than W , and nothing else distinguishes these actions morally, y 's action in W^* is morally better than x 's action in W (2005a: 171, emphasis added).

Leftow takes it that the 'moral differences' between worlds are fully attributable to the actions of libertarian-free creatures (172), and he assumes that nothing other than these differences distinguishes the actions of x and y morally. But, as I argue here, the latter assumption is unreasonable: there may well be other ways to distinguish the moral characteristics of the world-actualizing actions of x and y .

This represents one respect in which the product of God's action could have been better, and thus far we have no reason to think that God's action could have been better, since God has morally sufficient reason for refraining in this manner.

But, is it reasonable to think there are other respects in which the product of God's world-actualizing action could have been better? Yes. Perhaps it's the case that no matter what God does, God could always create more intelligent, conscious, free, happy creatures,¹⁹ more beautiful things,²⁰ better things altogether,²¹ and so forth. (These are plausible good-making features of worlds, and are the sort of features that typically motivate NBW.) It's reasonable to think that, for at least one such respect in which God could bring about a better product, it follows that God's doing so constitutes a better action overall. This is so even if God is justified in doing less than he is able, in the specific manner described in the modified objection. In short, the modified objection fails.

Conclusion

The objections to P1 discussed above commit equal and opposite errors. The initial objection treats “the product of God's world-actualizing action” too broadly, by taking it to mean the entire world under consideration (and, accordingly, by failing to distinguish divine contributions to world-actualization from creaturely contributions). But the modified objection treats “the product of God's world-actualizing action” too narrowly, by concentrating only on certain respects in which God might reasonably refrain from bringing about a better product (and, accordingly, by assuming that there could not be other respects in which God could bring about a better product and thereby perform a better action on the whole). Neither, then, is satisfactory. For this reason, the defender of divine unsurpassability is best advised to pursue some other objection to P1, or an objection to P2. Alternatively, she might pursue one of the other responses sketched earlier, but their drawbacks have been noted. The *a priori* argument against EDU-theism remains a formidable challenge.

¹⁹ Richard Swinburne takes this view (1979: 114), and it is his reason for endorsing NBW.

²⁰ Worlds can contain entities which bear aesthetic properties, and perhaps God's ability to create (quantitatively) more of these, or (qualitatively) more beautiful entities, is without limit. Equally, perhaps entire worlds bear aesthetic properties, and perhaps there is no limit to what God can do with respect to these.

²¹ Norman Kretzmann takes Aquinas to hold that God could make each thing in the world a better instance of what it is (1991: 229–249.) Perhaps there is no upper bound on what an omnipotent being can do in this regard.

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The MaximalGod and the Problem of Evil

Yujin Nagasawa

Introduction

I have argued elsewhere (Nagasawa 2008) that we can refute nearly all existing arguments against Anselmian theism by holding that God has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence, instead of insisting that He¹ is an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being. As an argument that is refuted in this way I have cited, among many examples, the problem of evil. Some critics suggest, however, that we cannot resolve the problem of evil in this way because the problem undermines not only the version of theism that depends on God's being omniscience, omnipotent and omnibenevolent, but also versions of theism that do not depend on that thesis. The aim of this paper is to defend my strategy against such a criticism. This paper has the following structure. In section “[Anselmian Theism](#)” I review my general strategy for defending Anselmian theism against existing counterarguments. In section “[The Problem of Evil](#)” I focus on the problem of evil and explain how my strategy resolves it. In section “[The Non-OmniGod Response](#)” I discuss a response to the problem of evil that *gives up* God's omnipotence or omnibenevolence. I argue that, while that response crucially differs from mine, it is important for the cogency of my defence of Anselmian theism to address it. In section “[Arguments Against the Non-OmniGod Response](#)” I introduce P. J. McGrath's and H. J. McCloskey's arguments, according to which the problem of evil persists even if we give up God's omnipotence or omnibenevolence (or both). In section “[Objections to Arguments against the Non-OmniGod Response](#)” I provide objections to their arguments and defend my response to the problem of evil. Section “[Conclusion](#)” concludes.

¹ As is common practice, I use the pronoun ‘He’ to refer to God. This should not, however, be taken to imply that God has a gender.

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Anselmian Theism

Anselmian theism is arguably the most widely accepted form of monotheism. Its core thesis can be expressed as follows:

The Anselmian Thesis: God is the being than which no greater can be thought.

Anselm's original definition of God is 'that than which no greater can be thought'. For the sake of simplicity, I assume in this paper that this is equivalent to 'the being than which no greater can be thought'. In this way we can set aside polytheism, which is not our focus here. Most Anselmian theists hold that the Anselmian thesis entails the following:

The OmniGod Thesis: God is an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being.

Anselmian theists often ascribe many other unique attributes to God such as timelessness, changelessness, simplicity, self-existence, incorporeality, and so on. In this paper I will, however, limit myself to omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence, or more generally, knowledge, power and benevolence, for two reasons. First, as I explain below, the problem of evil is formulated in terms of these three attributes. Second, they represent the most widely recognised attributes of the Anselmian God. In what follows, for the sake of simplicity, I will call a being that is omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent 'omniperfect'.²

There are literally dozens of arguments against Anselmian theism. In order to develop a powerful generic defence of Anselmian theism we need to find common features in these arguments. I maintain that nearly all existing arguments fall into one of the following three types.

Type A: Arguments that Purport to Show the Incoherence of the Divine Attributes

Type-A arguments are meant to show that at least one of the divine attributes specified in the omniGod thesis is internally incoherent. From the internal incoherence of at least one of the divine attributes, the opponents of the omniGod thesis deduce that there cannot exist an omniperfect being. Given that the Anselmian thesis entails the omniGod thesis and that there cannot exist an omniperfect being, the arguments conclude that Anselmian theism is false. Type-A arguments include: (i) The paradox of the stone, which purports to show the incoherence of omnipotence by considering the possibility or impossibility of an omnipotent being's creating a stone that that being itself cannot lift (Mavrodes 1963); (ii) The argument from knowledge *de se*, which purports to show the incoherence of omniscience by showing the impossibility of any being's acquiring knowledge *de se* of another being (Grim 1985, 2000).

Type B: Arguments that Purport to Show the Mutual Inconsistency of the Divine Attributes

Type-B arguments are meant to show that even if each of God's attributes is internally coherent, at least some of them are mutually inconsistent. If some of God's attributes are mutually inconsistent, then, again, the omniGod thesis is

²This is Peter Millican's terminology. See Millican (2004), p. 453.

false and Anselmian theism is false. Type-B arguments include: (i) The argument from God's inability to sin, which purports to show the inconsistency between omnipotence and omnibenevolence by claiming that an omnibenevolent being cannot be omnipotent because it cannot perform a morally wrong action (Morrison 2001; Pike 1969); (ii) The argument from concept possession, which purports to derive the inconsistency between omniscience and omnipotence by showing that an omnipotent being cannot be omniscient because such a being fails to know fully what fear and frustration are (Blumenfeld 1978).

Type C: Arguments that Purport to Show the Mutual Inconsistency of the Set of the Divine Attributes and a Certain Fact about the Actual World

Type-C arguments are meant to show that, even if God's attributes are internally coherent and mutually consistent, the set of attributes is mutually inconsistent with a certain fact about the actual world. If that is true, then, again, the omniGod thesis is false and Anselmian theism is also false. Type-C arguments include: (i) The problem of evil, which purports to show the inconsistency between the existence of an omniperfect being and the fact that there is evil in the actual world (Mackie 1982); (ii) The problem of divine hiddenness, which purports to show the inconsistency between the existence of an omniperfect being and the fact that the existence of such a being is not manifest to everyone in the actual world (Howard-Snyder 2002).

Anselmian theists have tried to refute each argument in each category by adopting a case-by-case approach. That is, every time a new argument against Anselmian theism is introduced they have tried to scrutinise it and identify a flaw in that specific argument. This is not an economical approach because: (i) it is time consuming to develop an objection to each argument individually; (ii) it provides no mechanism to prevent critics from developing further arguments against Anselmian theism. We should therefore try to extract a generic structure that is common to all these arguments against Anselmian theism and construct a unified response which attacks that structure, thereby refuting nearly all existing arguments against Anselmian theism and blocking the development of further arguments with the same structure.

I submit that we can extract the following structure from all Type A, B and C arguments:

1. If Anselmian theism is true, then the Anselmian thesis is true.
2. If the Anselmian thesis is true, then the omniGod thesis is true.
3. If the omniGod thesis is true, then God is an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being.
4. There cannot be an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being.

Therefore,

5. The omniGod thesis is false.

Therefore,

6. The Anselmian thesis is false.

Therefore,

7. Anselmian theism is false.

Premise (1) is a mere assertion that Anselmian theism endorses the Anselmian thesis. Premise (2) is, as I mentioned earlier, what most Anselmian theists hold. Premise (3) only imparts the content of the omniGod thesis. Premise (4) is the conclusion of any Type A, B, or C argument, which purports to prove that there cannot be an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being, again, by showing that (i) at least one of the omni-attributes is internally incoherent; (ii) at least some of them are mutually inconsistent; or (iii) the set of these attributes is mutually inconsistent with a certain fact about the actual world. Intermediate conclusion (5) is derived from (3) and (4). Intermediate conclusion (6) is derived from (2) and (5). And final conclusion (7) is derived from (1) and (6).

We are now ready to refute all Type A, B and C arguments by focusing on the above structure. My strategy is to reject premise (2). It is normally taken for granted that the Anselmian thesis entails the omniGod thesis, but that is far from obvious. The main interest of Anselmian theism is to defend the idea that God is the being than which no greater can be thought, which does not immediately force us to commit ourselves to any specificities about God's individual attributes. In particular, it does not, without additional arguments, force us to commit ourselves to the claim that God is definitively omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent. I hence replace the omniGod thesis with the following more modest thesis:

The MaximalGod Thesis: God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence.

While the maximalGod thesis implies that God is very knowledgeable, very powerful and very benevolent it leaves open whether or not He is omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent. Given the maximalGod thesis, we can say that Type A, B and C arguments against Anselmian theism all fail at premise (2) because the Anselmian thesis entails only the maximalGod thesis, which is more modest than the omniGod thesis. Although the maximalGod thesis is consistent with the omniGod thesis in principle, it does not imply that God is unquestionably an omniperfect being. Given that none of the Type A, B or C arguments refutes the Anselmian thesis directly or shows that the Anselmian thesis entails the omniGod thesis rather than the maximalGod thesis, Anselmian theists can conclude that these arguments are not powerful enough to refute Anselmian theism. If the arguments show anything at all, they show merely that the Anselmian God, as the being than which no greater can be thought, is not an omniperfect being, which is, given the maximalGod thesis, consistent with Anselmian theism. This strategy is applicable to all the arguments against Anselmian theism we have seen.³

³ This summary of my strategy for defending Anselmian theism is radically simplified to save space. For a comprehensive discussion of the strategy see Nagasawa (2008).

The Problem of Evil

Let us focus on one of the Type-C arguments, the problem of evil, which is undoubtedly the most well-known argument against Anselmian theism. There are at least two versions of the problem of evil: the logical version and the evidential version. The logical version says that the existence of evil in the actual world is logically inconsistent with the existence of God, as an omniperfect being. The evidential version says, on the other hand, that even if the existence of evil in the actual world is logically consistent with the existence of God, it nevertheless constitutes good *evidence* against the existence of God. Since my interest here is in deductive arguments against Anselmian theism I focus on the logical problem of evil. In what follows, when I use the term ‘problem of evil’ I denote the logical problem of evil.

The problem of evil is based on the following set of propositions, which appears to be inconsistent:

1. God is omniscient.
2. God is omnipotent.
3. God is omnibenevolent.
4. Evil exists.

If God is omniscient, then He knows that there is evil in the actual world. If God is omnipotent, then He can eliminate evil in the actual world. If God is omnibenevolent, then He is willing to eliminate evil in the actual world. This means that if God exists, then there should not be evil in the actual world. However, it is undeniable that there *is* evil in the actual world. This means that proposition (4) is definitely true and one or more of (1), (2) and (3) must be given up. (1) is often regarded as being redundant because an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would try to know and come to know whether there is evil in the actual world. The problem of evil is commonly formulated, therefore, as an inconsistent set of propositions consisting of propositions (2), (3) and (4) above. In what follows, therefore, I set aside (1) and God’s omniscience. If the problem of evil is sound, then, given that there certainly is evil in the actual world, either (2) or (3) is false and thus an omniperfect God does not exist. This means, according to proponents of the problem, that the omniGod thesis is false and that the Anselmian thesis is also false. Therefore, Anselmian theism is false.

As I mentioned earlier, the problem of evil is a Type-C argument, and my response to it is the same as my response to any other Type-A, -B, or -C argument. I resolve the problem by saying that *if* the problem of evil is indeed sound, then it just means that God is not an omniperfect being. However, I continue, that does not entail that Anselmian theism is false because it has not been shown that God cannot be the being than which no greater can be thought. In other words, the problem of evil might refute the omniGod thesis but it fails to refute the Anselmian thesis. Therefore, it fails to refute Anselmian theism.

The Non-OmniGod Response

There is a response to the problem of evil which, on the face of it, is similar to mine. This response says that we can resolve the problem of evil by *giving up* God's omnipotence or omnibenevolence. That is, according to this response, we should reject either or both of propositions (2) and (3). J. L. Mackie, one of the most well-known contemporary proponents of the problem of evil, anticipates this response. He writes,

It is plain, therefore, that [the problem of evil] can be easily solved if one gives up at least one of the propositions that constitute it. Someone who holds that there is in some sense a god, but one who is not wholly good, or, though powerful, not quite omnipotent, will not be embarrassed by this difficulty (Mackie 1982, p. 151).

Similarly, Michael Martin, another critic of Anselmian theism, writes, '[T]he problem of evil presumably does not show that God does not exist when "God" refers to some being that is either not omnipotent or not completely benevolent' (Martin 1974, p. 232).

Call the response which tries to resolve the problem of evil by giving up God's omnipotence or omnibenevolence the 'non-omniGod response' and my response, which tries to resolve the problem by holding that God has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence, the 'maximalGod response'. The difference between these two responses is that while the non-omniGod response explicitly gives up God's omnipotence or omnibenevolence the maximalGod response does not. The maximalGod response is more modest in the sense that it leaves open whether or not God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. The maximalGod response is more strategically advantageous because it allows Anselmian theists to resolve the problem of evil without committing to specific intensities of God's power and benevolence.

Despite the difference, it is important for the cogency of the maximalGod response to assess the non-omniGod response because *if* the problem of evil is sound, the maximalGod response is committed to denying that God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, or both, in order to be consistent. That is, if the problem of evil is sound, the maximalGod response collapses into the non-omniGod response (even though the maximalGod response remains that God is the being than which no greater can be thought). This means that if the problem of evil is sound and if it can be directed against not only theists who hold the omniGod thesis but also theists who are willing to give up the thesis, then both the non-omniGod response *and* the maximalGod response fail.

There are three versions of the non-omniGod response: (i) one that gives up God's omnipotence; (ii) one that gives up God's omnibenevolence; (iii) one that gives up God's omnipotence as well as omnibenevolence.

Several philosophers have defended version (i). John Bishop, for example, claims that it is reasonable for theists to think that the existence of evil entails that God is not omnipotent. He writes, '[on the basis of the problem of evil] theists should reject the concept of God as an agent outside the natural order who has an absolutely unlimited power of intervention within nature' (Bishop 1993, p. 13). Wes Morriston

similarly takes the possibility seriously that while God is omnibenevolent He is not omnipotent. Morriston writes that perhaps God is ‘(a) necessarily morally perfect; and (b) as powerful as is logically consistent with (a)’. In this way, Morriston says, God remains powerful enough to create the world and perform miracles without being omnipotent (Morriston 2001, p. 158).⁴

Version (ii) is much less popular than (i). I am not aware of any contemporary theistic philosopher who explicitly gives up God’s omnibenevolence. However, some attempts have been made to amend the traditional understanding of omnibenevolence as moral perfection. Nick Trakakis points out that Brian Davies’s attempt to respond to the problem of evil can be construed as a rejection of God’s omnibenevolence (Trakakis 2007, p. 338). Davies writes, it is ‘wholly inappropriate to think of God as something able to be either moral (well behaved) or immoral (badly behaved)’ (Davies 1998, p. 178).

Version (iii), which is a combination of both (i) and (ii), is the least popular one. This makes sense because, as Mackie says, giving up *either* omnipotence or omnibenevolence is sufficient to resolve the problem of evil. There seems no point in rejecting both attributes in response to the problem of evil.

Some critics argue, however, that Anselmian theists cannot resolve the problem of evil by adopting the non-omniGod response. In the rest of the paper I examine their arguments.

Arguments Against the Non-OmniGod Response

There are a few, but not many, attempts to show that the problem of evil persists even if we adopt the non-omniGod response, that is, even if we give up God’s omnipotence or omnibenevolence.⁵

P. J. McGrath (1986) argues against Mackie’s claim that the problem of evil does not arise if we give up God’s omnipotence or omnibenevolence. McGrath writes, ‘I believe that Mackie is wrong about this and that evil constitutes a problem for belief in even a scaled down version of the deity’ (p. 63). McGrath’s argument runs as follows: Suppose that we adopt the non-omniGod response and give up God’s omnipotence in particular. We can then say that there is evil in this world because it is impossible for God to eliminate all instances of evil in the actual world. However, this creates a problem for Anselmian theists. There are cases in which humans have successfully eliminated certain instances of evil, such as smallpox, by themselves. This suggests it is not just that

⁴ It should be noted that Morriston makes this claim in response to the argument from God’s inability to sin rather than to the problem of evil. This suggests that the non-omniGod response is potentially applicable to the argument from God’s inability to sin as well as to the problem of evil.

⁵ In addition to the works mentioned in the main text, the following address the non-omniGod response: Burke (1987), Crisp (1986), Dilley (2000), Howard-Snyder (1998), Hutcheson (1992), Madden and Hare (1968), Martin (1990) and McGrath (1987).

God fails to be omnipotent but that He also fails to be as powerful as humans.⁶ This entails that God is not in fact a proper object of worship. Suppose, on other hand, that we give up God's omnibenevolence. We can then say that there is evil in this world because while it is possible for God to eliminate all instances of evil in the actual world, He is just unwilling to eliminate all of them. This is, however, even more problematic because it entails that God is a 'moral monster' who tolerates the existence of evil merely because of his lack of concern for humans and other sentient beings (McGrath 1986, p. 64). Suppose, finally, that we give up both God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence. Perhaps this is better than the second option because it allows us to say that evil exists in the actual world not because of God's lack of concern but because of His lack of power to eliminate it. However, this faces the same problem as the first option. It entails that God cannot eliminate instances of evil that humans can eliminate and, hence, again, He cannot be a proper object of worship.

H. J. McCloskey (1974) also argues against the omniGod response. He makes several points, some of which are similar to McGrath's and some of which are not. First, similarly to McGrath, McCloskey says that if God is not omnipotent or not omnibenevolent, then He fails to be a proper object of worship. Second, McCloskey agrees with the non-OmniGod response that if God is not omnipotent or not omnibenevolent, then the traditional problem of evil, which is concerned with the compatibility between the existence of God and the existence of evil *in general*, does not arise. There are logically possible scenarios in which a non-omniGod and a certain instance of evil in the actual world coexist. However, McCloskey says, it is still unclear why a non-OmniGod could not have prevented some specific instances of evil that have occurred. McCloskey does not provide any examples, but he seems to have in mind something similar to McGrath's example of smallpox. Even if God is not omnipotent, we can still wonder why He could not have eliminated smallpox with His enormous power. Third, and finally, McCloskey maintains that if it is agreed that God is not omnipotent or omnibenevolent, then not only do we fail to resolve the problem of evil but we also lose some available arguments for the existence of God, such as the cosmological argument and the ontological argument. This is because, according to McCloskey, these arguments are designed to derive the existence of God as a necessary being.

Objections to Arguments Against the Non-OmniGod Response

Neither McGrath nor McCloskey seems to have succeeded in showing that the problem of evil persists even if we give up God's omnipotence or omnibenevolence.

First, McGrath and McCloskey seem to conflate the problem of evil and the problem of God's worship worthiness. The sole aim of the non-omniGod response is to resolve the problem of evil by saying that the existence of God is compatible

⁶ Howard-Snyder makes a similar point: 'How could [God] be the providential governor of the world if He is unable to do what even *we* frequently do, namely prevent evil?' (Howard-Snyder 1998, p. 83). Thanks to Jeanine Diller for the pointer.

with the existence of evil in the actual world provided that God is not omnipotent or not omnibenevolent. Whether or not such a being is worthy of worship is a separate issue. It is a separate issue because it is controversial on its own, independently of the problem of evil. Both McGrath and McCloskey think that omnipotence and omnibenevolence are necessary conditions for being a proper object of worship. This assumption is controversial. As Tim Bayne and I have discussed elsewhere (Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 2007), there are many alternative accounts of worship worthiness. For instance, some claim that God is worthy of worship not because He is omnipotent and omnibenevolent but because He created the universe and all creatures in it. To take more examples, some claim that God's worship worthiness is His primitive attribute, and some others claim that God is not worthy of worship in the first place given that worship worthiness is construed as a property such that it is morally obligatory for everyone to worship its possessor. Which account is correct is an interesting but separate issue from the problem of evil. In sum: (i) McGrath's and McCloskey's assumption about worship worthiness is controversial on its own; (ii) the assumption is at any rate separate from the cogency of the non-omniGod response as a response to the problem of evil.

Second, consider McGrath's claim that God is not even as powerful as us because He cannot eliminate such an instance of evil as smallpox that humans could eliminate. This claim is controversial too. Some theists might appeal to the notions of weak actualisation and strong actualisation here. God did not strongly actualise the state of affairs in which smallpox was eradicated; that is, He did not eradicate it by himself. However, perhaps He weakly actualised the state of affairs; that is, He eradicated it through humans. Hence, they might claim, it is a mistake to think that God cannot eradicate smallpox; He can and He did eradicate it, through humans. I do not mean to endorse such a response, but my point is that McGrath's claim evokes counterarguments that are, again, not directly relevant to the problem of evil itself. McGrath's claim also seems to depend on a contentious assumption about power. When McGrath says that God is not even as powerful as humans He seems to assume the following: if there is a task p such that x can perform p but y cannot, then y is not as powerful as x . This is far from obvious. It seems fairly reasonable to say, for example, that (average) adults are more powerful than (average) small children even though they cannot perform a certain tasks that small children can (e.g., fitting in a small space). This is because taken altogether adults' physical, epistemic and intellectual capacities are more impressive than those of small children. Similarly, even if we grant that God cannot eliminate smallpox while we can, it is far from clear that God is not as powerful as humans. Whether or not my response here succeeds, it is an issue that goes beyond the problem of evil. In sum: (i) McGrath's assumptions about God's impossibility of eradicating smallpox and about the comparison of powerfulness between God and humans are controversial on their own; (ii) the assumptions are at any rate separate from the cogency of the non-omniGod response as a response to the problem of evil.

Third, McCloskey's claim about the cosmological argument and the ontological argument is untenable. He says that if God is not omnipotent or omnibenevolent then these arguments for the existence of God are not available to theists. However,

contrary to what McCloskey seems to think, these arguments do not say anything about the specific intensities of God's power and benevolence. The cosmological argument is meant to show only that there is an ultimate cause that exists necessarily. Some philosophers (e.g., Craig 1999) maintain that the argument implies further that the cause is timelessness, immaterial, enormously powerful, and so on, but no proponent of the argument claims that it entails that the final cause is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. Some might claim that the cosmological argument entails the existence of a necessary being and that a necessary being is necessary because it is the being than which no greater can be thought. The argument therefore entails, one might say, the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. However, while the property of being the being than which no greater can be thought might entail necessary existence, necessary existence does not entail being the being than which no greater can be thought. Moreover, even if the cosmological argument does entail the existence of the being than which no greater can be thought it is far from clear, as I have maintained, that that being is omnipotent and omnibenevolent.

Similarly, the ontological argument is silent about God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence. The argument is meant to show only that God, as the being than which no greater can be thought, exists. However, again, it is far from clear that the being than which no greater can be thought is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. Hence, contrary to what McCloskey assumes, it is far from clear that the ontological argument entails that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God exists. Whether or not they are ultimately sound, the cosmological argument and the ontological argument are available to proponents of the non-omniGod response. Yet whether or not these arguments are available is, again, not relevant to the non-omniGod response as an attempt to resolve the problem of evil. In sum: (i) McCloskey's claim that the cosmological argument and the ontological argument are not available to the non-omniGod response is ungrounded; (ii) the claim is at any rate separate from the cogency of the non-omniGod response as a response to the problem of evil.

In order for McGrath and McCloskey to show that the non-omniGod response fails to undercut the problem of evil they need to show that the same problem persists even if we hold that God is not omnipotent or omnibenevolent. However, as we have seen, at most they show that the omniGod response raises further issues concerning the nature of God that are independent of the problem of evil. Whether or not a non-omniGod is worthy of worship, whether or not a non-omniGod is as powerful as humans, and whether or not the cosmological and the ontological arguments can be adopted by proponents of a non-omniGod are questions that are not directly relevant to the problem of evil. I conclude, therefore, that Mackie's original claim stands: The problem of evil is not a problem for theists who believe (or leave open) that God is not omnipotent or omnibenevolent.⁷

⁷ This claim requires a small qualification because there *are* cases in which the problem of evil is clearly a problem for theists who believe that God is not omnipotent or omnibenevolent. For example, if a theist held that God is not omnipotent but nevertheless capable of eliminating a certain instance of evil that He should eliminate and held also that that instance remained, then the problem of evil would persist for such a theist. It is unlikely, however, that any theist would hold such theses.

Conclusion

Given that the non-omniGod response remains a live option, we can safely maintain the maximalGod response. Again, the maximalGod response is more advantageous than the non-omniGod response because it allows us to resolve the problem of evil without immediately giving up God's omnipotence or omnibenevolence.

The problem of evil may or may not be successful. Even if it is successful, all it shows is that God is not omnipotent or not omnibenevolent. This does not undermine Anselmian theism, which is based on the Anselmian thesis rather than the omniGod thesis. Until critics show that the Anselmian thesis entails the omniGod thesis or that the problem of evil can be directed against the Anselmian thesis itself, we need not regard it as a threat to Anselmian theism.

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Infinity, the Neoclassical Concept of God, and Oppy

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Introduction

In 1995 the Australian philosopher Graham Oppy developed the most detailed (indeed, encyclopedic) set of criticisms to date on the ontological argument. In that work he promised a second book that would criticize the cosmological argument (Oppy 1995, xi; 2006, ix–xi). In attempting to complete the latter project, however, Oppy found several components of the cosmological argument fascinating in their own right, most notably the concept of infinity and the concept of sufficient reason. More recently he has published an entire book on the concept of infinity (Oppy 2006) with the understanding that he will still deliver on his promissory note regarding the cosmological argument in a third book.

In a separate publication I have criticized Oppy's view of the ontological argument (Dombrowski 2006). It will be the purpose of the present article to criticize Oppy's treatment of the concept of infinity, both because of the intrinsic interest found in this concept and because of the crucial role infinity plays in debates regarding the concept of God.

I will concentrate on three issues. First, Oppy's treatment of the relationship between the concept of infinity and Zeno's paradoxes lays bare several problems that must be dealt with if the concept of infinity is to do any intellectual work in philosophy of religion. Here I will expand on some insightful remarks by Oppy in an effort to adequately respond to these problems. Second, I will do the same regarding Oppy's treatment of Kant's first antinomy in the first critique, which deals in part with the question of whether the world had a beginning in time or if time

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extends infinitely into the past. And third, my examination of these two issues will inform what I have to say regarding a key topic in the philosophy of religion: the question regarding the proper relationship between the infinite and the finite in the concept of God.

At the outset I should make it clear that my own approach is that of a neoclassical (or, more loosely, process) theist. As a result, it is not surprising that I will rely heavily on the thought of Alfred North Whitehead and especially Charles Hartshorne in my effort to respond to Zeno's paradoxes and Kant's first antinomy so as to eventually think clearly about the relationship between the infinite and the finite in the concept of God. We will see that the infinite plays a more restricted role in neoclassical theism than it does in traditional or classical theism. That is, I will argue that philosophical theists have traditionally overemphasized the infinite in what they have said about God.

In this regard I find Oppy very helpful. Granted, ultimately he does not take a stand regarding the role of the infinite in philosophy, in general, and he is an agnostic in philosophy of religion, in particular. Rather, he throws sand in the eyes of almost everyone who uses the concept of infinity. The infinite is a more complicated concept than most are willing to admit, he thinks. Although there are very few areas of philosophy where questions regarding the infinite do not arise at some point (consider the role the infinite plays in philosophy of mathematics, logic, philosophy of science, mereology, philosophy of religion, aesthetics, etc.), there are nonetheless various problems and/or paradoxes that arise when one tries to find application for the infinite outside of the realms of logic and mathematics (Oppy 2006, 1, 48–49). As Oppy himself puts the point:

On the one hand, a blanket ban on the infinite seems to bring crippling difficulties. Infinity is everywhere in classical mathematics. In particular, real analysis provides foundations for everything from the calculus to the mathematical theory of probability. Moreover, infinity is found everywhere in the foundations of science and our ordinary thought about the world: Consider, for example, familiar conceptions of the divisibility of space and time. Because the infinite lurks everywhere, both in our ordinary thought about the world and in science, it is very hard to see how we could live without it. On the other hand, involvement with the infinite brings with it a huge range of difficulties [as in Zeno's paradoxes, Kant's first antinomy, etc.].... Moreover, there are the many quite fundamental problems that arise for such apparently simple notions as counting, adding, maximizing, and so forth. Because we are so firmly wedded to limit notions—"best," "first," "greatest," "maximum," and so forth—that do not sit easily with the infinite, it is very hard to see how we can make our peace with the infinite (Oppy 2006, 294–295).

Even in mathematics and logic the situation is complicated, as Oppy emphasizes. The vast majority of practicing mathematicians think that we have a sound understanding of the infinite. However, there is a significant minority who dissent from the dominant view (Oppy 2006, 270). Once again, my task here is to confront some of the problems with the concept of the infinite so as to eventually try to clarify the role the infinite plays in the concept of God.

In addition to (unwittingly) helping neoclassical theists criticize the muscular use of the infinite in classical theism, Oppy is also instructive in the way he maps out the range of philosophical positions one could take regarding the infinite. It will

help us to briefly indicate this range here at the beginning so that appeal can be made to it later.

Strict finitism is the view that we have no proper use of the concept of the infinite. That is, extrapolation from the finite to the infinite is not up to the task of avoiding the problems that come along with an appeal to the infinite, hence (i) classical mathematics is to be rejected because of its commitment to the infinite; and (ii) we can posit only a finite number of possible worlds, each with a finite frame and composed of a finite number of mereological atoms. At the other end of the spectrum is strong actual infinitism, which accepts both classical mathematics with its infinite branches and infinite possible worlds (many of which involve an application of the infinite).

In between these two extremes one can also find various potential infinitisms. (It is in this in between region that I suspect Oppy's own sympathies lie, although there can be no assurance here.) For example, weak potential infinitism involves skepticism about actual infinities, but it admits that the domain of the possible itself constitutes an infinity. In other words, there are infinitely many ways that things could be. We will see that this view, as characterized by Oppy, shows several similarities to the neoclassical theistic view that will be defended in the present article.

Zeno's Paradoxes

The puzzles that have come down to us from Zeno raise serious questions that still require attention. If space and time are assemblages of points, then these assemblages must be either discrete or dense. On either alternative we are led, via the Zeno paradoxes, to think that contradiction arises (Oppy 2006, 91–99).

Because Zeno's paradoxes are so well known, there is no need to summarize all of them. One example sets the tone for them all. In the famous Achilles and the Tortoise illustration, we are led to suppose that space and time are dense assemblages of points. To put the point spatially (to put it in temporal terms would work as well), in a race between Achilles and the Tortoise, the latter gets a headstart of 100 m in a 120 m race. By the time Achilles makes up the initial handicap of 100 m, the Tortoise has advanced. By the time Achilles traverses this distance, the Tortoise has advanced as well. And so on infinitely. At this rate, not only will Achilles never catch the Tortoise, the Tortoise will never get to the finish line. Because these conclusions are implausible, we are led to wonder whether space and time are really dense assemblages of points. A similar example could be cited regarding discrete assemblages of points, equally leading to contradiction.

It is unclear exactly where Oppy stands regarding Zeno's paradoxes, except to say that he thinks that they cause problems for philosophers of various stripes. But Whitehead and Hartshorne, as I see things, can overcome these problems.

The key process insight here is that the infinite refers to possibilities, not actualities. In different terms, actuality is not infinitely continuous and dense, but discrete. Let us define “density” in the following way: it refers to the idea that between any two fractions we can always find another fraction intermediate in value. Further, a

consideration of density leads us to an understanding of the meaning not only of continuity, but of the infinite as well. To use the language of calculus, the infinite refers to a continuous function; that is, to a function whose value alters only gradually, however “gradually” is defined (Whitehead 1948, 52, 55, 110).

Abstract points in space and moments in time are (merely) limits that are densely related to each other. But the actual world is composed of occasions that have duration. That is, they endure for a certain stretch and hence are discrete, rather than dense. Zeno’s paradoxes are created by committing the fallacy of misplaced concreteness; they are created by the assumption that the abstract region of continuous possibility is the same as the concrete actual world of discrete occasions (Whitehead 1953, 128–129, 138).

Whitehead’s snappy way to make the point is to say that there is a becoming of continuity, but no continuity of becoming. The actual occasions are the creatures that become, and they are not actually continuous, only potentially so. Further, every actual occasion is to be credited with a spatial volume to provide its own perspectival stand-“point.” In effect, Zeno’s mistake in the “paradox” of Achilles and the Tortoise (conceived temporally rather than spatially) is to suppose that we can consider the first half-second of Achilles’ running as one act of becoming, the next quarter-second as another such act, the next eighth-second as a third such act, and so on inexhaustibly to infinity. Indeed, it is possible to abstractly divide moments of time into infinity, but particular, concrete acts of becoming are exhausted after a finite amount of time, as we all know from personal experience (Whitehead 1978, 35, 68–69, 307).

I should be clear that I am not trashing Zeno altogether. The ancient debate between the continuous and the discrete views of space and time (a debate that gives rise to Zeno’s supposed paradoxes) can be resolved if each is given its proper function. That is, the continuous (and the infinite) finds application in the region of the potential and the discrete (and the finite) finds application in the region of the actual, as Hartshorne insightfully argues (Hartshorne 1972, 38).

An analogy may help. The actual array of red objects that we have seen to date does not exhaust the continua of all possible hues, shades, and tints of red. The actual signals an arbitrary breaking of a continuum of infinite parts, whether such a continuum involves color or time. To cite another example, human experience is not infinitesimally short in duration even if abstractly we can divide a second into a half-second, a quarter-second, an eighth-second, etc., to infinity. A drop of human (or other) experience endures for a finite length of time. A unit of experience is an endurance with a certain temporal thickness or spread of a certain length (Hartshorne 1970, 122–123).

One might jump to the conclusion that the finite is a simple idea and the infinite is a complex one on the evidence provided by the supposed difficulty involved in understanding the infinite. But from another point of view it is the continuous, infinite assemblage of points that is a simple idea. It is a simple idea because it can be grasped merely by understanding the concept of density, as defined above. The idea of discontinuous, discrete actual occasions is complex, however. This is because finite actual occasions involve more than mere logical possibility; they also involve

definiteness or some sort of determination among an infinite number of determinables. As Hartshorne puts the point, “the finite or actual includes the infinite as an idea or potentiality.” We will see that the exaltation of the infinite (the lesser) over the finite (the greater) that is characteristic of traditional theism (and which Oppy assumes just is theism) is in fact a type of idolatry (Hartshorne 1970, 126–127).

Another way to make the case is to say that continuity of an infinite number of points or instants tells us nothing about actual things. Concepts like continuity and density are ideals of subdivision or limits that provide the mere backdrop for the actual world. Infinity is not an empirical concept, but a metaphysical one. The actual world of discrete occasions is more complex than the abstract one of logical possibility precisely because it requires specification regarding which possibilities are (or should be) actualized (Hartshorne 1970, 30, 119, 153, 193).

Experience comes in drops or unit instances (rather than in infinitely small fractions thereof), hence in a panexperiential, process world actual occasions are necessarily discrete. This stance is perfectly compatible with the view that infinity has the character of possible states that could become actual: “To do everything possible is to do nothing. To act is to choose among incompatible alternatives. There is a definite or actual world because not everything possible is in it” (Hartshorne 2000, 195). The incompatibility arises only when, and Zeno’s illustrations only become paradoxes when, infinity is identified with the actual (Hartshorne 1991, 652, 716; 1983, 79).

To say that actual occasions are discrete, however, is not to say that they are substantial. Substances are conceived as having their essential being first and then coming into relation subsequently (and accidentally). That is, relations are external to their being. But two discrete actual occasions, one earlier and the other later, are such that the later one cannot come into being “except as a process of reactualizing and completing the first” (Cobb 1975, 74). Relationality is integral to reality when conceived in processual terms. An earlier actual occasion in part constitutes a later one that causally follows it; whereas the later actual occasion incarnates and preserves the earlier one, albeit not in the earlier one’s own subjective immediacy. It is because an actual occasion is temporally thick (is infinitely divisible in theory or as an abstract possibility, but not in actuality) that we can account for the obvious facts that Achilles will in short order pass the Tortoise and that both will eventually reach the finish line.

In sum, although Oppy provides a skeptical service to philosophers by throwing sand in the eyes of everyone who uses the concept of infinity, regarding Zeno’s “paradoxes” it seems that some philosophers have far less sand in their eyes than others.

Kant’s First Antinomy

Another area concerning which Oppy is very helpful is the first antinomy of pure reason in Kant’s first critique (A426-A434; B454-B462). Here Kant offers “proofs” on conflicting theses regarding the finitude or infinitude of time (and space, which I

will not be treating in the present article). Kant's aim seems to be to show that reason is not powerful enough to decide between these two conflicting theses. But Kant does not seem to think that the arguments are sophistical. Oppy disagrees. Both arguments are sophistical, he thinks, and each contains a "tissue of errors" (Oppy 2006, 115–123).

- (i) Kant's argument that the world has a beginning in time goes something like this: If we assume that the world has no beginning in time, then at any given moment an infinite series of moments has already elapsed; but if there has been such an infinite series, it cannot be completed through successive synthesis; hence, such an infinite series is impossible; therefore, the beginning of the world is a necessary condition of the world's existence.

Oppy thinks (correctly, I think) that by "completed successive synthesis" Kant refers to a first and last member of a series from the past. And he thinks that for Kant this is required in order for us to understand the series. But why is a completed successive synthesis required?, it might be asked. The very notion of an infinite series consists in the idea that there can be no completed successive synthesis. Oppy rightly interprets Kant to be begging the issue here. However, if what is meant by "successive synthesis" is that each member in a series is derived in a law governed fashion from the preceding member of the series, then the concept would be intelligible. Despite Oppy's insightful treatment of Kant's argument here, there is at least one defect: Oppy apparently assumes that the world's having a beginning in time is an essential feature of theism. It is not essential, however, for neoclassical theism. Far from it.

- (ii) By way of contrast, Kant's argument that the world has no beginning in time goes something like this: If we assume that the world does, in fact, have a beginning in time, this could occur only if there were a prior time at which the world did not exist, an "empty" time. But nothing can come into existence in an empty time. Therefore, the world has no beginning in time.

We will see that this argument is close to the neoclassical theistic view, hence it is not surprising that I find fewer problems with Kant's view here than with the previous argument. But the way he phrases the argument is misleading. Rather than speak of a time prior to the beginning of time, which sounds contradictory, we should speak of a time before the big bang or a time before our solar system came into existence, so as to avoid the contradiction. Further, Oppy does not help matters by continuing with Kant's language of an "empty" time before the beginning of time. If time is, in some sense, a moving image, as Plato thought (*Timaeus* 37d), what could be imaged in a world in which absolutely nothing "existed"? That is, the neoclassical theistic view sides with Leibniz in the famous Leibniz-Clarke debate: time should be viewed relationally or as relative to the things whose motions are measured (Oppy 2006, 112; cf., Dombrowski 2007, 30).

As with Zeno's "paradoxes," Oppy is very helpful in locating the weaknesses in Kant's arguments regarding time in the first antinomy. But by trashing both of them

equally he gives no indication of the relative strengths of the arguments. That is, he thinks that no one can take any comfort from Kant's arguments and that no one should be willing to take a stand on these issues unless the philosopher in question is willing to "throw caution to the winds" (Oppy 2006, 123). As I see things, however, one can assess the relative strengths of Kant's arguments and still remain cautious.

If God is the greatest conceivable knower, such a knower would be aware of all already actualized entities as well as emergent realities, including emergent universals, metaphysical categories, and mathematical entities. And all of these would be known in time. Kant was correct to hold that all of our conceptions require temporal succession for their application. He was incorrect, however, in assuming that God would be an exception to this rule by existing outside of time in something like a Boethian eternal "now."

The question is: Is there an infinite regress of past stages in the divine knowing? If there is not such an infinite regress, then one wonders how a first stage could arise if every experience must have antecedent objects or conditions. Although dogmatism is to be especially avoided here, it seems to me that the Greeks were correct to lean in the direction of an infinite past. G.E. Moore also comes down on the side of the Greeks and the neoclassical theistic view in seeing a need to conceive of an infinity of temporally realized events (Moore 1953). This need is due to the unintelligibility of a first event, as even Kant, in a way, emphasizes. If, by definition, an event involves a grasping by way of causal inheritance or memory or both from the past, and a creative partial determination of various future determinables, then there can be no events if there is no causal inheritance from, or memory of, the past.

Of course temporal finitists hold that an infinite past is unintelligible. One way to respond to this challenge is to note that at each moment God makes not an (admittedly unintelligible) infinite addition to the divine life, but a finite one. The infinity of prior events, however, are not mutually independent. In fact, the just preceding event would have included (through causal inheritance or memory or both) the earlier ones into its own prehensive unity. So God, in combining finites, enables us to understand an infinite past (Hartshorne 1970, 65–66, 71, 100–101, 125–126).

This Hartshornian consideration enables us to respond to the puzzle treated by Oppy concerning "Hilbert's Hotel" (Oppy 2006, 51–53). An infinite past is not modeled accurately by a hotel with an infinite number of rooms, all of which are occupied, into which new moments must be fit. As Hartshorne puts the point, "There is no infinity of coexisting objects, but only of successively realized [finite] events" (Hartshorne 1970, 126).

Granted, human beings cannot distinctly conceive of every item in an infinite set. Nor can we do so with respect to every item in very large finite sets. But this consideration in no way implies that there cannot be an infinite series, whether in mathematics or concerning past events (Hartshorne 1983, 174). Analogously, Whitehead, one of the twentieth century's greatest mathematicians, argued that any talk about infinitesimals is disguised discourse concerning classes of finites (Whitehead 1948, 168–171; 1978, 328, 332–333). At times Oppy flirts with this view as well (Oppy 2006, 150).

The point to the previous three paragraphs is to suggest that the idea of a beginningless world process is not unintelligible, nor is the idea of a God who comprehends this process *everlastingly* (rather than *eternally*) is a Boethian *totum simul*). God is enriched through each new occasion such that the order of infinity is increased in that new members are added and none are lost, the latter thanks to eminent divine memory (Hartshorne 1972, 87–88). At the very least we should be skeptical of the claim that Kant's first antinomy *refutes* the temporal infinitism of neoclassical theism (Hartshorne 1967, 27–28).

In one sense, belief in temporal infinity is closer to a rational and scientific view of the world than is belief in a temporally finite world. An absolute beginning of becoming (whether theologically based or due to a big bang or both) would entail the idea that this beginning would be different in principle or kind from all later phases of becoming. By way of contrast, belief in temporal infinity leads to no such radical breaks in nature in that the history of the cosmos would consist in the evolution of definite qualities out of a continuum of possible qualities. This does not necessarily mean evolution away from a primordial chaos toward complete order in the distant future. Rather, it might mean consistency throughout evolutionary history in terms of degree of order, but differences over time with respect to the particular principles of order themselves. That is, natural “laws” themselves are contingent and can change from one cosmic epoch to the next, “although that there are some laws or other is a necessity and is guaranteed by the wisdom and power of God” (Hartshorne 1991, 681–682).

Divine creativity presupposes neither a preexistent (prime) matter nor absolute nothingness, as Oppy seems to think, influenced as he is by traditional or classical theism. In fact, traditional theism in a way inappropriately finitized God by limiting the divine productivity to a merely finite stretch. These philosophical considerations lead us to expect some predecessors to the big bang (Hartshorne 1984a, 75, 135).

By assuming that God and the soul are not ultimately in time, Kant distorts some of the problems with which he is most interested in the first critique. For example, his view that we can only have true knowledge of the temporal would be compatible with the claim that we can have knowledge of God if God were temporal, as neoclassical theists believe. This would also call into question the dogma that there is a thing-in-itself behind the temporally changing phenomena (Hartshorne 1941, 20).

On the one hand, Kant can be seen as one of the last great medieval theologians in that his *concept* of God (in contrast to what he says about the *existence* of God) is the traditional one where God is beyond time in a supernatural, changeless realm. Like Oppy, Kant erroneously assumes that traditional or classical theism just *is* theism. On the other, it is possible to view Kant as philosophizing on the cusp of process thought. If he is correct that the only positive use we can make of categories is to apply them to temporal phenomena, then he is very close to the process or neoclassical theistic commonplace that our prime concern is with concrete becoming, rather than with abstract being (Hartshorne 1983, 174–176; 1965, 209, 231; Malone-France 2006).

My next task will be to bring together what I have said thus far regarding Oppy's treatment of Zeno's “paradoxes” and Kant's first antinomy. Then I will use these results in the effort to explicate the role the infinite ought to play in the concept of God.

We have seen in response to Oppy's treatment of Zeno's "paradoxes" that the appropriate way to understand the infinite is in terms of possibility, not in terms of actuality. And we have seen in response to Oppy's treatment of the arguments regarding time in Kant's first antinomy that the concept of an infinite past is not unintelligible. But I have not yet brought these two ideas together. How exactly is an infinite past in the region of the possible rather than in the region of the actual? This question is especially pressing when it is considered that in neoclassical theism the past is the region of the already actualized, the future is the region of the yet-to-be-actualized, and the present is the region where future possibilities or probabilities are becoming actualized.

God as Infinite-Finite

Let us assume that God exists necessarily. Whitehead implies that to identify God with the infinite is a half-truth (Whitehead 1958, 107). And Hartshorne is quite explicit on this point. Divine infinitude deals with possibility or potentiality, not actuality. Or better, God is infinite regarding what could be or could have been, not regarding what is, which requires finitude (in the positive sense of the term, as we will see). If God not only exists, but exists necessarily (as entailed by the modal version of the ontological argument), then God is, and has been and will be, infinitely capable of actuality, which is quite different from saying that God is infinitely actual. In effect, it does not make sense to talk of God's infinite actuality in that what actually exists requires limitation of some sort (not in the pejorative sense, but in the sense of determination regarding possible determinables). By way of contrast, what is inexhaustible and infinite in God are the ways in which the divine life could become actual or could have become actual in the past (Hartshorne 1967, 21).

To be specific, this view of God as infinite-finite is a part of neoclassical theism's stance regarding God as dipolar. In bare existence (i.e., the fact that God exists everlastingly) God is infinite with respect to both the past and the future. But this tells us little about God's actuality (i.e., how God exists in concrete detail from moment to moment). Here we need to wait on the contingent results of God's relations with finite creatures. And because God is related to such creatures, say through knowledge and love, then God is (once again, in divine actuality rather than in divine existence) finite, too. By seeing God as strictly infinite, traditional theism's (and Oppy's) monopolar stance makes it difficult, if not impossible, to explain how God could know and love the creatures. For example, in traditional or classical theism God knows what happens contingently to the creatures, but remains eternally unmoved by these events. God loves the creatures, according to traditional or classical theists, but is not affected internally by what happens to them, not even if they suffer intensely and die prematurely or tragically. Neoclassical theists rightly wonder whether this is really the greatest conceivable being.

By viewing God as not simply infinite or totally other, it is possible to overcome the complaints that Christian (and other) mystics have had about the "God of the

philosophers” (i.e., the God of traditional philosophical theists). The process of actualization involves the acceptance of limitation and finitude. It is to respond in this way to some particular being, say through mystical union or compassion. Even for God, “to do all possible things is to do nothing” (Hartshorne 1967, 24, 36, 74–75, 128). Or again, “we had better worship God, not ‘the infinite’” (Hartshorne 1970, 154). It even makes sense to call this dipolar view of God as infinite-finite a type of “dual transcendence.” God is both eminently infinite (in existence), in contrast to our limited, finite lifespans, and eminently finite (in actuality), in contrast to our defective knowledge of, or love for, particular beings.

As I see things, the key insight regarding infinity captured by traditional, monopolar theists is preserved in dipolar theism. That is, neoclassical theism is both “neo” and “classical.” This key insight is that in part what makes God much more than even the most admirable human being is infinity of existence in the sense that there are no threatening conditions that could lead to God’s passing out of existence (Hartshorne 2000, 34, 417). But there is no need to overemphasize the infinite by applying it as well to divine actuality (once again, to how God exists rather than to the fact that God exists everlasting). Indeed, the greatest conceivable being could not be infinite in every respect and still be the greatest conceivable (Hartshorne 1962, 78).

The hope is that there is progress in philosophical theism as various thinkers try to properly assess the role the infinite plays in the concept of God. For example, Hegel and Schelling and Fechner (and Aristotle!) knew that the merely infinite cannot have knowledge of the finite; William Ellery Channing thought it idolatrous to identify God with an abstract concept like the infinite; even Richard Rorty, like Oppy a nonbeliever, argues (contra Oppy) that if God is equated with infinity then the concept of God is devoid of religious value; and, of course, Whitehead implied that God has both an infinite or primordial aspect as well as a finite or consequent one; etc. (Hartshorne 1984b, 31, 62, 259, 281–282; 1941, 239).

From the above it would be correct to infer that, in addition to the defects of a strictly infinite God, there are obvious defects in a strictly finite God, as found in William James, for example. The logic of perfection leads us to conclude that God is infinite in terms of the temporal extent to which other divine attributes (e.g., omnibenevolence) could be exhibited. But what it is like concretely to instantiate divine goodness requires a positive sort of finitude. Both finitude and infinitude have both positive and negative connotations. The task is to include only the positive connotations in the concept of God (Hartshorne 1984a, 7, 47; 1991, 17, 635; 1941, 17).

Further, to define God in an Anselmian way as the greatest conceivable is not to say that God is thereby limited to our conception on the analogy of the greatest possible number. In both mathematics and several puzzles treated by Oppy, it is clear that there are infinities that are unequal to each other. But this fact alone does not undermine the very idea of infinity. For example, the set of cardinal numbers is smaller than the set of real numbers, but both sets are infinite (Oppy 2006, 8, 49–51).

One of the features of the concept of God that makes it a difficult one to understand adequately is that it requires a sort of methodological pluralism. Understanding the infinite, possible aspect of God requires the sort of abstract reasoning that flourishes in mathematics, but understanding the finite, actual aspect of God requires empirical

evidence broadly conceived, whether scientific or mediated through religious tradition or based on the sort of evidence that comes from personal (mystical) experience (Hartshorne 1983, 377). To know that God exists everlasting is one thing, to know how God actualizes possibilities from moment to moment is another. And no being, not even a divine one, can know in minute detail and with absolute assurance how future determinables will be determined. Although neoclassical theism operates with a revised notion of divine omniscience, it by no means abandons the concept: God knows everything that logically could be known (Hartshorne 1941, 268).

To lack all limitation (finitude in the sense of being this rather than that) is to become indistinguishable from mere indeterminate potentiality or infinity (Hartshorne 1965, 169). Divine de-cisions (literally the cutting off of some possibilities rather than others) must be made at each moment, but which ones? All-good ones, yes, but which ones exactly? Much depends on the creatures' previous (contingent and free) responses to the divine lure.

It should be clear by now that there is something misleading in the overly parsimonious claim made by traditional or classical theists that human beings are finite and God is infinite. More accurate is the claim that human beings have finite lifespans whereas God's is infinite. But God is not infinite simpliciter. And there is something misleading in identifying human beings with the finite simpliciter in that God's actuality is eminently finite. One aspect of the problem at hand is illustrated well by the contrast between human fragmentariness and divine omnipresence. Just as our temporal careers are finite, we are also fragments of a spatial whole. (I leave unexamined the interesting question as to whether this spatial whole is finite or infinite. Also see Oppy 1997). God, as the soul for the body of the whole world (the World Soul) is fragmentary in no way (Hartshorne 1984a, 36, 117, 131).

Finitude can be defined as the region of the actualization of some, but not all, possibilities. Analogously, to be fragmentary is to be less than all that is spatially actual. But both finitude and fragmentariness share an alliance with the contingent, in contrast to the abstract necessity of the infinite and ubiquitous. For example, God must exist at all times and places in the best way possible, but this abstract assertion can be fleshed out only as a result of divine and creaturely decisions (Hartshorne 1962, 78–79, 245; 1967, 7). God cannot be infinitely actual at any one time because this would mean the actualization of all possible worlds, many of which are not compossible. Every actuality, even the omnibenevolent divine one indexed at some particular time, must be limited or finite in some respects when compared to what is conceivable (Hartshorne 1970, 234–235).

Practical Implications

We have seen above the legitimate insight that is captured by traditional or classical theists. Because we have finite lifespans, and because we enjoy our lives, it makes sense that we look positively on infinite temporality and that we live for the sake of the infinite in the sense that we try to find some enduring repository for all that is

good and beautiful to which we can contribute. That is, divine infinite temporality adds depth to what would otherwise be not only finite, but ephemeral. Even Dewey, who did not necessarily see the infinite as pertaining to the divine, noticed that each of us acts in such a way as to set up an infinite chain of consequences that last longer than we do (Hartshorne 1962, 15; 1975, 18, 25; 1984b, 95).

It might be asked: what could one contribute to a temporally infinite deity? Infinity-plus-one is still infinity, as is infinity-minus-one. Would not God get along just as well without us? These questions seem to assume a classical theistic view, however, the view that Oppy assumes whenever he talks about God. From a neoclassical stance, however, we should respond as follows: what we can contribute to a temporally infinite God is nothing other than the richness of finite experiences (Dombrowski 2004). As before, infinity is involved in almost every branch of human knowledge, including mathematics, ethics, astronomy, aesthetics, etc. In effect, the infinite is not exactly outside of our ordinary experience, as is often alleged, but is rather within our experience as a horizon. This “immanent infinity,” as Hartshorne refers to it, bridges the gap between our lives and the divine to the extent that the latter is characterized by infinity (Hartshorne 2000, 222; 1972, 36).

It will be noted that I have not said anything about infinite power in God or about the attribute of omnipotence, which, as is well known, is criticized in neoclassical theism. But this does not necessarily mean that the neoclassical theist “limits” the power of God or settles for a strictly finite God. Rather, the point is that there is a social element in the very idea of power. As was noted in Plato’s *Sophist* (247e), anything that exists, even in an insignificant way, has some sort of *dynamis* or dynamic power, specifically the power to affect and to be affected by others. Hence, no being could have all power or infinite power if others exist. However, the persuasive power of God, consistent with divine omnibenevolence, operates everlasting or infinitely throughout time (Dombrowski 2005; Hartshorne 1972, 100–101; cf., 1975, 114, 122).

As Oppy correctly notes, the concept of the infinite initially finds its application not only in the desire to find a temporally infinite existent, but also in, and primarily in, mathematics. Whitehead argues that the main ideas at the base of mathematics are not so much recondite as they are abstract. This is why mathematics is so important in a liberal education: to accustom young people to handle abstract ideas (Whitehead 1957, 80; 1953, 168–169; 1978, 202–206). Although consideration of the infinite in mathematics is the most fruitful stepping stone to consideration of the infinite in theology, the latter involves something else: the logic of perfection (Hartshorne 1962, 107).

In the present article I have tried to understand the place of the infinite in this logic. I have argued (in response to the Zeno “paradoxes”) that the infinite refers to the region of the possible and that all actualization is finite in that it involves the exclusion of alternative possibilities. I have also claimed that the idea of temporal infinity is more intelligible than Kant or Oppy have admitted. Both of these ideas help us to better understand the dipolar concept of God, which includes the ideas that God’s temporal existence is infinite, but how God actually exists in each occasion of divine experience is finite. By “finite” here I refer to the fact that any occasion

of experience excludes “the unbounded welter of contrary possibilities” ([Whitehead 1967](#), 259, 276). As in the fine arts, the goal is to produce finite occasions of experience that harmonize with each other; it is to contribute to the divine life the most intense experiences of goodness and beauty of which we are capable.

Postscript

In this final section I would like to be more precise regarding the character of the relationship between Hartshornian universals (in partial contrast with Whiteheadian eternal objects, although admittedly there is a family resemblance between the two) and the infinite. In this effort I will touch on some interneccine strife within process thought, in contrast to the more significant extramural debate between process thinkers and traditional, substantialist metaphysicians (including Oppy).

In general, process thinkers are committed to belief in two sorts of necessity: (a) the necessary as what is common to all events; and (b) the necessary as it relates to the unalterability of the past (i.e., conditional necessity, in that the past was once future and characterized by possibility). As Donald Viney has emphasized ([Viney 2010](#)), even Thomas Aquinas held that not even God could restore virginity to someone who had lost it ([Summa Theologiae](#) I, q. 25, a. 4).

As before, the theory of modality assumed here includes the claims that the past is fully determinate, the future is at least partially indeterminate, and the present is in the process of determination. An implication of these claims is that transient states cannot be expressed in terms of a tenseless copula. If a tenseless copula is used it should refer to a nontransient state of affairs. It is thus a mistake to think, as did Leibniz, that possible worlds are lined up in eternity awaiting actualization by divine fiat, as Viney again rightly emphasizes. Rather, possible worlds in their infinity are ways that the actual world in the present could be. A possible world is a way that the actual world could be, either in the near or remote future.

In the aforementioned example of a continuum of color, it is interesting to note that if we judge two objects to be exactly the same shade of red, this is probably due to our inability to discern the real differences in their colors. “A continuum, by definition, has no least element but is infinitely divisible,” as Viney notes. Any particular shade of red is nothing other than a slice of this abstract continuum. The shade is not a Whiteheadian “eternal object” if what this means is a preexisting “form of definiteness.” Rather, the precise shade of red is the present actual occasion itself where definiteness takes place, where a determinable becomes determinate.

Granted, the Hartshornian view I am defending could admit that the most abstract universals (cosmic invariances, metaphysical rather than color universals, etc.) may in a way escape from temporal flux. But what we normally mean by universals (e.g., redness) are themselves processual in character in that we can only begin to notice the infinite nuances of difference among them by reference to actual occasions as they are token-reflexively indexed (e.g., this particular shade of red here at this particular time as witnessed by this specific viewer, etc.).

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Part IV
Open Theism

Introduction to Open Theism

David Basinger

Open theism is the “newest” of the theisms in this part of the book, except for some of the emerging “end of being theologies” explored in the sixth section. While all of the key theological/philosophical commitments affirmed by open theists have been, and continue to be, affirmed by proponents of other theisms, the classification of a specific set of these commitments as “open theism” is relatively recent (1994). Accordingly, both proponents and critics are still in the process of attempting to clarify both the key theological/philosophical concepts in question and their implications for practical Christian living. This has understandably led to significant confusion on the part of many encountering open theism for the first time.¹

The purpose of this introduction is twofold. First, I want to outline as clearly as possible what I see, from my perspective as one of its original proponents, are the key philosophical/theological commitments that comprise open theism, comparing and contrasting this set of commitments with those of some competing theisms. Second, I will introduce the three essays on open theism in this section, noting for each how the essay contributes to the ongoing “fleshing out” of the original formulation of this new relational theology and my own response to the line of reasoning presented.

¹ Some of the best sources for a more in-depth understanding of open theism are the following: Basinger (1996), Boyd (2000), Fretheim (1984), Hasker (1998, 2004), Pinnock (2001), Rice (2004), Sanders (1998).

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I

While I don't believe that one need be a Christian to affirm the key tenets of open theism, open theism was, and continues to be, primarily a Christian theological perspective. In the early 1990s Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Richard Rice, William Hasker, and I started discussing our dissatisfaction with the models of God available to Christians who believed the Bible to be an authoritative guide to faith and practice. These discussions led to an understanding of God and God's relationship with the world published in the *Openness of God* in 1994.²

The overarching theme of open theism is that God loves and desires to be in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with us. The best way to clarify what this means, I believe, is to outline comparatively the open perspective on four divine attributes: God's power, God's moral nature, God's affective (emotive) nature, and God's knowledge.

While it is often difficult to determine the exact position of historic figures such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin on the nature and efficacy of God's power, there are three basic perspectives on this question. Proponents of *theological determinism* maintain that God *is* all controlling. Humans are free and responsible for their actions, but all and only that which God has determined (decreed) should happen does happen. This does not of course mean that God "likes" all that occurs. The evil that occurs in the world is not inherently desirable or pleasing to God. But each instance of evil, along with every other occurrence, has been decreed by God as part of a perfect plan for our world and is thus instrumentally necessary, although we will never in this life be in a position to understand how this could be so.

Proponents of *freewill theism* maintain that God possesses the same amount of power as that of the God of Theological determinism and thus *could be* all controlling. And they maintain that God does at times use this power to intervene unilaterally in our world. God, for instance, created the world *ex nihilo*, and God can and does occasionally override the natural order and/or human freedom to ensure a desired outcome. However, to the extent that God grants us meaningful freedom, it is argued, God has voluntarily given up control over what will occur as a result. Accordingly, there is inherent risk in this world. Not all that occurs is in keeping with the divine will. Some of what occurs is not even instrumentally necessary. The world would have been better without it.

Proponents of *process theism* are in agreement with freewill theists that God cannot control free choice and that such choice often produces states of affairs that the world would be better off without. But for process theists, this is not true because God has chosen to limit divine power. It is true because God *cannot* unilaterally control anything – for example, did not create the world *ex nihilo* and cannot intervene unilaterally to prevent evil. By metaphysical necessity, all entities always retain some power of self-determination that cannot be overridden by God.³

² Pinnock et al. (1994). A very interesting, clearly written account of both the origins of open theism and the relevant backgrounds of those of us who were involved in its initial formulation can be found in Witham (2010).

³ A more detailed discussion of these three differing understandings of divine omnipotence can be found in Basinger (1996), chapter 1.

Proponents of open theism are sometimes (often) characterized as process theists, but this is inaccurate. Open theists have always been freewill theists in relation to God's power.⁴ We read in the *Openness of God*, for instance, that "God not only created this world *ex nihilo* but can (and at times does) intervene unilaterally in earthly affairs" (p. 155), that "God chose to create us with incompatibilistic (libertarian) freedom – freedom over which God cannot exercise total control" (p. 155), and that "God so values freedom – the moral integrity of free creatures and a world in which such integrity is possible – that God does not normally override such freedom, even if God sees that it is producing undesirable results" (p. 155). It is true that open theists can appear quite similar to process theists in that both often maintain that given states of affairs were not decreed (controlled) by God. But for open theists this is the result of a divine choice, while for process theists this is the result of a metaphysical necessity.

The relevant debate over God's moral nature centers around two basic perspectives. Some Christians have held, and continue to hold, that although God loves us, God is under no (self-imposed) obligation to do all God can to make our lives as good as possible. Proponents of this view often point to verses such as Romans 9: 16–22, where we read that just as a potter can do with a lump of clay whatever the potter wants for any reason, so too can God do what God wants with and to us as humans for God's own reasons, apart from how this might affect our wellbeing.

Other Christians have held, and continue to hold, that because of God's love for us, God has chosen never to do less than God can to make our lives as good as possible. Of course, it is recognized that what God can do is in part a function of other choices God has made. For instance, those in this category who are freewill theists acknowledge that to the extent God chooses to grant us freedom, God cannot both allow such freedom and preserve us from all the negative consequences the use of this freedom can produce. But our primary role on earth is not to be used by God for God's purposes. God has God's purposes, and we may play a role in bringing those to fruition. However, God is always to the extent possible helping us live our lives as fully as possible.

Open theists clearly fall in this second camp.⁵ Because they hold that God's primary goal in creation is to participate in an ongoing, dynamic, loving relationship with God's creation, it should not be surprising that open theists maintain that "God always desires our highest good, both individually and corporately" (*Openness*, p. 155).

A third relevant debate centers on God's affective or emotive nature, and again we find two basic perspectives. Proponents of what I will label the Traditional Orthodox perspective hold that while God is aware of all that occurs in our lives, including all of our successes and failures, God is immutable (unchanging) and therefore impassible (cannot be affected emotionally by anything we do). Since

⁴There is in the literature an unfortunate ambiguity in the use of the phrase "freewill theism." At times it is used as the label for one of the specific perspectives on God's power (as is the case here), but at other times as a more comprehensive label, like "open theism" or "process theism," for one of the theological systems affirming a specific set of perspectives on all four key attributes in question.

⁵A fuller discussion of God's moral nature can be found in Basinger (1996), chapter 3.

God is perfect in every way, any change “within” God would entail that God has been, or is now, lacking in some way. Hence, we cannot countenance change of any sort in God, including a change in God’s affective status. This doesn’t mean, for instance, that God does not love us or have compassion for us. But as church fathers such as Anselm and Aquinas have taught us, while this love and compassion can and does affect God’s actions, such love and compassion are not for God subjective emotional experiences.

Those who affirm what I will label the Contemporary Orthodox perspective see things differently. We clearly find in Scripture, it is argued, that God does experience emotional change – for example, does really does rejoice and/or become sorrowful in response to our actions. This, however, is not an essential change in God’s nature. God is essentially perfect – exemplifies perfection in every way. And for God to be affected by (appropriately emotively dependent on) what happens to those with whom God is in relationship makes God a more complete and admirable being than one who is incapable of experiencing such change.⁶

It will come as no surprise that open theists affirm the Contemporary Orthodox view. Again, God’s primary goal in creation is held to be participation in an ongoing, dynamic, loving relationship with God’s creation. And this type of relationship, open theists maintain, is possible only if there is some form of affective vulnerability in God – that is, only if “God … is affected by what happens in our lives” (*Openness*, p. 155).⁷

If open theists affirmed only the three perspectives on God’s attributes noted so far, open theists would be indistinguishable from freewill theists,⁸ who also affirm these tenets. However, with respect to God’s knowledge, open theism distinguishes itself from freewill theism. And it is in relation to this divine attribute that considerable controversy within some segments of the theological community has arisen.

There are three basic perspectives on God’s knowledge. Those who believe God possesses *present knowledge* maintain that God knows infallibly all that has occurred and is occurring, and can predict (but does not know infallibly) what individuals will freely do. Let us assume, for instance, that Judy is choosing between marriage proposals from Jim and Bill and goes to God in prayer for guidance. Begging important questions about whether it would be appropriate for God to communicate to Judy all God knows and whether Judy would be in a position to “hear” clearly and accurately that which God communicates, what useful information would be available for God to share? God would know, for example, the true motives and character of both Jim and Bill. And given God’s understanding of the past experiences and personality of all involved, God could predict better than even the most seasoned human counselor the likelihood of success in either case. However, given that the outcome of

⁶See, for example, Lucas (2010).

⁷As will be noted below, not all who currently label themselves open theists believe God must be subject to emotive passibility (affective change). I will argue at that point, however, that this is an unacceptable option for open theists.

⁸I am here referencing the broader meaning of “freewill theism” as a theological system affirming a specific set of perspectives on all four key attributes in question. See footnote [4] above.

either marriage would be determined in part by relevant libertarian free choices yet to be made, God does not know what exactly would eventuate in either case and thus would not be in a position to give Judy fully accurate, comprehensive comparative advice.

Those who believe God possesses *simple foreknowledge* maintain that God knows infallibly not only all that has occurred and is occurring but also all that will actually occur. With respect to Judy's marriage proposals, a God with simple foreknowledge knows infallibly and comprehensively not only the past of each of the three individuals and the present character, personality, and motives of all three, God also knows exactly what will happen. God knows for instance whether Judy will marry Bill or Jim or neither. And if it is the case that she will marry Jim, then God knows all that will actually occur during their married life.

A variant of simple foreknowledge is timeless knowledge. Proponents of timeless knowledge agree God knows infallibly and exhaustively all that will actually occur. They maintain, however, that God does not experience the world as past, present, or future. God is outside of time. For God, all actual states of affairs, including all such states of affairs related to Judy's marriage proposals, are viewed in the "eternal now."

Those who believe that God possesses *middle knowledge* maintain that God knows infallibly not only all that has occurred, is occurring, and will actually occur, God also knows exactly what would occur (or would have occurred) in every possible situation. With respect to Judy's marriage proposals, this means that a God with middle knowledge knows infallibly and exhaustively not only the past of each of the three individuals, the present character, personality, and motives of all three, and what *will* actually happen, God also possesses what for Judy is very important comparative knowledge in that God infallibly knows exactly what *would* (not just *could*) actually happen if she were to marry Jim, marry Bill, or stay single.⁹

Open theists affirm present knowledge. Many open theists do so primarily because they believe that humans cannot exercise true libertarian freedom if God foreknows (or already knows timelessly) what the outcome of these free choices will be. Other open theists affirm present knowledge primarily because they believe this understanding of God's knowledge to be most faithful to that picture of a loving, relational God found in Scripture. But all agree that "God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of exactly how we will utilize our freedom, although God may well at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will freely make" (*Openness*, p. 155).

The negative reaction of the conservative (especially Evangelical) Christian community to this understanding of God's knowledge was swift and strong. While most in this camp were (and still are) comfortable with differing understandings of God's power, moral nature, and emotive nature, many were clearly not comfortable with the contention that God does not have exhaustive knowledge of the future. They were especially troubled by what was viewed as the incompatibility of present

⁹ A more detailed discussion of these differing understandings of divine omniscience can be found in Basinger (1996), chapter 2.

knowledge with the clear teaching of Scripture on such things as divine guidance, the ultimate triumph of good over evil, and prophesy. Nor were these criticisms merely academic. A number of those who publicly affirmed open theism found themselves having to defend their orthodoxy before college administrations, college trustees, and/or organizations such as the Evangelical Theological Society.¹⁰

While many in the conservative Christian community still find open theism unacceptable, open theism is more widely accepted (or at least better tolerated) than it was initially. More importantly, discussions surrounding the key commitments of open theists have moved into philosophical and more mainstream theological circles, where these commitments have been subjected to much more nuanced analyses and their implications for significant theological doctrines more fully explored. The three essays in this section are good examples of this type of philosophical and/or theological analysis.

II

David Woodruff begins his essay by noting that the commitment of open theists to an open future leads to the affirmation of two highly controversial claims: (1) that God did not foreordain everything that happens and, accordingly, that creation entails risk and (2) that God does not possess exhaustive, infallible knowledge of the future. Criticisms of these claims, he adds, can be grouped into three categories: theological (related to our thoughts about God), practical (related to our thoughts about how we should act), and philosophical (related to the conceptual framework that should guide our thinking).

Key among the theological criticisms mentioned are that a God lacking full omniscience and omnipotent is not worthy of worship and that the very notion of divine risk this entails is repugnant. Among the practical criticisms noted are that (1) the God of open theism is not able to perform the functions we rightly expect of God – for example, is not in total control and cannot give us guidance based on full knowledge of the future – and that (2) the understanding of Scripture open theists are forced to accept doesn’t allow them to affirm such important practical concepts as biblical inerrancy or prophecy. Among the philosophical criticisms noted are that open theists incorrectly presuppose a dynamic view of time and incorrectly maintain that humans possess libertarian freedom.

While the purpose of Woodruff’s essay is in part to discuss how open theists can best respond to such criticisms, his primary goal, as I see it, is to highlight the proper way in which discussion between open theists and their critics should be

¹⁰ Some key critical sources are the following: Craig (2000), Erickson (2003), Flint (1998), Frame (2001), Geisler and House (2001), Helm (1994), Piper et al. (2003), Schreiner and Ware (2000), Ware (2001), Wright (1996).

See again Witham (2010) for a more in-depth discussion of the difficulties encountered by some who initially affirmed open theism.

conducted if such discussion is to be meaningful and productive. In both cases, we are told, the key is to understand that the disputes in question are based on differing assumptions and control beliefs.

Let's consider, for example, the standard claim of the critic that the key tenets of open theism are based upon a faulty hermeneutic – on a defective, inferior, unacceptable approach to biblical interpretation. In response, we are told, open theists should not simply retort that it's the critic's hermeneutic that is faulty. Open theists should state clearly the key hermeneutical principle that guides their interpretation of Scripture: that the preferable interpretation is the one which best expresses the dynamic loving relationship between God and God's creation. But even more importantly, open theists should point out to the critic that all specific biblical interpretations, including the critic's, are grounded in specific theological traditions, that all such traditions are fallible, and that there can be, accordingly, a number of legitimate interpretations of biblical passages, including those affirmed by open theists. While this may well not sway the critic, it does at least highlight what this hermeneutical debate, at its conceptual core, is all about.

The important general point this illustrates for Woodruff is that since disputes between open theists and their critics are fundamentally grounded in differing basic assumptions and control beliefs, meaningful, productive discussions concerning these disputes require all parties to grant that "rational people can share a set of accepted facts and still come to different conclusions." For only when those in both camps concede that honest, good-intentioned, reasonably intelligent people can justifiably disagree on such fundamental commitments will we be able to move past personal *ad hominem* attacks and simplistic claims based on an assumed interpretation of biblical verses or a prominent historical figure. This doesn't mean that those in both camps cannot continue to argue (even passionately) that their perspective is superior. However, it will center such discussion on what is really fundamental to the debate and will keep such discussion at a civil, respectful level. Moreover, in such a context, Woodruff maintains, progress in moving toward consensus is possible.

I agree fully with what I see as Woodruff's most important epistemic claim: that all parties in epistemic disputes, including theological disputes, should acknowledge that sincere, knowledgeable individuals can differ on the issues in question and that we should, therefore, be open to reflecting on the reasons why both we and those with whom we disagree hold our current perspectives. I also believe, though, that recent studies on the formation and retention of belief show that meaningful comparative belief assessment of this sort is even more difficult than previously believed.

We have always known that our basic beliefs about reality are shaped significantly by subconscious cultural conditioning and respected authority figures. Recent studies, however, seem to indicate that the brain is "wired" to retain the beliefs bestowed on us by culture and authority figures, especially if there is a strong, deep-seated affective (emotional) attachment to these beliefs. What this appears to mean in practice is that our default response to epistemic challenge is to defend our bestowed beliefs. Specifically, it appears that we are "wired" not to listen openly to the reasons

on which our competitors hold their beliefs. We are rather immediately thinking of ways of explaining away or refuting our competitors' beliefs. And we are "wired" not to analyze critically our own beliefs.

Studies also show, however, that productive comparative belief modification can occur if we acknowledge these shaping influences and consciously reflect on our beliefs and the beliefs of our epistemic competitors.¹¹ So while I applaud Woodruff for encouraging open theists and their critics to engage in serious discussions around the key theological/practical/philosophical assumptions on which their disputes are based, I think it is important to realize that these discussions will be most productive only if both parties come to understand why such discussions are so difficult and work consciously not to allow the "default" approach to disputes to prevail.

The primary purpose of Alan R. Rhoda's essay is to offer a nuanced, comparative philosophical analysis of what he sees as the core commitments of open theism and to highlight some implications of these commitments for other important philosophical/theological concepts.

First and foremost, we are told, open theists are committed to the key tenets of classical theism. Specifically, unlike process theists, open theists are committed to the fundamental classical contention that God is a metaphysically necessary being with maximal power, knowledge and goodness, who has created the world *ex nihilo* and has the power to intervene unilaterally in this created order as needed. What distinguishes open theists from other classical theists (such as theological determinists) is their commitment to a certain set of understandings about what it means to say that God is all powerful, all knowing, and perfectly good.

One such commitment, we read, is the belief that the future is causally open. Specifically, the future is causally open in the sense that it is not fully settled or fixed – that is, some things that will happen could have turned out differently – and this is so only because God is open in the sense that God freely enters into an ongoing, two-way relationship with us.

However, open theists can maintain that the future is causally open, Rhonda points out, only if they are also committed to the belief that the future is epistemically open in the sense that no one knows which causally possible future will in fact come to pass. It is because open theists believe this epistemic openness applies even to God that they deny that God has infallible, comprehensive foreknowledge of the actual future.

Moreover, since open theists maintain that the future is causally and epistemologically open, they are then committed to the claim that the future is providentially open in the sense that not all that actually occurs was pre-ordained (was decreed) by God.

Given these core commitments, Rhoda continues, certain corollaries follow. It follows, for instance, that God's knowledge must change over time and, thus, that God must be a temporal being. Furthermore, while open theists are not necessarily committed to affirming that God's will or feelings change (are possible), it obviously follows that God cannot for open theists be impossible (unchanging) in

¹¹ Basinger (2011).

knowledge. It also follows for open theists that if the future is epistemically open (that exhaustive knowledge of the future is not available even to God) the future is ontically open in the sense that while what has existed and now exists is settled, what might come to be is not, as that does not yet exist. Finally, it follows for Rhoda that if the future is ontically open (that what exists in the future is not settled) and causally open (what will happen in the future is not determined by what now is), then the future is alethically open in the sense that there is no complete, true story of the future, although he admits that there is not full agreement among open theists on this point.

Rhoda concludes his essay by comparing the tenets of open theism to theological determinism, Molinism (the belief that God has middle knowledge), and process theism on the following questions: (1) Is the manner in which God exercises power causally sufficient (determining) or a contributing factor (persuasive)? (2) Is the scope of God's providence meticulous (all details of creation are ordained) or general (not all details of creation are ordained)? (3) Are there any unavoidable external limits on what God can do?

What such comparisons most clearly demonstrate, Rhoda contends, is that the four "isms" in question don't uniformly agree or differ on these issues. For example, while open theists and Molinists both hold that the use of God's power is only sometimes sufficient (determining), theological determinists believe it always is. However, while theological determinists and Molinists both agree that all that exists is in a real sense ordained, open theists deny this. And while there are no external limiting factors for either theological determinists or open theists, God's counterfactual knowledge before creation of what we would freely do in any context in which we exercised freedom placed limits on the possible creative choices that were actualizable for the God of Molinism.

Rhoda's essay is helpful in many respects. I'm especially grateful for his careful delineation of the senses in which the future is open for open theists, as these distinctions allow for a much more nuanced understanding of that to which open theists are committed (or not committed) on important questions related to God's temporality and possibility. I'm also grateful for his comparative review of the nature and extent of God's providential activity in open theism, theological determinism, Molinism, and process theism. Open theism is often confused with process theism, and Molinism is held by some to be simply a modified form of theological determinism. Rhoda's comparative analysis clarifies in what senses the various "isms" are alike and how each actually differs from the others.

There is only one point on which Rhoda and I disagree. As noted, Rhoda believes that the question of whether God's feelings change is a legitimate in-house debate for open theists. "Some open theists," he tells us, "point to Biblical descriptions of God's 'changing' his mind, 'repenting', getting angry, and so forth, as evidence that God is possible in will and in feeling, whereas others ... argue that possibility in either will or feeling is incompatible with divine perfection and that therefore Biblical passages that suggest such possibility on God's part should not be construed literally."

While I accept that those who label themselves open theists can legitimately differ on significant points, as I see it, the question of whether God's feelings are

possible (do change) is not one of them. God, from my perspective, must be considered possible in feeling by open theists. This is not the case primarily because I believe that the God's emotive possibility is clearly evident in Scripture, for I have already acknowledged in my discussion of Woodruff's essay that equally knowledgeable, sincere individuals can interpret Scripture differently. My primary reason for believing God's emotive possibility to be a non-negotiable core commitment for open theists is because I see this to be a corollary of the most fundamental commitment of open theists: that God is in a dynamic personal, loving relationship with us. Just as I don't see how it is possible for humans to be in a personal, loving relationship without affective vulnerability on the part of both parties, I don't see how it is possible for God to maintain the type of dynamic, personal, loving relationship with us that open theists envision if God cannot (and does not) experience emotional change (a real change in feeling) as the result of this interaction.

Richard Rice's essay explores how open theists can best respond to an important theological question related to God and time. A key tenet of open theism is that God is a temporal being whose experience is inherently interactive in the sense that God affects the world and the world affects God. However, this relationship is in a significant sense asymmetric for open theism in that, unlike what is the case for process theism, while it is true that the world needs God, it is not the case that God needs the world. We are, accordingly, left with the question of "how one might conceive of divine temporality without a temporal world for God to experience." Rice argues in this essay that recent work on the Trinity by Robert Jensen, when corrected on one key point by the insights of process theist Schubert Ogden, gives us a very satisfactory way of understanding God's experience as a temporal being within open theism.

Jensen rightly notes, we are told, that a proper understanding of the Trinity requires that the divine experience be inherently relational and temporal. In fact, the Trinitarian concept of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" actually derives its meaning from God's creative, interactive reality in time. However, Jensen's understanding of God's temporality, Rice maintains, is inadequate. Jensen believes that God envelopes time in the sense that while God is not above time, God is "ahead of" or "in front of" time, which still implies that time is something distinct from God's own reality. But if God is truly temporal, Rice argues, we cannot conceive of God as preceding, enveloping, or succeeding time.

It is at this point that Rice finds Schubert Ogden's process thought to be of value. Both God and humans, Ogden argues, exhibit a two-fold character. Both possess a number of enduring, defining characteristics that provide identity over time – for example, a certain personality and character traits. But it is also the case that both God and humans at each concrete moment of life encounter stimuli that are incorporated into a new synthesis of experience. In other words, both divine and human experience is essentially "dipolar" in the sense that reality for both consists of an enduring sequence of momentary experiences, within the context of a number of enduring, defining identity traits.

And this means that no person, including God, can be ahead or in front of time. Rather it follows from the fact that reality for both God and humans consists of a continuous sequence of experiences that God and humans are essentially temporal

in the same sense; both are equally “in time.” But if both God and humans are essentially temporal, how do we preserve an appropriate distinction between God and humans? A satisfactory answer, Rice believes, is again furnished by Ogden. While both are temporal, humans are temporal in a temporary sense: their ongoing personal experiences have a beginning and an end. But God is supremely and eternally temporal in the sense that God’s own experience has no beginning or end; it is everlasting. Also only God’s experience is fully comprehensive in that only God has and will always experience all that is occurring in the world at any given sequential moment.

These insights of Jenson and Ogden together, Rice concludes, give us a coherent way of envisioning divine temporality. Jenson persuasively argues that God is temporal; Ogden provides a helpful explication of this divine temporal experience in terms of sequential experiences. But while Ogden clarifies Jenson’s concept of divine temporality, Jenson corrects what for open theists is a deficit in Odgen’s dipolar theism. For process theism, without a world of other beings to experience, God would not be. But Jenson rightly maintains, in keeping with a key tenet of open theism, that only God’s existence is necessary and thus that God creates freely rather than out of necessity. Moreover, Jenson helps us see that this does not mean that God is alone or lonely. He helps us understand that the Trinitarian life of God is rich and complete in and of itself and thus that creation is not required to meet some deficiency in the divine reality. Rather, creation is a freely chosen expression of God’s inherently full, vital life.

I find Rice’s work to be a unique, insightful contribution to a very important ongoing theological discussion. I do, though, want briefly to comment on two of Rice’s claims: that God is essentially temporal and that God creates out of freedom, not necessity.

With respect to God and time, while all open theists do believe that God is temporal in the sense that God has, at least since creation, been interacting with us in time, John Sanders is among those who don’t believe that open theists need take a stand on whether God was temporal prior to creation and thus whether God is essentially temporal.¹² I personally side with Rice on this point. If we accept, as I do, that God’s Trinitarian nature is essentially interactive and relational and understand divine temporality to mean that God has an ongoing succession of experiences, then it seems to me to follow clearly that God is essentially temporal.

The question, though, of whether God creates (has created or will create) out of freedom or necessity seems to me much more complex.¹³ Since open theists believe that God created the world *ex nihilo*, they are clearly committed to the belief that God alone is truly necessary in the sense that God’s reality is not dependent in any

¹² For example, in a statement on the [Open Theism Information Site www.opentheism.info](http://www.opentheism.info), Sanders states the following: “It is not essential for open theists to take a stand on whether or not God was temporal prior to creation. Even if God was eternally temporal God did not experience metric (measured) time until the creation.”

¹³ The question of the extent of God’s own freedom of choice continues to be a debatable issue in the broader theological/philosophical context. See, for example, Morriston (2002). At present, I’m only sharing some initial thoughts what an open theist might or might not be committed to with respect to divine freedom and God’s creative activity.

way on the existence of any form of co-eternal or created reality. However, I see the contention that God is necessarily creative (is compelled to create) as clearly distinguishable from the contention that without an eternal (or created) “other” with which to interact, there would be no God.

Moreover, the claim that God is necessarily creative in the sense that God is compelled to create any specific thing at any specific time – for example, was compelled to bring into being our world at the “time” and in the manner this was done – is distinguishable from the claim that God is necessarily creative in the sense that God is by nature (inherently) creative and exemplifies this character trait in various acts of creation – for example, in the initial creation of this world. While the former does seem to me unacceptable for open theism, the later does not. At the human level, a person who is creative by nature (inherently creative) was so before this character trait was exemplified (if ever) in a creative act and remains creative until this trait is exemplified (if ever) again. And I see no reason why it could not be true, in some similar fashion, that the God of open theism is by nature (inherently) creative and freely chose to exemplify this character trait in the initial creation of our world. To accept that this is so may well mean that God is compelled to create “something” (and this raises its own set of questions/problems). But it doesn’t entail that it was necessary for God to create our world (or any other specific thing or states of affairs) or that God was incomplete before doing so. At the very least, I think this to be an issue for legitimate debate among open theists.

In summary, what was less than 20 years ago a theological perspective of interest primarily to conservative Protestant Christians is now a theological perspective widely discussed in both mainstream theological and philosophical circles. And these articles exemplify well both the increasing rigor and diversity of theological/philosophical topics common in current discussions of open theism.

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Being and Doing in the Concept of God

David M. Woodruff

Introduction

I shall call Divine values, those values that we analytically assign to the concept of the divine. Whatever divine values there may be they are probably not as clear cut as we are often inclined to believe. When asking someone to choose between alternative conceptions of the divine nature, what one person might take to be an analytical concept others outright reject. My purpose here is to explore the role our value concepts play in how we assess open theism. To this end, I will begin by identifying some of the value concepts associated with the view of the divine embraced by open theism (and other similar theological models). I will then attempt to show how three otherwise divergent criticisms, a theological criticism, a practical criticism and a philosophical criticism can be best understood as sharing a difference of opinion about the divine values embraced by open theists. Finally, I hope to provide a brief discussion of how control beliefs and philosophical assumptions can be used in a significant interchange.

Values

We often include action concepts in our list of divine values. We are not going to be satisfied with a god if, like the number 2, it does not really do anything. Typical action oriented properties assigned to the concept of the divine include: omnipotence, creator, redeemer, and the notion that God exercises providential control over the outcome of the created order. Clearly open theism is not the only theological model which would embrace the connection of action with value in the concept of

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the divine nature. Furthermore, action is not the only divine value that any particular open theist might want to embrace.

The means by which open theism approaches this connection between the divine nature and action is often described as relational theology.¹ Not just any action is something that open theists are seeking in elucidating the divine nature. According to open theists and others, the controlling idea of divine action is that of relationship. Relational theology, as the name implies, has relationship as the core divine value. Of course it is easy to focus strictly on the divine–human relationship, but at a deeper level God seeks to be in relationship with the whole of the created order. One way to characterize relational theology is that it makes sense of a wide array of views about God's purposes, actions, and intentions throughout all creation by virtue of the claim that God values the relationships that the created order offers.² Open theism then is a subset of those relational theologies that attempt to put forward a consistent understanding of the conditions necessary for the relationships God seeks. To this end, open theists claim we must understand the created order as one that is not uniquely determined by the divine creative act. It is “open” in the sense that there is more than one possible outcome in creation. Two theological flash points are readily apparent from this. First, according to open theists not everything that happens in creation was ordained (or foreordained) by God. God takes risks in achieving the divine goals. Second, because of this openness, future states of creation are inaccessible to the divine consciousness. God cannot know the outcome in its totality.³ God lacks exhaustive definite foreknowledge. There are other points of contention but these two seem to be big costs in the relational model that open theists embrace.

Criticisms

The controversial claims of open theists invite a number of replies or criticisms of open theism, some sensible and some that are amazingly obtuse. I have picked several as a means to identify common themes in the openness model. I have tried to group them into the domains of theological concerns, practical concerns and philosophical concerns. What I have in mind by these labels is distinguishing what we think about God, what we think about how we should act, pray, and so forth, and finally how our conceptual framework will look. I offer this distinction merely for its usefulness and not because I am convinced there are deep conceptual facts to base this distinction upon; however, none of what I argue rests on this.

A central theological concern, one at the heart of a variety of expressed criticisms, is that open theism fails to describe a being whose glory is worthy of our

¹ It is also sometimes referred to in the literature as freewill theology.

² Again, I don't make this claim strictly for open theism. This is true of theological models other than open theism as well.

³ Open theists differ on the scope of God's knowledge, but they agree that while God may know the end to which he will bring creation, God does not know the future free actions of particular individuals.

worship. One way this is stated is that the god of open theism fails to be the being ‘than which no greater can be conceived’ (Anselm’s perfect being). In particular open theists are said to ‘fail to embrace the perfection of God’. Stating it this way makes it sound more like a philosophical concern than theology; however, the point can be expressed in more common theological modes by saying: that the god of open theism fails to be infinite, expresses a lesser glory or reduces God to the image and imagination of humanity. One of the more interesting related criticisms here is that open theism incorrectly uses love as the central divine attribute. Another is that the very notion of divine risk is abhorrent.⁴

Several practical criticisms are leveled at open theism which center around the idea that the open theistic model gives us a God who cannot perform the function we expect. Critics claim open theists cannot rely upon God to be fully in control and fully knowledgeable about the future. When we pray and ask for divine guidance we expect these things of God. One explanation offered for why open theists commit this foible is that they don’t read biblical texts the right way. There are several related criticisms including things like: open theists can’t affirm inerrancy (where the practical implication drawn is that they cannot get correct guidance from the Bible), that prophecy is impossible so open theists cannot properly form an eschatology and finally, God is unable to bring about his goals for creation and hence cannot be relied upon to work life’s pains and misfortunes for good.

Philosophical criticisms are mostly aimed at the metaphysical structure that open theists put forward.⁵ One specific philosophical criticism is open theism wrongly presupposes a dynamic view of time and because of the denial of the existence of the future, open theists cannot affirm obvious truths like, ‘tomorrow either Bob will play golf or Bob will not play golf’. Open theists accept a dynamic view of time as necessary for the options that they take as a required part of free will.⁶ If the stasis model of time is correct,⁷ there already exists a unique future and hence the future cannot properly be said to be open. There are a number of related criticisms ranging

⁴ I have intentionally not included references for these criticisms as my point is not to attack or belittle them but to lay out a framework for understanding an open theist’s response.

⁵ One criticism is that open theists fail to have a fully developed metaphysic. I think this might well be right, but I’m not too impressed with it as a criticism given that I don’t know that I can say I am aware of any system which has a fully developed metaphysic. Thomism seems to be the closest to having a complete metaphysic. Perhaps the intent of this is to say that it is not adequately developed, but I am unaware of how this is to be shown to be the case. Having a ‘fully developed’ metaphysic may have its costs as well. Two that have been suggested to me are that with a more fully developed metaphysic there will be more danger that the metaphysical system will exert too much control in the interchange between one’s philosophy and theology. An additional concern is that by having a ‘more fully developed’ metaphysic a theological system will lack a certain valuable flexibility. These were suggested by William Hasker and John Sanders, respectively.

⁶ Open theists accept the libertarian analysis of free will. One formulation is that S (some subject) was free with respect to A (some action), if and only if, S was able to have done other than A. Open theists are incompatibilists, rejecting the view that a single action could be both determined and free.

⁷ In the literature on this topic this model of time is also called the static theory, the B-theory, the tenseless theory or the block theory.

from, options that open theists are criticized for failing to consider, such as middle knowledge, to entailments that open theists are said to wrongly make, for instance, that atemporality entails immutability.

A Framework for Open Theist Replies

While I do not think all criticisms can be handled by merely identifying differences in background assumptions and control beliefs, I do think many problems can be best understood in this way. Our assumptions and control beliefs are a complex inter-weaving of many different commitments and motivations, some of which may not be immediately introspectively available to us. Nonetheless, what I hope to do here is identify some of the conceptual motivations for why open theists make the claims they do in a way that undermines the criticisms offered. In some cases we may find that open theists just don't share assumptions with their critics. In other cases we may share the assumption in its propositional form, but disagree about how the assumption should fit into the set of beliefs which we use to shape our opinions on these matters. Especially in these situations I hope to defuse some of the animus that is common. Following the pattern I set above,⁸ I will examine these beliefs under the heading of theological, practical and philosophical. I will first survey some of the possible responses and then try to show what is behind these responses in a way that gives some common conceptual themes regarding the divine values we hold.

As I identified in the opening discussion about the structure of our concept of the divine, open theists hold as a control belief that God seeks to be in loving relationship with the created order. This guides open theists' view of divine perfection. In cases where we do not share the belief that relationship is a divine goal, no doubt we will also disagree about the divine character entailed by perfection. In short we could agree with the divine value of perfection but without a shared standard of perfection we might still disagree about what it means to be perfect. Nonetheless, I am sure that many, or at the very least some, critics of open theism would agree with the claim, God seeks to be in loving relationships.

Since we agree to this, how can it be the source of such differing opinions about the divine character and activity? I think the best way to characterize the problem is to look at how this belief functions with other beliefs we hold to be true. I think that open theists want to use this belief to guide other beliefs in a way that many find unfamiliar and some find unacceptable. We are back to the problem that even if we agree that God is properly understood to be perfect, we may or may not share the standard of perfection. Open theists use the concept of loving relationship as a means of understanding the nature of divine perfection. When Thomas Aquinas and

⁸ As before, I do so with no intention of any deep commitment to its structure other than a perceived immediate usefulness.

others tell us that to be perfect God must be immutable.⁹ open theists respond by first wondering how an immutable being might be related to creation. An open theist will use the notion of God's desire to be in loving relationship with creation as a standard by which perfection is to be measured.¹⁰ My point here and in the following section is that most of the criticisms above are fairly useless. If we want to make meaningful head way in understanding each other and understanding and ultimately judging models of the divine character what we need to do is come to a better understanding of control beliefs and the motivation for these control beliefs.

A practical consideration that seems to be behind many criticisms has to do with hermeneutics. Our traditions are often used to define our interpretations. What we often fail to see and have a difficult time accepting is that those traditions are fallible. This is particularly true when it comes to how we read canonical texts. This is not merely a problem for Christianity, but I will focus my attention there as open theism is an outgrowth of that larger tradition. We often assume, and sometimes explicitly assert that there is one proper interpretation of a text. It seems to me, practically speaking, one thing that open theists are committed to that enables them to continue to view their model of God as belonging within the Christian tradition, is that there can be a variety of legitimate interpretations of biblical passages. There is no single hermeneutical system which yields a unique and correct meaning for scriptural texts.¹¹ This belief is certainly not unique to open theists; however, when it is made explicit, criticisms which pit specific verses or passages against a theological model can be better analyzed. Without this we continue to talk past each other. With it we can begin to examine larger contexts and weigh the promise of differing interpretations.¹² When we do this, other practical concerns, things like our reliance on God, can be similarly addressed.

⁹ It is important to note here that Thomas and others treat immutability as what some have termed ‘strong immutability’. A thing is strongly immutable if it cannot change in any of its intrinsic properties. This can be contrasted with weak immutability where some subset of a thing’s properties is changeless but other intrinsic properties might change. Those espousing weak immutability of God often say things like, God cannot change in his character, goodness or nature, but that God does change in other ways. For example, he changes when he responds in love and compassion to a prayer that we offer, or in response to a request we make. Open theists can accept weak immutability, but of course, so can any number of theological views. I will use the term ‘immutability’ as synonymous with ‘strong immutability’.

¹⁰ This is not merely true of open theism rather it is true of relational theologies in general.

¹¹ This need not be thought to lead to a far reaching relativism. As a friend and mentor (Charles Moore) used to say interpretation is plastic, but not infinitely plastic.

¹² It is worth noting that those of differing theological traditions offer interpretations as well. This is most obvious when they are addressing ‘difficult’ passages where on the face of it the passage looks to contradict their chosen view. While this is when it is most obvious I would hasten to add that even when we (open theist or others from differing theological traditions) take a passage at ‘face value’ we are giving an interpretation. Rendering a meaning which is devoid of interpretation is not possible. The move from scripture to doctrine makes this most clear. Doctrine is underdetermined by the text. This is true in part because, as Pinnock has affirmed, the Bible is pretheoretical. I prefer to say that the Bible is not a metaphysic text. Hence we cannot assume that there is a metaphysic presupposed by the text and demand an interpretation based on that.

Finally, I think there are a number of philosophical commitments behind open theism.¹³ I do not think this should come to much but clearly in some criticisms there isn't even a commitment to the role of the law of non-contradiction. I must point out that not every claim of contradiction in the literature is correct; however, that of course is a matter to be met case by case. What is a concern are the places where there is not a commitment to even the principle that if two claims are directly contradictory then one of them must be false.¹⁴ Open theists are at times here criticized for putting logic or philosophy above God. Whether this criticism is legitimate or not the law of non-contradiction is something which we must agree on if we are to proceed. If not there will be no real hope of resolve for other criticisms.¹⁵

Two other philosophical commitments seem to be significant and probably a good deal more controversial. The first is a commitment to libertarian free will and in particular to the view that for there to be genuine freedom there must be alternatives which the free being has real access to actualizing. That is to say in a given situation to be genuinely free I must be able to do more than one thing. Many open theists think this implies that there is not a fact of the matter about what I will do. If the future exists and is a unique and complete state then there is a fact of the matter about whether I will play golf tomorrow.¹⁶ This would entail the rejection of libertarian freewill.

The second significant and controversial philosophical commitment is to a dynamic view of time – usually presentism.¹⁷ The very point of calling this model the open model is to affirm the notion that the future is not fixed. Most open theists deny the very existence of the future. This is controversial, but when this commitment is made clear, the basis for the implications can be directly discussed. In short you won't have a cogent argument against open theism by simply assuming the stasis view of time.

¹³ Being a philosopher I no doubt will over emphasize this portion.

¹⁴ Usually the explanation is given that because our ways are not God's ways contradictions can be meaningfully asserted of the divine. If this view is pushed everything can be said to be true of God, but that is hardly a useful theological position to take.

¹⁵ It seems worth pointing out that the discussion between open theists and others is not unique in this regard. Without accepting the law of non-contradiction we can not really get anywhere in a dialog.

¹⁶ This is not a commitment to a form of causal determinism that would entail fatalism. Even in the case where someone claims the existence of a unique future but asserts that the future will be what it is because of what I will choose to do (I don't actually know if this statement makes sense but it has been used in my presence so I will appeal to it here) there is a problem. I call this view simple determinism where the future is determined, but I am the cause of what happens. The problem the open theist asserts is that if there is a unique future (determinism) then I am not able to do otherwise. There is a fact of the matter and hence there are not alternatives which I might actualize. See Hasker, W. (2002). *The absence of a timeless God*. In: G. E. Ganssle & D. M. Woodruff (Eds.), *God and time: Essays on the divine nature* (pp. 197–198). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ The dynamic view of time is that the manifold of time is not complete. The most common form of this is presentism. The presentist claims that only the present exists; the past is no more and the future has not yet come to be.

Unifying These Replies

So far we have seen that there may be a number of direct replies available to the open theist to the criticisms raised. My point in raising these criticisms is to argue that there are concepts which provide an underlying unity to these responses.

Perhaps this can be most clearly seen by starting with the discussion of practical criticisms. A key component there seemed to be the variety of hermeneutical approaches and the different interpretations they yield. While open theists might share the view with many that there is no one right hermeneutical approach which yields the only correct interpretation, there is more an open theist will say in this regard. What guides the open theist in interpreting a particular Biblical passage is the notion of divine relationship. What we might call an Openness Sympathetic Interpretation (OSI) is the interpretation which gives the fullest and richest sense of the relationships that God enters into with creation. When considering a Biblical passage where it would appear that God responds in a fashion that would require temporal succession we might consider the following distinct interpretations. The first interpretation might treat the language of the passage anthropomorphically concluding that while the passage gives the appearance of temporal succession we should not view it as actually being committed to such. A second interpretation might treat the passage as a more direct descriptive account and as such implying that there was temporal succession in the divine–human interaction. The principle which will guide the open theist in choosing between these is to prefer the interpretation which expresses the fullest and richest relationship between God and creation.

The same basic commitment unifies the other two replies to criticisms outlined above. The principle that guides the open theist in deciding which view of God might best express the ‘divine glory’ or ‘perfection’ is the commitment to value of relationship that open theists view as a divine value.¹⁸ The basis for the philosophical commitments to libertarian free will and a dynamic conception of time is that each of these views seem to make better sense of the dynamic divine–human interaction and in particular they best account for a full and rich relationship. So, for example, even though with a stasis view of time we can give an account of change, the open theist will not be satisfied with this view because in their mind the account of change offered does not provide for the rich and full relationships that they see as a fundamental value. The unity which underlies the open theist’s response to these distinct criticisms is found in their commitment to the connection between the divine nature and the divine activity of seeking loving relationships.

¹⁸ Recall that a divine value is a value which is analytically a part of the divine nature.

A Dialectic of Models

The crux of my discussion here is not merely to identify what we should be arguing about or what are the important criticisms of open theism but rather, and I hope more significantly, it is about how we approach these problems. Useful critical discussions of open theism are going to be like many encounters with intractable issues. That is to say we are liable to find that after working carefully through an issue we discover an underlying intuition which strikes us in a distinctly different way than it does our interlocutor. If this is really what is at the heart of the matter we will not simply be able to offer a Bible verse or cogent syllogism and be done with things.

Perhaps however, there is a larger framework for discussions which may have a chance to be fruitful. The first step toward this end is to grant that there is room for discussion. This requires acceptance that honest well-informed people can disagree about these things. I am committed to the view that there are real philosophical disagreements, ones where when we clear away confusions about meaning and what not, people and philosophers in particular, disagree about pretty fundamental ways of thinking about the world and about what we should consider when we try to clarify the way the world is. For these things there are no cogent arguments, ones which start from obviously true or even widely agreed upon premises and lead in unquestionable ways to a single conclusion. This situation is not limited to philosophy but extends to other conceptual frameworks like politics. A consequence of this is that rational people can share a set of accepted facts and still come to different conclusions. If this is true, it follows that it doesn't make sense to believe, like so many people seem to believe, that all intelligent reasonably well-informed people are: democrats, or Christians, or materialists etc.¹⁹

Once we concede that honest, good intentioned, reasonably intelligent people can disagree about fundamental values which shape our view of the Divine nature, where does this lead? First, it leads away from a good deal of overly charged rhetorical attacks. Second, it leads away from thinking the issue can be settled by pointing to a few Bible verses or by appealing to some commitment made by a prominent figure in church history. But it does not lead to mere relativism on the matter either. I think people can be swayed and the conversation can be moved in one direction or another.²⁰ We move forward here more with illustration and thought experiments which reveal the consequences of our commitments than we do with precisely laid out arguments or a list of scripture texts. There can be and often is real progress at this level; it comes when we offer examples and examine consequences with the most charitable interpretation of the position we are examining.

¹⁹ Much of my thinking on this has been shaped by Peter van Inwagen and to some lesser extent by the writings of David Lewis. See van Inwagen, P. (1996). It is wrong, everywhere, always and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. In: J. Jordan & D. Howard-Snyder (Eds.), *Faith, freedom and rationality* (pp. 137–153). New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield. Reprinted in, Stump, E., & Murry, M. (Eds.) (1999). *The big questions: Philosophy of religion*. (pp. 273–284). Oxford: Blackwell. David Lewis has voiced somewhat similar things, see his introduction in, Lewis, D. (1983). *Philosophical paper* (Vol. 1, p. x). New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁰ Although I disagree with his position, I think Thomas Flint has done a good job setting this up in his discussion of middle knowledge and the incarnation. This paper was read at the SCP, in the spring of 2003.

Conclusion

When we work our way back to the control beliefs and philosophical assumptions, we find there are real differences of opinion which motivate different models of the divine nature. However, when we work in this way, while we might well better understand our interlocutor we will also find it much more difficult to show what is wrong (if anything) with their view. There are real criticisms and difficulties in open theism, but I know of no view of the divine nature which isn't in the same position.

Open Theism and Other Models of Divine Providence

Alan R. Rhoda

Among the many models of God now competing in the marketplace of ideas is a view that has come to be known as ‘open theism’.¹ The view itself is not new,² but until very recently it was off the radar of most philosophers of religion. Things changed dramatically in 1994 with the publication of *The Openness of God*,³ a book which ignited a firestorm of controversy among evangelical Christians.⁴ Open theism has since been embraced by a sizable and growing minority of theistic philosophers and is now recognized as a major player in philosophical discussions of the nature of God and of divine providence.

The main goal of this paper is to situate open theism in conceptual space by explaining its core commitments and distinguishing it from its primary competitors. While most of the popular discussion of open theism has been conducted primarily by theologians and Biblical scholars, my methods and interests in this paper are strictly philosophical. Thus, I will begin by defining open theism in terms of five minimal core commitments. I will then note some philosophically significant corollaries of those commitments and discuss an important issue that currently divides open theists. Finally, I will contrast the open theist model of divine providence with its chief competitors: theological determinism, Molinism, and process theism.

¹This paper draws on material from Rhoda (2008, 2010a, b). Rhoda (2008) was read at the Models of God mini-conference at the 2007 Pacific APA.

²The medieval Jewish philosopher Levi ben Gerson, a.k.a. Gersonides (1288–1344 CE) is perhaps the earliest *clear* proponent of open theism. See Gersonides (1987). The Christian scholar Calcidius (4th c. CE) has also been floated as an early open theist, but the attribution is less clear. See Den Boeft (1970) for details. Still earlier anticipations of open theism can be found in both Cicero (106–43 BCE) and Alexander of Aphrodisias (late 2nd to early 3rd c. CE). For Cicero, see his *De Fato* and *De Divinatione*. For Alexander, see Sharples (1983).

³Pinnock et al. (1994).

⁴See, for example, Coffman (2001) and Olsen (2003).

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I. The Core of Open Theism

Open theists are, as the label suggests, *theists*. Moreover, open theists have been quite insistent that, while their position lies somewhere between the classical theism of high-medieval orthodoxy and process theism, they mean to stay squarely on the classical side of that divide with respect to creation *ex nihilo* and the power of God unilaterally to intervene in the created order as he pleases.⁵ Indeed, most open theists see their view as a relatively conservative correction of the mainstream classical theistic tradition for the purpose of resolving what they see as otherwise irresolvable Biblical and philosophical tensions within that tradition.⁶ As a group, open theists are committed to a robust perfect being theology according to which God is conceived of as a metaphysically necessary being who essentially exemplifies a maximally excellent set of compossible great-making properties, including maximal power, knowledge, and goodness. The differences between open and non-open theists (both classical and process) have to do with what that maximal property set consists in, not with whether God exemplifies such a set. But even the differences, while significant, should not be overstated. Non-open theists today are far less unified on whether doctrines like divine simplicity, impassibility, and timelessness ought to be included among God's great-making properties than they were in the days of Anselm and Aquinas. Furthermore, as will become clear, each of the *core* commitments of open theism has long had numerous adherents among non-open theists. It is merely the *combination* of those commitments that puts open theism outside the mainstream. So unless we restrict the 'classical theist' label in such a way that few apart from, say, doctrinaire Thomists would qualify, it is somewhat tendentious to oppose 'open' to 'classical' theism and probably better to think of the former as a species of the latter, broadly construed. Open theists, we might say, are *broadly classical* theists in the following sense:

Broadly classical theism =_{def.} there is a unique, personal, metaphysically necessarily being (namely, God) who essentially possesses a maximally excellent compossible set of great-making attributes, including maximal power, knowledge, and goodness, and to whom all (concrete) non-divine beings owe their existence. Further, God created the world (i.e., the space-time system of concrete non-divine beings) *ex nihilo* and can unilaterally intervene in it as he pleases.⁷

The first core commitment of open theism, then, is

(1) Broadly classical theism is true.

But what puts the 'open' in open theism? The answer to that has two sides. One concerns the openness of *the future*, meaning roughly that the shape of things to come is not (yet) fully given, settled, or fixed. Instead, what is to come is

⁵ See Pinnock et al. (1994: 156) and Cobb and Pinnock (2000). My use of 'he' in reference to God is due merely to terminological conservatism and is not meant to imply that God has a gender or that masculine metaphors are more revealing of God's essence than feminine ones.

⁶ See Pinnock et al. (1994: esp. chs. 2–4).

⁷ The final sentence distinguishes open theism from process theism.

progressively taking shape as events unfold, choices are made, and contingencies are resolved one way or another. The other side to the question has to do with the openness of God, who, according to open theists, freely enters into dynamic, ongoing, two-way relations with at least some of his creatures. As open theists see it, the openness of the future and the openness of God are intimately related. Thus, having a world with an open future requires a degree of openness in God. As an essentially perfect knower responsible for creating and sustaining an open-ended world, God's knowledge and experience of the world must change so as accurately to reflect changes in the world. Conversely, God's openness to creation, particularly his openness to fostering mutually loving relationships with his creatures, requires an open future in which their free contributions help to determine the shape of things to come.

The foregoing sketch is, admittedly, quite rough. There are undoubtedly many non-open theists who, with perhaps minor qualifications, could endorse most or even all of it. To refine the sketch, and to isolate the issues that divide open and non-open theists, it is most helpful to focus on the openness of the future. (After all, we seem to have a better grip on the future than we do on the nature of God.) What has not been sufficiently appreciated, though, is that there are several *different* senses in which the openness of the future may be cashed out. To understand the central debates surrounding open theism, these different senses need to be carefully distinguished.

In the first place, then, open theists believe that the future is *causally* open. They believe, in other words, that there are future contingents, events which are causally possible but not causally necessary or otherwise unpreventable.⁸ In general, the future is *causally open* if and only if there is more than one causally possible future, where a ‘causally possible future’ is a complete, logically possible extension of the causally relevant actual past,⁹ compatible with holding fixed the laws of nature and concurrent divine causal contributions to creaturely events. The second core commitment of open theism is therefore

(2) The future is causally open (i.e., there are future contingents).

It should be noted that the sort of future contingency of chief importance to most open theists is creaturely libertarian freedom.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there is reason for not viewing this as a *core* commitment of open theism, for one easily could hold a view

⁸ I use ‘causally necessary’ and ‘unpreventable’ interchangeably. Somewhat roughly, a state of affairs (event) is causally necessary or unpreventable as of time *t* if and only if it obtains (occurs) in all logically possible worlds having the same causal history as the actual world up to and including *t*. Similarly, a proposition is causally necessary as of time *t* if and only if it is true in all logically possible worlds having the same causal history as the actual world up to and including *t*. On my usage, it follows that logically and metaphysically necessary truths or states of affairs are also causally necessary.

⁹ Restriction to the *causally relevant* actual past is needed to avoid begging the question against Ockhamism, which affirms a causally open future while positing as part of the actual past something (viz., divine foreknowledge) that entails a unique causally possible future. For a good primer on Ockhamism see the essays in Fischer (1989).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Pinnock et al. (1994: 156).

that agrees with (1), (2), and the other three core commitments of open theism that I will identify and yet denies that any creatures have libertarian freedom. Someone might hold, for example, that the future is causally open purely for reasons having to do with quantum indeterminacy. This sort of view is providentially in the same camp as mainstream open theism.

At any rate, all open theists believe in future contingency. Open theists also believe that future contingency is *incompatible* with divine foreknowledge, or more exactly, with God's knowing (or infallibly believing) of some unique causally possible future that it is (or is going to be) *the* actual one.¹¹ More simply, open theists believe that if the future is causally open then it must be *epistemically* open, not just for us, but also for God. In general,

the future is *epistemically open* if and only if for some causally possible future F, (i) neither <F will come to pass>¹² nor <F will not come to pass> is either known or infallibly believed *now* and (ii) neither <F comes to pass> nor <F does not come to pass> is either known or infallibly believed *simpliciter*.

The two clauses serve to rule out both (i) temporally situated knowledge of the future and (ii) timeless knowledge of the future. For the future to be epistemically open means that, as far as *anyone* knows, there are multiple causally possible futures that might come to pass and no one of them that certainly *will* come to pass. To use Borges's apt metaphor,¹³ it means that all knowers, even God, approach the future as though it were a 'garden of forking paths'.

Open theists are committed to an epistemically open future because they are committed to a causally open future and to the incompatibility of a causally open future with an epistemically *settled* one. The third core open theist commitment is thus

(3) Necessarily, if the future is causally open then it is epistemically open.

(3), together with (2), entails

(4) The future is epistemically open.

Here it is important to note that, for open theists, (1), (2), and (3) are more fundamental commitments than (4). Open theists, recall, are broadly classical theists. Thus, they want to say that God essentially has *maximal* knowledge. It follows that if it is *possible* that God know something (either *now* or *simpliciter*) then he knows it (either *now* or *simpliciter*). So if the future is causally open with respect to whether future F comes to pass and if it were still possible for God to know *now* <F will come to pass> or *simpliciter* <F does not come to pass>, then it would follow that God knows as much and that the future is epistemically settled. The only reason, therefore, why open theists accept (4) is because they believe

¹¹ They believe this on the basis of philosophical arguments like Pike's (1965) and Edwards' (2009 [1754]: II.12).

¹² <p> is short for 'the proposition that p' (i.e., the proposition named by the sentence enclosed in angle brackets).

¹³ Borges (1998: 119–128).

(1), (2), and (3). The future is epistemically open only because—and only to the extent that—it is causally open.

In addition to (1)–(4) there is one more core thesis of open theism that requires mention¹⁴:

(5) The future is providentially open,

where a ‘providentially open’ future is understood as follows:

The future is *providentially open* if and only if no agent S has acted in a way that guarantees that a unique causally possible future F shall come to pass while knowing for certain that in so acting F is guaranteed to come to pass.

We might put this another way and say that the future is providentially open if and only if no possible future has been *ordained*, where a future F has been ordained if and only if an agent S has either strongly or weakly *actualized* F.¹⁵ If we assume that only God could be in a position to ordain the future, then we can replace S with God and say that the future is providentially open if and only if the future has not been ordained by God. Conversely, the future is providentially *settled* if and only if God has ordained, in the words of the Westminster Confession, “whatsoever comes to pass.”¹⁶ In affirming the providential openness of the future, open theists categorically deny this. They believe that God’s providential decrees are *silent* with regard to *some* of what comes to pass.

Observe that (5) is a logical consequence of (4). Thus, it follows from the definitions of ‘providentially open future’ and ‘to ordain’ that if the future were providentially settled then it would also have to be epistemically settled because in ordaining F, God would thereby *know* that F will come to pass. Epistemic openness therefore entails providential openness. Furthermore, (5) is entailed by (2) and (3). If, on the one hand, God *strongly* actualizes all that comes to pass then God becomes the ultimate sufficient cause of all events, which conflicts with (2). If, on the other hand, God *weakly* actualizes all that comes to pass, then the future is epistemically settled for God, which conflicts with (3). So, given both (2) and (3), it follows that God does not ordain all that comes to pass.

Summing up, (1)–(5) are the core commitments of open theism. While the first three are the foundational ones, with (4) and (5) derivative upon them, it is helpful to state (4) and (5) explicitly since they have been the chief focal points of controversy surrounding open theism.

Concerning (4), the debate is whether to accept (2) and (3) and consequently (4), or whether to reject (4) and with it either (2) or (3). In this regard, open theism falls squarely between two competing positions within the broadly classical theistic

¹⁴ In Rhoda (2008) I ended my analysis of open theism’s core commitments with (4). Subsequent discussions with Joseph Jedwab convinced me to add (5).

¹⁵ The distinction between strong and weak actualization comes from Plantinga (1974: 173). S *strongly* actualizes F iff S’s actions are *causally* sufficient for, and known by S to be causally sufficient for, F’s coming to pass. S *weakly* actualizes F iff S’s actions are *counterfactually* sufficient for, and known by S to be counterfactually sufficient for, F’s coming to pass.

¹⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 3.1.

tradition: the theological determinism of the late Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards; and the freewill theism¹⁷ of Ockham, Molina, and Arminius. Thus, open theists side with non-open freewill theists over against theological determinists by affirming (2), the causal openness of the future. But they also side with most theological determinists over against non-open freewill theists by affirming (3), the incompatibility of future contingency with the epistemic settledness of the future.

The debate over (5) is parallel: Should we accept (2) and (3) and consequently (5), as open theists suggest, or should we reject (5) and with it either (2) or (3)? In this regard, open theism falls squarely between theological determinism, which rejects (2), and Molinism, which rejects (3).

II. Some Important Corollaries

There are some important corollaries of (1)–(5) worth noting. In the first place, if the future is epistemically settled for God in all and only those respects in which it is causally settled, and if, in addition, the future is causally open, then the content of God's knowledge must change over time as future contingencies are resolved. And if God changes, then God cannot be atemporal. Hence, open theism entails divine *temporality*. This should not be understood as implying that God is somehow 'in' time (as though time were a sort of container). Rather, it simply means that God experiences succession. Nor should it be assumed that time is a *creation*, for God is necessarily uncreated and so if God is temporal, then time is not a created thing. Instead, open theists could say, time supervenes on a dynamically changing reality and thus the reality of time is nothing over and above the fact that things change. Moreover, since God is nonphysical, it follows that time is not a strictly *physical* thing, and so not a topic on which physicists have the last word. Finally, it should not be assumed—at least not without further argument—that open theists are committed to *essential* divine temporality and mutability, for it is not immediately clear why open theists could not adopt Craig's suggestion that God is atemporal *sans* creation and temporal since creation.¹⁸

Another corollary is divine *passibility*, the idea that God is in some respects dependent on his creation. Here it is helpful to invoke Creel's fourfold distinction between passibility in nature, will, knowledge, and feeling.¹⁹ As broadly classical theists, open theists will not admit that God is passible in nature, for God's fundamental attributes are essential to him and cannot change. Open theists are, however, clearly committed to divine passibility with respect to knowledge, for how God's epistemic states change over time depends on how creaturely future contingencies are resolved. As for passibility in will and feeling, these would seem to be legitimate matters of in-house debate. Some open theists point to Biblical descriptions of

¹⁷ The term 'freewill theism' comes from Basinger (1996).

¹⁸ Craig (2001).

¹⁹ Creel (2005 [1986]: 9–12).

God's 'changing' his mind, 'repenting', getting angry, and so forth, as evidence that God is possible in will and in feeling,²⁰ whereas others, like Creel, argue that passibility in either will or feeling is incompatible with divine perfection and that therefore Biblical passages that suggest such passibility on God's part should not be construed literally.

The last corollary I will mention here is that open theism is committed to a 'dynamic' or 'A'-theory of time, according to which the totality of what exists *simpliciter* is non-constant. This means that if we could survey all that exists from an absolute or 'God's-eye perspective', our perspective would be irreducibly tensed because there would be an absolute distinction between what *has existed*, what *now exists*, and what will or might *come to exist*. More fully, open theists are committed to a version of the A-theory according to which the future is *ontically* open, where that notion is defined as follows:

The future is *ontically open* as of time t if and only if no unique, complete sequence of events which are future relative to t exists *simpliciter*.

In contrast, on a 'static' or 'B'-theory of time the future is ontically settled because the totality of what exists *simpliciter* includes a unique, complete sequence of past, present, and future events. Open theists must reject a static view of time and affirm an ontically open future. By (1), they believe that God is an essentially maximal knower. This implies that God is fully and immediately *acquainted with* all of reality. Hence, if the future were ontically settled—that is, if a unique, complete sequence of future events exists *simpliciter*—then God would be fully acquainted with that sequence of events and the future would therefore be epistemically settled for God. Since, by (4), the future is not epistemically settled for God, it follows that open theists are committed to an ontically open future.

III. The Alethic Openness of the Future

As we've seen, open theism is not a monolithic position. There are live in-house debates about, for example, the extent of divine passibility and the extent to which the future is causally open. But there is one such debate that is of particular dialectical interest. Whereas all open theists believe that the future is causally, epistemically, and providentially open, they divide over whether the future is *alethically* open, where this notion is defined as follows:

The future is *alethically open* if and only if for some causally possible future F , (i) neither $\langle F \text{ will come to pass} \rangle$ nor $\langle F \text{ will not come to pass} \rangle$ is true *now* and (ii) neither $\langle F \text{ comes to pass} \rangle$ nor $\langle F \text{ does not come to pass} \rangle$ is true *simpliciter*.

²⁰This seems to be Sanders's (1997: 196–197, and note 117) view. He clearly wants to go further than Creel in the extent to which he attributes passibility to God.

More simply, but less exactly, the future is alethically open just in case there is no *complete, true story* of the future.

Obviously, if the future is alethically open, then it must be epistemically open because knowledge presupposes truth. But why think the future is alethically open? The central argument turns on the principle that *truth supervenes on being* (TSB), which says that all (contingent) truths are true in virtue of what exists, such that any difference in what is (contingently) true would have to be accompanied by a difference in what exists. Now, if we add to TSB the assumption that the future is both causally and ontically open—an assumption, recall, that is incumbent upon open theists—then it seems that there would not be enough *being* for a complete, true story of the future to supervene upon. Thus, if the future is ontically open, then a complete, true story can't supervene on future events, for they don't exist. And if the future is causally open, then it can't supervene on past or present events plus the causal laws and concurrent divine causal contributions, for all that together leaves underdetermined which future comes to pass.²¹

Given TSB, then, there is a straightforward argument for alethic openness that should appeal to open theists, and many, perhaps most, open theists do accept the alethic openness of the future. But some prominent open theists—most notably Swinburne and Hasker—do not.²² They hold that the future is alethically *settled*. They thus admit that there is a complete, true story of the future parts of which God does not know. This raises an obvious worry: How can God be an essentially maximally excellent knower as required by (1) if there are truths that God doesn't know? Neither Swinburne nor Hasker offers anything by way of explanation. Perhaps they would say that God can only know truths that are either directly accessible to God via his acquaintance with reality or truths that are inferable from ones that are directly accessible. If so, and if the future is both causally and ontically open, then arguably there are no *accessible* will/will not truths about future contingents. But the problem with this proposal is that the very reason offered for thinking that some truths aren't *knowable* by God is also, given TSB, a reason for thinking that they aren't *true* to begin with. And so it remains unclear why an open theist wouldn't affirm the alethic openness of the future, especially if not doing so might require them to deny that God is fully acquainted with all of reality.

In my view, open theists are *much* better off if they affirm the alethic openness of the future. Indeed, there is a significant dialectical advantage in doing so, for it helps rebut one of the charges frequently leveled against open theism. The charge is that the God of open theism is a “diminished” God—and so not worthy of the divine title—because he isn't truly omniscient.²³ Swinburne's and Hasker's position on the alethic settledness of the future plays into the hands of such critics by conceding that there are truths that God doesn't know. While they would counter by saying that

²¹ For a more detailed presentation of this argument for alethic openness, see Rhoda et al. (2006) and Rhoda (2010b). For related arguments that a causally open and alethically settled future requires an ontically settled future, see Rea (2006) and Finch and Rea (2008).

²² Swinburne (1993: 180), Hasker (1989: 187, 2001: 111).

²³ See, e.g., Ware (2000).

God knows all *knowable* truths, this doesn't allay the worry. In the absence of a convincing explanation—which they haven't provided—of how there can be a real distinction between truths and divinely knowable truths, it's not clear why the critics aren't right that the God of open theism, so construed, knows *less* than God should know if he is an essentially maximal knower. In contrast, by affirming the alethic openness of the future, open theists can say without qualification that God knows *all* truths, in which case the criticism doesn't get off the ground.

IV. Four Models of Divine Providence

Having discussed the core commitments of open theism, some corollaries of those commitments, and one important in-house debate, it remains to compare open theism with other models of divine providence. I take its main rivals to be theological determinism, Molinism, and process theism. As we will see, open theism shares significant common ground with each of these models, though it also differs from each in important respects as well. Since I've already said a lot about open theism, I'll begin with brief descriptions of each of the other three models.

First, by 'theological determinism' I mean the view of the later Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and Edwards according to which God is the ultimate sufficient cause of all creaturely events. On this view God *strongly* actualizes a specific possible world, one with a complete history—past, present, and future—from which it follows that the future is causally, epistemically, providentially, and alethically settled.

Second, by 'Molinism' I mean Molina's view according to which God has 'middle knowledge'—prevolitional knowledge of 'conditional future contingents' (CFCs) by which God knows, before he makes his creative decree, what outcome *would* result from any causally specified creaturely indeterministic scenario. Armed with this knowledge, God *weakly* actualizes a specific possible world, one with a complete history—past, present, and future—and does so in such a way that the causal openness of the future is preserved.²⁴ For Molinists, therefore, the future is epistemically, providentially, and alethically settled but causally open.

Third and finally, by 'process theism' I mean the view of Hartshorne, Cobb, and Griffin, according to which God's activity vis-à-vis creation is exclusively 'persuasive'.²⁵ For process theism, in contrast with theological determinism, God is not the ultimate sufficient cause of *any* creaturely event, though he does make a necessary contribution to all creaturely events. Also, for process theists, it is metaphysically necessary that the future be causally, epistemically, providentially, ontically, and alethically open.

²⁴ For detailed exposition of Molinism, see Flint (1998) and Freddoso (1988).

²⁵ For detailed exposition of process theism, see Cobb and Griffin (1976).

I will now compare and contrast these models with each other and with open theism in terms of the manner, scope, and limits of God's providential activity vis-à-vis creation.

First, concerning the *manner* in which God exercises power over creation, let us say that God acts 'efficaciously' in bringing about a creaturely event or state of affairs just in case God's activity is *causally sufficient* for its occurring or obtaining. And let us say that God acts 'persuasively' in bringing about a creaturely event or state of affairs just in case God causally contributes to its occurring or obtaining but not in a way that is causally sufficient. In these terms, theological determinists hold that God's activity vis-à-vis creation is always efficacious; process theists, that it is always persuasive; and Molinists and open theists, that it is sometimes efficacious and sometimes persuasive.

Second, concerning the *scope* of divine providence, let us say that God exercises 'meticulous' providence just in case God ordains *all* the details of creation.²⁶ In contrast, let us say that God's providence is 'general' just in case it is not meticulous, that is, just in case there can occur creaturely events that God has *not* ordained. In these terms, theological determinists and Molinists affirm meticulous providence, whereas open and process theists affirm general providence.

Third, concerning the *limits* of divine providence, let us say that God's providential activity is 'unconstrained' just in case there are no *unavoidable external or contingent* limits on what God can do vis-à-vis creation.²⁷ In contrast, let us say that God's providential activity is 'constrained' just in case there are unavoidable external or contingent constraints on what God can do. In these terms, theological determinists and open theists believe that God's providential activity is unconstrained, whereas Molinists and process theists believe it is constrained. For the Molinist, there are unavoidable *contingent* limits on what God can do because God has no control over which CFCs are true. For the process theist, there are unavoidable *external* limits on what God can do because the world process necessarily exists in partial independence of God.

The following table summarizes:

	Theological determinism	Molinism	Open theism	Process theism
Manner of God's providential activity	Always efficacious	Only sometimes efficacious	Only sometimes efficacious	Always persuasive
Scope of providence	Meticulous	Meticulous	General	General
Unavoidable external or contingent limits on God	No	Yes	No	Yes

²⁶ Freddoso (1988: 3) nicely states the doctrine of meticulous providence as follows: "God, the divine artisan, freely and knowingly plans, orders, and provides for all the effects that constitute His artifact, the created universe with its entire history, and executes His chosen plan by playing an active causal role sufficient to ensure its exact realization."

²⁷ By 'unavoidable' here I of course mean unavoidable *for God*.

It is interesting to note that open theists agree with theological determinists that God's providential activity is unconstrained. For open theists, God could have done just what the theological determinist thinks God has done, namely, strongly actualize a possible world, one which includes a complete, determinate history. But open theists also believe that God deliberately chose *not* to do that. Instead, he chose to create a causally open world so that free creatures could significantly contribute to shape of things to come.

Similarly, open theists agree with Molinists that God's providential activity is only sometimes efficacious. In this they take a broadly classical position on divine power over against process theists while affirming the causal openness of the future over against theological determinists. But unlike Molinists, open theists believe that God's providential activity is unconstrained. In this respect, Molinism is at a dialectical disadvantage. The existence of unavoidably and contingently true CFCs limits God's creative options, thereby threatening to undermine God's standing as an essentially maximally powerful being.

Finally, open theists agree with process theists that God exercises general providence. It is not the case that *all* details of creation history have been ordained by God. This is a particularly useful thing for a theist to say about moral evils, for the claim that God ordains moral evils—not for their own sake, presumably, but rather for the sake of some greater good—is a hard one to swallow. Theological determinists and Molinists simply have to bite the bullet at that point. Process theists are on the other extreme. They hold that *none* of the details of creation history are ordained by God. This allows them to say about natural evils what open theists say about moral evils, namely, that God doesn't ordain any of them. But process theists pay a price for this, for it's not at all clear that a God who can only exercise persuasive power qualifies as an essentially maximally powerful being. In any case, open theism *arguably* occupies the virtuous middle ground on this issue.

V. Conclusion

In summary, I've argued that open theism can be defined in terms of five core theses: (1) broadly classical theism, (2) the causal openness of the future, (3) the incompatibility of an epistemically settled future with a causally open future, (4) the epistemic openness of the future, and (5) the providential openness of the future. Important corollaries of these commitments include divine temporality, divine passibility, and a dynamic or A-theory of time with an ontically open future. In addition, I argued that open theists should affirm that the future is alethically open as well, though this issue is currently a matter of in-house debate. Finally, I compared and contrasted open theism with its three main rivals among models of divine providence: theological determinism, Molinism, and process theism. While open theism shares features in common with each of its rivals, it also differs significantly from each and so fills a significant theoretical gap. For that reason alone, and despite its having only recently come to widespread attention, open theism merits a place at the discussion alongside its rivals.

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Trinity, Temporality, and Open Theism

Richard Rice

In the book that gave its name to this version of theism, the openness of God represents the work of several conservative Christians who share the conviction that an interactive view of God is more faithful to the biblical portrayals of the divine reality than the prevalent alternatives.¹ Open theists find support in numerous biblical passages for the idea that God not only affects the world, but the world also has an effect on God, and that the interaction between God and creation takes the form of an ongoing historical drama. In the years that followed that publication, open theists have found their proposal questioned and challenged, with varying degrees of intensity, across a broad front of exegetical, theological and philosophical issues.

A number of Christian thinkers have raised serious questions about the biblical support for open theism. Reactions from this direction typically focus on two corollaries of open theism: that God does not control the course of events absolutely and that God does not enjoy exhaustive, or absolute, foreknowledge.

While embracing an interactive view of God, open theists also adhere to two important features of traditional Christian theism, namely, that the world is not necessary to God and that God participates in the world's events directly as well as indirectly—in ways indicated by expressions such as “intervention” and “miracle”. Both concepts raise philosophical questions about such issues as the nature of time, the meaning of freedom, and the content of divine action.

Along with exegetical and philosophical questions, open theism also raises questions of a more specifically doctrinal or theological nature. Open theists agree with process thought that God's experience is inherently interactive and temporal. On the other hand, they agree with traditional theism that the relation between God and world is asymmetrical—that the world needs God in a way that God does not need

¹ Pinnock, C., Rice, R., Sanders, J., & Hasker W. (1994). *The openness of God: A biblical challenge to the traditional understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity).

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the world. The question therefore arises as to how one might conceive of divine temporality without a temporal world for God to experience.

The resurgence of Trinitarian thought in recent decades provides a possible resource for dealing with this issue. The work of Robert W. Jenson, in particular, is notable for the way it connects Trinity and temporality. And when corrected at a crucial juncture, I believe it provides, or at least suggests, ways for open theists to develop an answer to the question of divine experience.²

Divine Temporality Affirmed

For Jenson, as for other theologians who accept “Rahner’s Rule”, the events to which the biblical record bears witness, the acts of God in history, bring to expression the inner nature of the divine reality.³ God for us is just what God is in him/herself. And since it arises from the threefold manifestation of God in history, the Trinitarian portrait presents us with a God who is inherently related to time.

Jenson develops this position from a careful analysis of early Trinitarian thought. He agrees with the familiar observation that Christian theology emerged from the encounter between biblical religion and the thought-world of late antiquity. But instead of fusing the Gospel with Greek culture, he argues, early Christian thinkers deliberately refused to do so. Accordingly, the doctrine of the Trinity is not the product of Hellenic influence; it is the fruit of resisting Hellenic influence.⁴

As Jenson describes it, the critical difference between Christianity and Hellenism involved divergent views of time. At its heart, Greek religion was a quest for something that could resist the flow of time, for an aspect of reality impervious to change. The gods’ one defining characteristic was therefore immortality, immunity to destruction, and the true object of Greek religion was Timelessness as such. (Think of Zeus conquering Chronos.)

Biblical thought could not have been more different. While the Greeks insisted that divinity wasn’t involved in time, the Hebrews insisted that it was. And instead of conceiving of eternity as abstraction from time, they viewed God’s eternity as faithfulness through time.⁵

Nevertheless, the Greek vision of things had a profound influence on early Christology. Christians who accepted the Hellenistic assumption that the divine is impervious to time were left with an enormous gap between God and the world, and they located Christ in this space. Consequently, they viewed the Son, the logos, as inferior to God—an originated being, though nevertheless “God of a sort”.⁶ Arius,

² Jenson develops his views on the Trinity primarily in two major projects. Jenson, R. W. (1982). *The triune identity: God according to the gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress), and Jenson, R. W. (1997–1999). *Systematic theology*, 2 vols (New York: Oxford University Press).

³ Cf. Jenson, *Triune identity*, 139, 157. Karl Rahner’s familiar maxim, “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity,” has become a virtual mantra for recent Trinitarian thought. (1970). *The trinity*. Trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder), 22.

⁴ Cf. *The triune identity*, 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 59, 58.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

for example, concluded that “the Son is not unoriginated, nor is he in any part of the Unoriginated”. Accordingly, Arius said, “There was once when he [the Logos] was not”. And because Christ is involved with time he cannot really be God. The Logos may be God for us, but it cannot be God in him/herself.⁷

The doctrine of the Trinity developed in reaction to the idea that God is timeless and the logos must therefore be inferior to God. Its objective was to affirm both Christ’s full divinity and God’s intimate connection with temporal, creaturely reality. As expressed by Athanasius and confirmed by the council of Nicaea, the Father–Son relation is internal to God’s being: God is God precisely in relatedness. Later in the fourth century, the Cappadocian fathers solidified God’s relationality by eliminating subordinationism. In this way, Father and Son could be one God without ranking them ontologically.⁸

More of this would take us too deeply into the intricacies of Trinitarian reflection than we can afford to go here, but the central point is clear. God is inherently relational. The expression, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”, names the one God and identifies God as having deity in a complex and interactive way.⁹ Furthermore, as God is thus conceived, there is no distance between him/her and us that needs to be overcome. “Each of the Trinitarian relations is an affirmation that as God works creatively among us, so he is in himself.”¹⁰

Furthermore, there is a “tensed” quality to the divine relations. Salvation history comprises the manifestations of a divine reality, all of which is involved in each great act. Unlike the Greek view that God’s self-identity is immune to all outside influence, leaving him/her changeless and impassible, the Trinity imputes change, dynamism to God.

If this is really what the Trinity is about, then why all the confusion that surrounds the doctrine? Because, says Jenson, virtually all of the insights of the Eastern fathers were lost when the Trinity came to the West. Confused by their terminology, Western theologians employed what they thought were Latin equivalents (but weren’t) in a way that not only obscured but distorted the Cappadocians’ intent. And they set Western thought on a course that renders the Trinity incomprehensible and clearly at odds with the biblical portrait of God.

The central culprit in this story was Augustine, who attributed to God the very characteristics of Greek ontology that the Cappadocians sought to overcome. They wanted to show that God is intimately related to temporal creation; Augustine wanted to show what God is in himself, apart from creation. For the Cappadocians, God is complex: it is precisely the togetherness of the identities that constitutes God. But for Augustine, God is simple; each identity possesses an abstract divine essence in exactly the same way, so the distinctions among them are lost. The Nicenes called the Trinity God because of the triune relations and differences; Augustine calls the Trinity God in spite of them.¹¹

With these moves, Augustine severed the Trinity from its anchor in salvation history and cast it adrift on a sea of speculation. When you think of God, Augustine maintains, you think “a greatest and highest substance that transcends all changeable creatures....

⁷ Ibid., 81–82.

⁸ Ibid., 89–90.

⁹ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰ Ibid., 107.

¹¹ Ibid., 119–120.

And so if I ask, ‘Is God changeable or unchangeable?’ you will quickly respond..., ‘God is changeless.’” Here is the essential distinction between creatures and God: “speak of the changes of things, and you find ‘was’ and ‘will be’; think God, and you find ‘is’ where ‘was’ and ‘will be’ cannot enter”. God not only does not change, he cannot; just so, “he is rightly said to be”. God, in other words, is being itself, “he who is”.¹² Thus conceived, God is timeless and impassible, untouched and untouchable by the temporal world.¹³

But let us return to Jenson’s central point. Only salvation history gives meaning to the Trinitarian language of persons and relations. And if the mighty acts of God are indicative of divine reality, we must conceive of God as inherently and essentially temporal. With this, the edifice of philosophical reflection that insists on divine simplicity, impassibility, and timelessness gives way. Because the name “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” derives its meaning from God’s reality in time, the relations that constitute God are “either temporal relations or empty verbiage”.¹⁴

Divine Temporality Obscured

Jenson makes a strong case for the view that complexity, relationship, and temporality are intrinsic to the divine life. The mighty acts of God portray what God is, not just what God does in the world. But when Jenson moves from his insistence on divine temporality to an account of God’s relation to the temporal world, this essential point seems to evaporate, unless his language betrays his intention.

As we have seen, Jenson follows the Cappadocians, who rejected the Hellenistic view and affirmed God’s relation to time. He puts the contrast this way: “Hellenic deity is eternal in that in it circling time has its motionless center; Gregory’s God is eternal in that he envelops time, is ahead of and so before it”.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., 117–118.

¹³ Augustine’s Trinitarian meditations were a magnificent mistake, of course. For in his attempt to describe the inner life of the divine, Augustine discovered the inner life of the person and thus began the long journey of introspection that produced our Western concept of the individual. As far as human consciousness is concerned, we are still benefiting from his insights. The emergence of the self in Western thought, as well as its subsequent demise, has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. The most comprehensive discussion to date is no doubt Charles Taylor’s magisterial account. Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). A number of works deal with various aspects of the modern and/or postmodern self. Seligman, A. B. (2000). *Modernity’s wager: Authority, the self, and transcendence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press). Schrag, C. O. (1997). *The self after postmodernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press). An influential sociological study of the self in contemporary America is Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press). Stanley J. Grenz provides an account of the self’s long history and proposes a revisionary interpretation of the self that draws on the recent emphases in Trinitarian thought on personhood and community. Grenz, S. J. (2001). *The social God and the relational self: A Trinitarian theology of the imago dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox).

¹⁴The triune identity, 125–126 (emphasis his).

¹⁵The triune identity, 165.

But what is the difference between a motionless center and an enveloping reality? They give us different pictures of the God–world relation, to be sure, but in one respect they are strikingly similar. Both envision time as a sphere, a container, or a closed space to which infinity may or may not be related. For the Greeks, God exists apart from this sphere. God is above and beyond it, or immovably centered within it. But God is essentially untouched by it. It contributes nothing to God. The bliss or tranquility of the divine is untroubled by any happening in the realm of finite reality. For Jenson, God chooses to connect with this creaturely, temporal sphere. God is not “above” time; instead, God is “ahead of” or “in front of” it, drawing it dynamically forward. But this still treats time as something apart from God’s own reality. The creaturely sphere is temporal; in his/her own reality, it seems God is not.

Jenson’s separation of God and temporality is further evident in statements like this: “For God to create is for him to make accommodation in his triune life for other persons and things.... In himself, he opens room, and that act is the event of creation. We call this accommodation in the triune life ‘time’.”¹⁶ And in this statement, his spatializing of time—and his separation of time from God—is explicit: “In interpreting the reality of time, we could not avoid the language of space. Time ... is the room God makes in his eternity for others than himself”.¹⁷

Jenson thus veers away from the conclusion to which his Trinitarian reflections naturally lead. As he interprets it, the doctrine of the Trinity affirms that something in the inner life of God corresponds to the temporal world. But when he describes the nature of this relationship, his remarks seem to indicate that God is not essentially temporal. Time is the sphere of creaturely existence, a sphere distinct from God. While God is related in some way to the temporal sphere, God’s own reality, it seems, is not essentially temporal. The meaning of divine temporality becomes obscure when Jenson describes time as a something which God includes or surrounds, and when he draws a sharp distinction between “created time” and “triune time”.^{18,19}

¹⁶ “Created time is accommodation in God’s eternity for other than God” (Systematic theology, 2:25; *italics his*).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸ Jenson, Systematic theology, 2: 345.

¹⁹ We find the same problem in the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Like Jenson, Pannenberg affirms God’s relation to history as the key to understanding the divine reality, and, again like Jenson, he affirms the principle that the immanent Trinity is identical to the economic Trinity. But when he describes the ultimate future, he variously identifies it as “the coming of eternity into time,” and “the dissolving of time in eternity”. Pannenberg, W. (1991–1998). Systematic theology, 3 vols. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (3 vols.; Eerdmans) 3:595, 607. In other words, time gives way to timelessness, and temporal succession comes to an end. The final future is not a transition to a continuing life of temporal experiences, but a single, all-encompassing, momentary experience, an endpoint that subsumes the entire course of history that precedes it.

What happens to the divine temporality in the face of assertions like these? It evaporates. Instead of experiencing time sequentially, God experiences all things at once. The divine life is characterized by an “eternal simultaneity,” says Pannenberg. “To God all things that were are always present.” In the eternity of God, time is “taken up” into “the eternal simultaneity of the divine life” (*ibid.*, 3:607). God exists in “an undivided present” (*ibid.*, 3:630). Whereas creatures are “subject to the march of time,” “All things are always present to [God].” “The eternal God has no future ahead of him that is different from his present.” (*ibid.* 1:410).

If God is truly temporal, if God acts in history, and God's acts in history reveal God's own reality, then we cannot think of time as a bounded sphere which God may precede, succeed, or envelop. We must find a different way to envision it. On this point another line of theistic reflection is helpful. Process thought avoids the pitfalls of spatializing time, and it provides a way for us to think of God not only as genuinely temporal, but also as temporal in a supreme and excellent way.

Divine Temporality Clarified

If God is temporal in the way that the doctrine of the Trinity requires, that is, if God's mighty acts reflect the reality that God truly is, then God's reality must consist of a sequence of experiences.²⁰

A familiar objection to this view is that it reduces God to the level of the creatures. Instead of isolating God from the world, as the Greeks did, it goes to the opposite extreme: it immerses God in it and turns God into another version of ourselves.

The assumption here is that temporal passage detracts from God's greatness. If God changed with time, then God could lose value, becoming less than God was before. On the other hand, if God learns or grows over time, then God is always less than God could be. Either account conflicts with the idea of divine perfection—the concept, as Anselm put it, of “a being than which a greater cannot be thought”. The challenge, then, is to think of divine temporality as an ongoing series of events in a way that preserves God's generic excellence.

Schubert M. Ogden meets this challenge in an essay entitled, “The Temporality of God”.²¹ According to Ogden, we can develop an understanding of divine temporality by thoughtfully analyzing our own.²² Careful reflection reveals that human existence exhibits a twofold character. Each human being embodies, or incarnates,

²⁰The view that time is sequential requires extensive development, which space prevents us from providing here. For a classic discussion of the issues, see Pike, N. (2002). *God and timelessness* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock; reprint edition). For a more recent discussion, see Ganssle, G., & Woodruff, D. (Eds.), (2001). *God and time* (New York: Oxford University Press). William Lane Craig argues for the tensed theory of time endorsed here. Craig, W. L. (2000). Omnicience, tensed facts, and divine eternity. *Faith and Philosophy*, 17, 225–241. Richard E. Creel also deals with a wide range of issues connected to the theme of divine eternity. Creel, R. E. (1986). *Divine impassibility: An essay in philosophical theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press). Creel argues, confusingly, that God's knowledge of the actual world changes but that God is nevertheless changeless in his will and his feeling, as well as in his nature (204–206).

²¹Ogden, S. M. (1966). *The reality of God and other essays* (New York: Harper & Row). In this essay Ogden provides a succinct account of the process view of God and time, which receives its definitive expression in the writings of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Whitehead, A. N. (1929). *Process and reality: An essay in cosmology* (New York: Macmillan). Hartshorne, C. (1970) *Creative synthesis and philosophic method* (La Salle: Open Court); Hartshorne, C. (1948). *The divine relativity: A social conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press). Hartshorne, C. (1953). *Reality as social process: Studies in metaphysics and religion* (New York: Macmillan).

²²Since our own reality is the best entrée we have to reality as such, human existence gives us an answer to “the ultimate philosophical question of the meaning of being itself” (*The reality of God*, 148).

certain characteristics which provide identity over time. These include characteristics that are common to all humans, along with each individual's distinctive physical features and unique qualities of personality and character. But these do not exhaust the content of human existence. Each concrete moment of life presents a person with stimuli which he or she incorporates into a new synthesis of experience. So human existence is essentially "dipolar": it consists of a number of features that are relatively enduring, and a sequence of momentary experiences, which include or embody these features.

Similarly, Ogden argues, the being of God exhibits dipolarity. It consists of an ongoing sequence of discrete experiences, each of which includes the various qualities which are unique to the divine reality. On this view, all persons, human and divine, are essentially temporal. They exist as concrete moment-by-moment occasions of experience, each of which has certain defining characteristics.²³ In fact, to have experiences, to have a past and a future, is essential to the reality of anything.²⁴ God is "an experiencing self who anticipates the future and remembers the past and whose successive occasions of present experience are themselves temporal occurrences".²⁵

It is therefore misleading to speak of God as "outside", "above", or "ahead of" time, as if time were a sphere independent of God. Instead, God is inherently temporal. God's life, like all life, consists in a series of momentary experiences,²⁶ and with this concept the notion of divine temporality acquires coherent meaning.

Does this view of divine temporality compromise God's generic excellence? Does it make God just a larger version of ourselves, one agent alongside others embedded in the flux of temporal passage? Not at all, according to Ogden. We can preserve the qualitative distinction between God and everything else by saying, not that God is atemporal, but that God is supremely temporal.²⁷ Unlike God, creatures are not only temporal, they are temporary. Their experience begins and ends. In contrast, God's own experience is "everlasting". The sequence of events that constitute God's life is without beginning or end.²⁸ Accordingly, God's experience, and God's alone, is "eternally temporal".

²³ This view of things reverses the familiar notion that reality consists of "things," or enduring objects, which "have" experiences. Rather, reality consists of a welter of momentary experiences, some of which share certain qualities with previous experiences and therefore belong to a sequence of events that have sufficient similarity for us to think of them as an enduring object, that is, as a "thing," or a person.

²⁴ As Ogden puts it, our everyday sense of time is grounded in "a more primal temporality." The truly primary time of our experience is not something we are within, as if it were a container or some sort in which we order the objects of our ordinary external perceptions. Instead, it is "the time constituted by our experiencing itself, as actual occurrence" (*The reality of God*, 151).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁶ Perhaps the best way to express this is to say, not "God is in time," but "time is real for God."

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁸ "In the case of God," Ogden argues, "what is distinctive is the complete absence of... temporal finitude and limitation." "God's temporality is not itself temporally determined, so that there is neither a time when God was not yet nor a time when he shall be no more." "God's being has neither begun nor will it end, and the past and future to which he is related in each successive occasion of his present experience can be nothing less than a literally limitless past and future" (*ibid.*, 154).

God is also distinguished from all creaturely reality by the fact God's experience is utterly comprehensive. God responds to everything that exists; each momentary experience encompasses the entire contents of the world. In Ogden's words, "God's distinctiveness [is] not an utter negation of temporality but its supreme exemplification. God's eternity is not sheer timelessness, but an infinite fullness of time".²⁹ God's experience is thus the perfect and complete register of all that happens in the world. In contrast to the unmoved mover of Aristotelian thought, we should think of God as the "most moved mover",³⁰ as one who is more sensitive to what happens in the world than anyone or anything else could be.

Taken together, the accounts of Robert Jenson and Schubert Ogden provide both reasons for and ways of conceiving divine temporality. For Jenson, the doctrine of the Trinity expresses the fundamental conviction that the mighty acts of God in salvation history reveal God's essential reality. And, to be faithful to this portrait, we must conceive of God as genuinely temporal. For Ogden, divine temporality means that God's experience comprises a sequence of events that has no beginning and no end. So, Jenson makes a persuasive case that the Trinity involves temporality; Schubert M. Ogden provides a helpful concept of temporal experience.³¹

By explaining the sequential nature of God's experience, Ogden helps to clarify Jenson's affirmation of divine temporality. But there is an important respect in which Jenson's Trinitarian view of God corrects what to open theism is a deficiency in Ogden's dipolar theism. For Ogden, as for process theism in general, the ultimate metaphysical fact is God-and-world, not just God. Without a world of beings other than him/herself to experience, God would have no reality. In other words, God needs the world as much as the world needs God. For open theism, however, this conflicts with the historic affirmations of faith that God's existence alone is necessary, and that God creates out of freedom, not out of some sort of necessity.

With his dramatic portrayal of God's inner life as one of complexity, dynamism, and drama, Jenson shows that God is relational not only by virtue of God's connection with the world; God is relational in him/herself. For this reason, we need not think of God in or by him/herself as anomalous, or as "lonely". The Trinitarian life is filled with experience, unimaginable to us in its richness, complexity, and love. Consequently, creation does not meet a deficiency in the divine reality. To the contrary, it freely expresses God's inherent fullness; it extends the inner vitality of God's own life.

²⁹ "In their truly primal forms, temporality and relations structure are constitutive of being itself, and God's uniqueness is to be construed not simply by denying them, but by conceiving them in their infinite mode through the negation of their limitation as we experience them in ourselves" (*The reality of God*, 154). Cf. Whitehead's insistence that God is not the exception to metaphysical principles, but their supreme exemplification (*Process and reality* [Free Press edition, 1959], 405).

³⁰ This is the title of one of Clark H. Pinnock's books. Pinnock, C. (2001). *Most moved mover: A theology of God's openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker).

³¹ For further discussion of the idea that God expresses his innermost life in creation but does not depend on the world for his existence, see Rice, R. (2000). *Process theism and the open view of God*. In Cobb, J. B., & Pinnock, C. (Eds.), *Searching for an adequate God: A dialogue between process and free will theists* (pp. 163–200) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

Suggested Readings: Open Theism

1. Basinger, David. 1996. *The case for freewill theism: A philosophical assessment*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
2. Basinger, David, and Randall Basinger (eds.). 1986. *Predestination and free will: Four views of divine sovereignty and human freedom*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
3. Boyd, Gregory A. 2000. *God of the possible: A biblical introduction to the open view of God*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
4. Cobb Jr., John B., and Clark H. Pinnock (eds.). 2000. *Searching for an adequate God: A dialogue between process and free will theorists*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
5. Hall, Christopher, and John Sanders. 2003. *Does God have a future? A debate on divine providence*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
6. Hasker, William. 1998. *God, time and knowledge*. Cornell Studies in Philosophy of Religion. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
7. Hasker, William. 2004. *Providence, evil, and the openness of God*. Routledge Studies in the Philosophy of Religion. New York: Routledge.
8. Pinnock, Clark H. 2001. *Most moved mover: A theology of God's openness*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press.
9. Pinnock, Clark H., Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger. 1994. *Openness of God: A biblical challenge to the traditional understanding of God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
10. Rice, Richard. 2004. *God's foreknowledge and man's free will*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
11. Sanders, John. 2007. *The God who risks: A theology of providence*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Part V

Process Theology

Introduction to Process Theology

Roland Faber

This section of the book collects four articles that have taken their inspiration for contemporary models of God and ultimate reality from process theology. A good choice! I know of no other elaborate theological pattern of thought—historically or currently—that would allow us not only to express a distinct group of models of God *and* ultimate reality *at once*, but even more to harbor such a *variety* of models of both the divine and the ultimate. On the basis of its declared variability of construction and differentiation of possibly employed methods, but mostly because of its ability to consistently generate new conceptions in varying contexts, process theology may be one of the very few contemporary alternatives in (philosophical) theology that escapes the threat of being ossified by any particular dogmatic tradition within any given religion with which it might engage.

The four articles that will follow—Weidenbaum’s “William James’ Argument for a Finite Theism”; Viney’s “Hartshorne’s Dipolar Theism and the Mystery of God”; Coleman’s “From Models of God to a Model of Gods”; and Long’s “Ultimate Complexity: A Hindu Process Theology”—attest to this creative transgression of traditional limits of thought. As they engage with process theology in their own particular way, they also demonstrate nothing less than the breadth and depth of ways to mediate their intentions with very different filters of process theology’s own history. In other words: While they reflect the current exciting global complexity of theological thought in an interreligious context, they also rest their findings on different facets of process theology’s complex inner diversification. In raising questions of how to situate dimensions of communication of modes of God and ultimate reality *between* different philosophical traditions—from Aristotelian ontology and Jamesean cosmology to Hinduism’s mystical non-dualism—and *between* different religious traditions—from Christianity and Hinduism to African indigenous

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traditions—they also draw on some of the major, but different directions *within* process thought—their various Whiteheadian and Hartshornean strains—to make their respective cases.

If we seek for a common tenor in these papers, it may be fair to say that these articles offer a perspective on the universe and our philosophical and theological categories of thought that is permeated by *a search for complexity* instead of simplification. In the recognition of a plurality of cultural and religious traditions, which no longer requires justification, they stress the inherent multiplicity these traditions enshrine and offer their best theoretical attention, that is, with their respective *modes* of process thought. Such a constitutive multiplicity, then, is reflected in the proposed models of God and ultimate reality insofar as process theology offers the means to express an *inherent* essential multiplicity and, nevertheless, a *coherent*, but complex openness in its approach to the divine and ultimate. Moreover, such “multiplicity in process” becomes the very presuppositions of any form of contemporary sensitivity for cultural and religious difference.

Process theology is itself the paradox of such a processual complexity. It is a known term and yet, while its inception lies about a century in the past, it remains still somewhat obscure. It is already in its complex birth-process that the above mentioned characteristics are inscribed. Born of the ignition of the encounter between the Chicago-based social gospel movement and Alfred N. Whitehead’s philosophy of process and organism created in the 1920s, process theology branched—right from the beginning—into different strains of thought. Each strain, representing several emphases in Whitehead’s text, developed into broad streams offering complex answers to cultural, social, political, religious, or intellectual questions and problems.

While some more closely followed Whitehead’s own investigations into religion, theology, God, and ultimate reality, especially as developed in his book *Religion in the Making* (1926) and Part V of *Process and Reality* (1927–9), others emphasized the ethical impulses with a more pantheistic or nontheistic outlook (such as Henry Nelson Wieman and Bernard Loomer). Still others sought a more neo-classical theistic approach (such as Charles Hartshorne and his followers). Needless to say that various other directions took their inspiration from Whitehead’s initial thought as reactions to different philosophical and theological schools (phenomenology, existentialism, holism, poststructuralism) and religious traditions of all kinds of shades (theistic, pantheistic, nontheistic, panentheistic). I have laid out this development of process theology in detail in Part I of my book *God as Poet of the World* (2008).

While Whitehead’s interest in theology was somewhat ambiguous, he recognized the importance of both religious experiences and their theological explications, on the one hand, as well as the importance of a concept of the divine and ultimate reality in his *philosophical* endeavor to formulate a comprehensive cosmology, on the other. If we do not forget that Whitehead was a physical mathematician throughout his whole professional life who, only at the age of 63, became a philosopher at Harvard University, we will understand why he thought that any future development of an intelligent civilization must follow the scientific revolution as it unfolded at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet as a philosopher he also insisted that

we must exchange its underlying reductionist philosophical scheme, that is, its materialism and positivism, and instead seek out all worlds of experience, be they physical, mental, or spiritual, cosmic or social, private or political, human or ecological. Striving for such newly negotiated harmonies of alleged opposites, he thought, makes all the difference between war and peace, annihilation or conversation, anesthesia or aesthetic enjoyment as aims of existence.

What process theology *is*—is another question. Its basis is experience. Whitehead, with William James, insists on the genuine integrity of experience as source of knowledge, and, even more, existence. In order to construct a cosmology or a comprehensive philosophical understanding of the world as a whole (with everything in it) we must not only take into account the uniqueness of the multiplicity of possible and actual and mutually irreducible kinds of experiences. In order to guarantee this constitutional diversity we must rather, Whitehead explains, reorient the framework for our understanding of experience. Instead of experience being something on the basis of anything *else*—be it any material or any substance of which it would appear as an accident—experience is that which *actually exists*. The world is a complex of experiences and a complex rendering of their structural and creative movements of integration, of processes of forming organisms, societies, and patterns of repetition and change that, in fact, generate the diversity of forms and processes of the cosmos on all of its levels as well as its deep structures of space and time.

Hence, Whitehead's engagement with religion and theology can be comprised by referring to three existential, that is, indispensable and deeply motivating, moments generated by his understanding of experience. First, since experience expresses the most “fundamental” level of analysis, not only must we take seriously that there *are* religious experiences, that is, experiences of the divine and of ultimate reality, but we will, moreover, find the *roots* of divinity and ultimacy within the very fabric of experience as it is the “stuff” of which existence is made. Second, because of the irreducible multiplicity of such experiences of divinity and ultimacy, reality itself cannot consist in anything else but the complexity, relativity, relationality, and mutuality of experiences of which the *different* “instantiations” of divinity and ultimacy are their very expression. Third, since every experience is somehow in all others—although allowing for different structures of societies, cultures and religions to grow out of the process of their mutual engagement—any theological claim must consist in a *criticism of power*. It is to be determined in what sense a unique strain of lived experience—as it forms a religious tradition, philosophical school, social community, or cultural identity—occupies a place of imperialist universalism, emptied of all other strains of existence. Whitehead's engagement with divinity and ultimate reality is radically democratic, valuing the plurality and complexity of *different forms* of life with divinity and ultimacy as well as a plurality and complexity of divinity and ultimate reality *themselves*.

Process theology is the expression of this Whiteheadian impulse as it wanders through such different strands of experiences as they form patterns of integrity, sufficiently distinguished from another so as to be identified in their diversity, but sufficiently related so as to be found mutually enriching and, in fact, immanent in one another. This makes process theology an ideal candidate for a sufficiently

diverse and complex conceptual framework within which to analyze different religious and cultural traditions regarding their mutual relevance. Exceptional examples can be found in Hartshorne's *Divine Relativity* (1948) and Bernard Loomer's *The Size of God* (1987) regarding the radical criticism of philosophical simplicity within theology; John Cobb's *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (1999) regarding Christianity and postmodernity and *Beyond Dialogue* (1982) regarding Buddhism and interreligious discourse as well as David Griffin's *Deep Religious Pluralism* (2005) in its engagement with the complexity of ultimate reality based on Whitehead and Hartshorne and different Eastern and Middle Eastern religious traditions; or Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep* (2003) with its emphasis on the intertextuality of diverse mystical traditions and poststructuralist philosophy.

Two of the maybe most creative moves by which Whitehead initiated a distinct process theological approach may precede the discussion of the four articles of this section as they draw on their potential. The first move concerns Whitehead's understanding of ultimate reality as *composition*, which for him comprises three aspects: infinite potential, infinite creativity, and divinity. In fact, this irreducible, but interdependent complex of Reality comprises two contracts of opposites at once: that of *potentiality and actuality*—both of which he thought to be *abstractions* from the concrete integration on events of experiences—and of *divinity and ultimacy*—which only in their *differentiation* hinder religious claims of imperialistic power. It is precisely this complexity of Reality that allows process theology to develop ever new models of interreligious conversations on God and ultimate reality without overpowering any position with dogmatic fixations of any participating tradition. Since none of its aspects are independent, the analysis and theological reconceptualization of diverse traditions with process theology allows to avoid any monopolization of any model of God and ultimacy. Even more, it offers a mode of discovery of the internal complexities in these traditions, which often have been and remain subject to oppression in the name of a prevalent orthodoxy to which process theology often appears as threat.

The second distinguishing feature of Whitehead's understanding of Reality is even more important. As the primordial *expression* of ultimate reality (as creative activity) and as primordial *evocation* of ultimate reality (as potentiality), Whitehead's God is, in principle, *devoid* of any power, except that of evocation and receptivity, or in more classical terms, of eros and responsiveness, rather than decreed order and immutable omnipotence. As God's nature is the supreme *effect* of ultimate reality, God is *creatively evoking novelty* in all events of experiences (in all of existence) and is *creatively suffering all actualizations* of such potentiality in experiences. This duality in God's nature, which Whitehead names the "primordial" and "consequent" natures of God, not only makes God a non-coercive agent of ultimacy, always seeking surprise over oppression and hope over destruction, but makes us ethical agents in the search for harmonious intensities of contrasts that are instruments of religious diversity and peace.

In "William James' Argument for a Finite Theism," Jonathan Weidenbaum argues against the monopolizations of the One with the help of William James' *A Pluralistic*

Universe (2005). As part of his polemic against monism and idealism, James advocates a God, or a multitude of gods, as both limited in influence and set off against other forces in the cosmos. By championing a deity amenable to a pluralistic and open-ended universe, James sought not only to promote the morally vigorous life, but to do justice to the full texture of human experience. While critically analyzing James's "finite theism," Weidenbaum introduces Whitehead's elaborate concept of divinity and ultimate reality.

Since William James "taught us that metaphysical positions are not merely abstract ideas," but that "they have a tremendous bearing on how we live" by having "a pre-rational hold on things, a root intuition" (2) and feeling, it is a condition for the morally active life that we affirm freedom rather than determinism. Hence, as James explains in his book on *Pragmatism*, a merely transcendent One as envisioned by many mystics and idealists relegates the everyday world of struggle to a mere appearance, a move which invalidates rather than promotes the need for personal initiative and moral exertion. Instead, he promotes an *intimacy* that "connotes the continuity of the self with the cosmos as found within the immediacy of our perceptual life" and "ontologies" (5) that encourages active participation with the world instead of passive resignation. Hence, he advocates a pluralistic divinity over against dualistic ontologies or merely impersonal materialism.

These motives lead James, toward the end of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, to depict "our awareness as continuous with a wider sea of consciousness, a transpersonal Mind whose concrete effects on our personal life are noted by all of the world's faiths." By suggesting a *panpsychism* "wherein all of nature is understood as possessing a degree of consciousness," our "spiritual intuition—the sense of our immersion within an immanent and spiritual reality"—can "preserve the integrity of lived experience and moral purpose." This "superhuman consciousness" however, is neither the whole of reality nor its commander, but rather has a world as its "external environment, and consequently is finite." (7)

Yet, as Richard Gale argues, since James is committed to both a passive, mystical self, seeking sacred union, and an active, moral self, struggling against evil, he faces the metaphysical problem of how a *finite* God who as "one force among many" would *itself* be "involved in a struggle for the good," could also be "an aim toward which morally awakened human beings are also directed." Therefore, "the superhuman consciousness of James's religious philosophy is merely an object of *relative concern*" (9) as it is an instrument towards the ethical struggle against evil. As the "ethical self seeks not God, but what God seeks," how can this finite God be of value in this formation of the ethical subject?

This is the point at which Weidenbaum introduces Whitehead whose God is a persuasive as opposed to coercive power, that is, who cannot force divine will upon any living events that constitute reality. Instead, any event of experience co-operates with the divine in order to enhance the aesthetic intensity and harmonious satisfaction of the universe. While our moral efforts are with God's "primordial" aspect as it grounds the possibilities for moral action as well as the structure of the universe, God's "consequent" aspect inherits each and every stage of this development, including and preserving the memory of every event and its decisions everlastingly

within God, thereby contributing to James' twofold sensibility toward the moral and the mystical vocation and "aim" of human existence. (9–10)

Weidenbaum demonstrates how a "process panentheism" is resonant with a family of philosophical and theological positions that, in taking experience of both morality and mysticism seriously, must make a case for a philosophical and theological pluralism that is set against monisms of *all* kinds as they necessitate an ontology that would place power in the hands of a single principle. Instead, James and Whitehead utilize one effective way to maintain a spiritual worldview while avoiding such a hegemonic and centralized cosmology, namely, by arguing for a God limited in scope and influence. Yet, while James' God seems to be more interested in the *moral* freedom of humanity over against an all-encompassing God, Whitehead is more interested in the *aesthetic* initiation and completion of this freedom in God's twofold nature. While James' universe defines wholeness by incompleteness in which always something *escapes*, Whitehead's universe is initiated by a God who releases it from its ossifications by *initiating* this escape. While for James this escape is the condition for morality, for Whitehead it is the condition for an intensity that enriches *mystical* union with God.

In Donald Wayne Viney's "Hartshorne's Dipolar Theism and the Mystery of God," we encounter another philosophical discussion around power and the nature of a mysticism that avoids the implications of a world subsumed into an omnipotent One, as sometimes expounded by negative theologies. The discussion partners in this paper are not Whitehead, but his assistant Hartshorne, and not monisms or dualisms in general, but the Thomistic God of "classical theism," against which Hartshorne sets his own version of a Whiteheadian "neo-classic dipolar theism."

Viney, as does Hartshorne, recourses to Anselm's two famous propositions, namely that, on the one hand, God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived (which becomes the basis of his ontological argument), but that, on the other hand, God is always greater than can be conceived. The second formula—essential to sound theology—points to the mystery of God, which usually is preserved by the *via negativa* as one finds in Aquinas. Viney now explores Hartshorne's argument *against* negative theology but, since an "adequate concept of God must point beyond itself to a mystery not wholly available to our conceptuality," we must "somewhat paradoxically" assume that, "within the tradition of faith seeking understanding, God may be conceived as calling us from beyond the understanding to understand the God that lies beyond." (3) In the end, Viney defends mysticism by demonstrating how Hartshorne preserves the mystery of God in situating it not in the essence, but the actuality of God.

For Viney, Hartshorne offers an alternative to Descartes' God as mystery and Aquinas' unchanging, non-contingent, and non-relational God by claiming that God, to be conceived as perfect, must be immutable in some respects, but mutable in others. He draws the classical three-fold distinction among essence (what a thing is), existence (that a thing is), and actuality (the particular state in which a thing is). Yet, since Hartshorne agrees with Aquinas that essence and existence in God are the same, this comparison ends with the abbreviation of God's existence versus God's actuality. If existence and essence in God are the same, and if God's existence is

immutable, then God's essence (or character) can remain immutable (as in classical theism), but this necessary existent and perfect God (in power, knowledge, and goodness) does not preclude that God's actuality remains a mystery that is always greater than any conceptualization.

Viney's article shows how a *creative reversal* of the location of the mystery of God needs not to give up on rationality (which Hartshorne was most interested in), but must relocate the divine mystery within the unexpected. While classical theism identifies mystery with the omnipotent God by *precluding* any *real* relationship to the world—that is, the divine receptivity Whitehead refers to as the “consequent nature” and Hartshorne as divine “states of activity”—Hartshorne identifies this *presumed* “mystery” as the mere abstract character of a God of which the very *events* of actuality are the *real* mystery beyond any rational necessity. God's mystery is in God's *becoming*, which is sovereign, but supremely responsive, such that *this* divine process is, if at all, the mystery of divinity. Although Hartshorne's alteration of Whitehead's dipolarity of God's nature has conceded to classical theism an abstract nature of God that is necessary and fixed—something Whitehead's “primordial nature” as living complex of the integration of a multiplicity of potentialities has avoided—it has made the concrete events of the living actuality of God supreme. Their very *multiplicity* is a mystery of *life* for which the character of God is only a guarantee that God's identity *as God* is not lost in the mystery, but that the mystery we seek is always the *divine* mystery.

Monica A. Coleman's article “From Models of God to a Model of Gods” changes direction and ventures from the Eurocentric discussions to that of African tribal religion, which we better avoid to interrogate with the measures of monotheism or polytheism—categories set to retain supremacy over non-western, non-Christian realms of thought, religiosity and cultural alterity. In order to achieve this aim, Coleman proposes “a Whiteheadian process model that describes a community of gods that has active interaction with the temporal world” not only as a model that “broadens conversations of religious pluralism for Western-trained religious scholars, but also acknowledges the Western context in which many practitioners of African traditional religions live.” Thereby, Coleman wants to test whether “process theism can offer a model of God that can work with a non-Christian religion.” Since “African traditional religions, and other religions...complicate the issue of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue” as “their understanding of the divine is so radically different from the God of Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions,” this may be seen as a test case to the transformative power of process theology's matrix in relation to traditions where we need a “model of Gods” because they hold “a belief in a plurality of divinities.”

With Laurel Schneider, Coleman wants to show how it is *multiplicity* that “always rears its head of reality in the face of the logic of the One,” even as we too often remain enmeshed in “a drive towards Oneness that usually devalues multiplicity.” (330) In process theology, the world's events always respond to God's “initial aim” (God's erotic presence that initiates any event as potential of its own becoming) such that God is quite literally a part of who we are and what we do. Yet while, in

every moment, we can become an incarnation of God's self, can process theism also imagine divine multiplicity?

Coleman chooses the Yoruba-based religion to show the challenge to monotheism and polytheism, which, as in other African religions, doesn't fit, but only "distorts the rich diversity of African religious experience by oversimplification." The traditional Yoruba religion has "multiple figures that are eternal and active within the finite human world" and "also maintains that the end of life within the finite world does not necessitate the end of life within a divine or ancestral world," Rather, "there is constant, continuous, embodied (sometimes malevolent, sometimes benevolent) contact between that which is divine, eternal and ancestral, and that which is human, animal and planetary." (333)

In light of these complications, Coleman suggests that a creative alternative would think in terms of "a community of gods" under a term of "communotheism," indicating "that the Divine is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and ontologically equal while at the same time distinct from one another by their personhood and functions." Their "immanence" expresses a "radical relationality among the members of the divine community and between the divine community and the world," while "transcendence" (334) remains because of geographic distance and death that cannot destroy radical relationality.

Coleman situates this conceptual novelty within a Whiteheadian context by referring to "a place" in Whitehead's theology "where there is everlastingness or immortality, and multiplicity is held together and affirmed," namely the "consequent nature" of Whitehead's God. "In the consequent nature, all actual entities live on and participate in God eternally, to the ordering of what has been received (God's concrescing), to the primordial nature where the vision is returned to the world. This 'heaven' or the 'community of God' is both something that is apart from the world—in God—and yet in the world." This community of God also "describes a kind of multiplicity—the manyness of the world that finds immortality within God." But why, asks Coleman "must it be just the manyness of the world? Why not the manyness of the divine?" (336)

For Coleman, affirming divine multiplicity—a model of *Gods*—is a "radical theological act" that, like Sally McFague's description of her models of God, lies not so much in the activation itself than in the "changes of consciousness" it instigates though a "new imaginative picture of the relationship between God and the world" that always must precede radical action. In "an act of decentering, a rejection of ontological Oneness, and a refusal to accept the position of 'Other' as other," this becomes "a postmodern, feminist, African-centered theological act." (339–340)

Last but not least, Jeffery D. Long's "Ultimate Complexity: A Hindu Process Theology" ventures into Asia and stages a communication of process theology's differentiation between the divine and the ultimate with Hinduism's Vedanta traditions and their various non-dualist understandings of ultimate reality. Interestingly, Long avoids the oft-observed preference of Advaita Vedanta in Western reception and, instead, relates his "Hindu process theology" to the neo-Vedantan strain of the

Bengali sage Sri Ramakrishna and his disciple Swami Vivekananda, who brought Hindu thought to the West at the end of the nineteenth century.

By engaging this tradition, Long also creatively argues with (and against) a line of process thought that, with John Cobb and David Griffin, presents Whitehead as holding a *plurality* of ultimates (Creativity, the World, God). Instead, Long wants to demonstrate, with the resources of the neo-Vedanta tradition, that Whitehead can be understood as attaining a *single complex* ultimate. Like Cobb and Griffin's plurality model, Long wants to avoid a "debilitating relativism" (Alan Race) as is allegedly inherent in John Hick's ultimately unknowable Real, but, at the same time, strives to affirm the "distinctiveness of the world's religions." (5) Long seeks a solution by using Whitehead's observation "that metaphysics either makes process ultimate or fact ultimate." (7) This is confirmed in Hindu thought by the opposition of Advaita Vedanta, which makes Brahman ultimate, to Dvaita Vedanta's extreme dualism, which rejects this. Long, instead, suggests "intermediate" systems of Vedanta, such as the well known qualified non-dualism, or Visistadvaita of Ramanuja, which give emphasis to a *unity* "that underlies plurality, and that connects diverse entities as elements in an *internally* pluralistic, yet ultimately singular, system." (7)

In reading Cobb's and Griffin's "three *types* of ultimate reality" not as corresponding to three *types* of religion—Theistic Religions, Acosmic Religions, Cosmic religions—but to *aspects* of *any* religion, they avoid being interpreted as competitors and, rather, become "three mutually necessary parts or aspects of what is ultimately a unified and internally coherent picture of the universe." (6) Thereby, Long tries to establish a synthesis of, rather than a middle way between, dual aspects of the ultimate such as personal divinity (*bhakti* tradition) and impersonal ultimate (*advaita* mysticism) with a difference comprised in Whitehead's dual nature of God: the primordial nature of potentials (as represented by Sri Ramakrishna's "inactive Brahman") and the full actuality of God that synthesizes both natures (the active Brahman). In a sense, then, Long achieves a synthesis between Whitehead's and Hartshorne's duality in God that reflects Griffin's "Doubly Dipolar Theism." (Griffin 2001: 148)

Many more models could be explored and nuanced from Whitehead's innovation of ultimate multiplicity and unity, all of them different regarding the emphasis they lay on irreducible elements as they come together in a synthesis by different valuations (up and down) that is evoked not only by the fluency of the mutual immanence of these aspects, but even more by the *event* of their togetherness in the diverse religious, theological, and philosophical contexts in which such a synthesis is uniquely situated. As the four articles on process models of God and ultimacy presented in this section, arouse more than satisfy the depth of process theology's ability to venture into different cultural, religious, theological, and philosophical realms they also should evoke further research into, and creative events of, syntheses of ultimate multiplicity and unity. And much more thought could be given to the *mutuality* of the chosen ultimates, be they divine or not, theistic or nontheistic, all-comprising or unique, ethical or mystical, aesthetic or rational.

In the end, I think that Whitehead's theopoetics is not meant to press any charges against existing or still-to-be invented models based on such a mutuality of ultimate aspects of Reality (whether they are right or wrong), but asks us to further explore the *methodologies* of the four articles: To seek that which *escapes* our imperial comprehension of the Whole and that which furthers the *nonviolent self-contraction* of the divine (Nicolas of Cusa)—as Weidenbaum suggests with James and Whitehead. To seek the mystery of ultimacy not in any allegedly fixed nature of a “perfect” God in opposition to an “imperfect” world, but in the supremacy of *relationality* within ultimate reality and the *events* of God—as Viney suggests with Hartshorne. To seek the valuation of *becoming ultimate* as that which makes the ultimate ultimate—as Coleman suggests with the divine *receptivity into complexity* in the context of African tribal religions in resonance with the multiplicity that Whitehead's God synthesizes in all of God's aspects. Finally, to seek ways to express the complexity of ultimate reality in its very beauty of releasing us from single-minded dogmatic expressions that can only understand multiplicity as a loss of divine perfection—as suggested by Long with Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda in a variation of Cobb's and Griffin's “deep religious pluralism” and the oscillations between Whitehead and Hartshorne.

If I am, from my own research, to suggest aspects for future investigations of models of God and ultimate reality inspired or initiated by process theology that need further elaboration or are not used as resources in this volume, I would name five. First, rather than finding resonances between process theology and religious, theological, or philosophical models, it would be mandatory to find the *depth-structure* from which they communicate. What is the *relationship* between the different multiplicities that Whitehead's metaphysical engagement with ultimacy raises—the multiplicity of the “natures” of God and the multiplicity of non-divine aspects of ultimacy (for instance, creativity, *khora*, extensive continuum, divine or non-divine matrix, potentiality, novelty, cosmic epochs or the infinity of cosmic cycles)? Second, how does Whitehead's differentiation of these multiplicities and their respective “unities” (for instance, the unity of creativity as activity, of God as event, of the Receptacle as place of communication) generate different understandings of the *process* of their mutual relation that *speaks* to the variability of religious, theological, and philosophical traditions? Third, much more thought has to be given to the contrast between the difference and non-difference of divinity and ultimacy and how this “duality” (of duality and non-duality) itself is related. I suggest that a discussion of the still-mostly-absent thought patterns of Plotinus, Meister Eckhart and Nicolas of Cusa, as they appear not only in a Western and Christian context but, for instance, in the Islamic, Sufi, Hindu, and Buddhist contexts, may fruitfully further such reflection. Fourth, much more thought should be given to what seems to me to be *the ultimate* in Whitehead beyond the different multiplicities of ultimacy already named and their respective multiple “unities,” namely the *mutual immanence* of all such multiplicities *itself* as Whitehead explores in *Adventures of Ideas*. Fifth, any discussion of ultimacy must not forget that such a mutual immanence has a *cosmological width* and, hence, harbors an *ecological imperative* to seek the *solidarity* of ultimacy not beyond the world, but *with* the world in its diversity of irreducible events of experience.

In any case, if the potentials of process theology for future discussions of models of God and ultimate reality will be taken up, it should be in the spirit in which they are incepted and that the four papers of this section so eloquently express, namely as models of multi-religious *understanding*, in addressing the root causes of religious strife and fanaticism, and by gently suggesting ways to embrace an atmosphere of religious peace that is longed for by many within many religious traditions and nonreligious persuasions. If it helps us to re-situate humanity in an infinite cosmos with its mysterious rhythms, if it makes us feel at home and activates us to universal solidarity, this “unity” will be more heralded by future generations to come than the insistence on the details of its different accents.

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William James's Argument for a Finite Theism

Jonathan Weidenbaum

In his biography of William James, Robert D. Richardson describes a terribly affecting episode in the history of the James family. Henry James Jr., the novelist, reads out loud a note written by his brother William at the gravesite of their recently departed father: “All my intellectual life I derive from you, and though we have often seemed at odds in the expression thereof I’m sure there’s a harmony somewhere, and that our strivings will combine.”¹ Henry James Sr. was something of a self-made theologian, a quasi-Swedenborgian who befriended Ralph Waldo Emerson and espoused an ontology in which the material world is a shadow of the spiritual and the self a fiction. His son William, the great psychologist and philosopher, would spend his long career fighting the “block universe” entailed by the idealist and monist philosophies so predominant in his time. Undoubtedly, and most evident at the cemetery, there were both a hint of rebellion and subsequent guilt in the relationship of William’s theological concepts to that of his father. But even if he recognized this, it would never have hindered him from carrying through with his pluralism. It was William James, after all, who taught us that metaphysical positions are not merely abstract ideas. On the contrary, they have a tremendous bearing on how we live; and no matter how well they are argued, they are the product of a sensibility, a pre-rational hold on things, a root intuition. We feel before we think.

The innermost core of James’s intellectual concerns, while personal in origin, inform standards of truth and inquiry intended to be universal in scope. In offering his positions, James promotes his readers and listeners to actualize their highest possibilities as human beings. In this endeavor, James is in good company; Pierre Hadot includes him as one of those rare thinkers who “conceived of philosophy not only as a concrete, practical activity but also as a transformation of our way of

¹ Richardson (2006), *William James; In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, p. 229.

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inhabiting and perceiving the world.”² The necessity of doing justice to the full-blooded character of lived experience and the urge to advocate the morally rigorous form of life are, in fact, among James’s most vital concerns, the “hotspots” in his consciousness—to borrow a phrase from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Following closely from these themes is the promotion of an open-ended universe—one plastic, malleable, and improvable through human effort. As we explore and assess James’s arguments for a finite theism we will encounter these positions in more detail.

One condition for the morally active life is the acceptance of personal autonomy, the affirmation of freedom over determinism. This topic was of central interest to James, whose epiphany while reading the French philosopher Renouvier (“my first act of free will shall be to believe in free will”) was instrumental in his own struggles against a paralyzing depression and anxiety. James also held that for freedom to be morally significant, reality must be pliant enough for our choices to make a difference. But the idea of an uncertain future is a challenge for traditional theism. For if there is an all-knowing and all-powerful god, a being who plans and shapes the course of history beforehand, then all events may very well be pre-established and therefore unchangeable.

Toward the end of “The Dilemma of Determinism,” James argues for the compatibility of theism with a measure of contingency in the universe. The deity is here compared by James to a master chess player who, sitting across from an amateur, is in fact blind to whatever strategy his or her opponent will take. Although prepared for every possible move, and fully intent on eventually winning the game, the master simply “cannot foresee” each and every decision made by the face on the other side of the board. “I will lead things to a certain end,” James has this god proclaim, “but I will not *now* decide on all the steps thereto.” In promoting a deity who relinquishes full knowledge and control over events in order to make room for chance, James demonstrates that the existence of providence does not necessarily entail determinism.³

Later, in the Gifford lectures, better known as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James argues for a god, or gods, limited in power and unable to assure the world’s salvation. Hence, in setting out his “overbeliefs,” his personal doctrines concerning the divine reality, James revokes providence entirely.⁴ Furthermore, the deity’s limitations are intrinsic, and not self-imposed as in “The Dilemma of Determinism.”⁵ Continuing in this direction through *Pragmatism*, he suggests a god who, far from the all-encompassing Absolute of the professional philosophers, is only one player “in the midst of all the shapers of the great

² Hadot (2002), *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, p. 270.

³ James (1956), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, pp. 180–183.

⁴ James (1958), *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 396–397.

⁵ This is not stated explicitly. Although it remains *conceivable* that the deity’s lack of omnipotence and omniscience in James’s mature thought might be self-imposed after all (an equivalent to the doctrine of the *tzimtzum* or God’s “contraction” in Lurianic Kabbalah), the fact that the deity is in active tension with other forces in the cosmos makes this highly unlikely.

world's fate."⁶ In both the Gifford lectures and *Pragmatism*, James argues that the acosmistic One envisioned by so many mystics and idealists relegates the everyday world of struggle to a mere appearance, a move which invalidates rather than promotes the need for personal initiative and moral exertion. After all, if perfection were already beneath and about us, what is there to struggle against? It is in the Hibbert lectures of 1908, however, wherein James's religious philosophy is the most refined. Subsequently titled *A Pluralistic Universe*, it includes and deepens most of the theological ideas outlined in his earlier works, and therefore serves as a most adequate place to examine his mature arguments for a finite theism.

James opens the Hibbert lectures by choosing between ontological frameworks based upon a criteria of *intimacy*: Our living connection with the cosmos rather than our alienation from it. His reasons, as usual, are both phenomenological and moral in nature. Intimacy, first, speaks to James's doctrine of "radical empiricism." At once a method and an ontological position, radical empiricism holds "pure experience" to be the one fundamental reality underlying the artificial distinctions between subject and object, mind and matter.⁷ As a method, it retains as real whatever is directly found within our experience, and excludes all that isn't. The relations subsisting between facts are therefore considered to be part of the very fabric of reality, and are neither relegated to the deep structures of the transcendental self (as seen by rationalists) nor slapped onto sense experience due to the associations formed through habit (as interpreted by empiricists). In short, intimacy connotes the continuity of the self with the cosmos as found within the immediacy of our perceptual life; and ontologies, for James, can be evaluated by the extent to which they approximate the world as we actually live and experience it.⁸ Second, to understand our relationship to the universe as one of intimacy is to encourage an active participation in things rather than a passive resignation. It is precisely this sense of kinship with the cosmos, what James labels the "sympathetic" as opposed to the "cynical temper," which motivates the need to continually improve it.⁹

Employing intimacy as a standard, spiritual worldviews in which we feel at home in the universe are preferred by James to the cold impersonality of materialistic ones. Similarly, pantheistic theologies which espouse the closeness between God, nature, and humanity are chosen over a dualistic theism in which the deity's "connexion with us appears as unilateral and not reciprocal."¹⁰ The image of a transcendent

⁶ James (1975), *Pragmatism*, p. 143. Much of what James articulates more elaborately in *The Varieties and Pragmatism* concerning God is briefly proposed toward the conclusion of an earlier essay, "Is Life Worth Living?" James (1956), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, p. 61.

⁷ See, for instance, James (1996a), "A World of Pure Experience," found in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.

⁸ David Lamberth states: "Whereas on a first reading James's distinction comes across as arbitrary, ascribable perhaps only to *his* psychological temperament, on a second reading one can see James drawing his distinctions according to a particular philosophy's adequacy in accounting for the phenomenological concreteness of our actual, lived experience." From Lamberth (1997), *The Cambridge Companion to William James*.

⁹ James (1996b), *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 23.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 26.

and infallible being with the world firmly in its control, an entity who could suddenly vanquish evil if it so pleased, simply does not lend itself to an ontology in which humans are required in any essential way. Pantheism is itself broken down into two distinct types: A monism or “all form” which identifies God with the entire cosmos, and a pluralism of “each-forms” in which the universe, however infused with the divine, exceeds any attempt to collect it into a totality.¹¹ And it is here, in the contest between monistic and pluralistic pantheism, wherein James sets out the puzzles and contradictions for which the doctrine of a finite theism is the answer.

In a nutshell, James argues that monistic pantheism, in its own way, transforms into a dualism every bit as alienating as the most “monarchical theism.” Conceiving the universe as the Absolute is to envision a state of perfect knowledge as well as a freedom from suffering. But to encounter the cosmos from *our* vantage point, a perspective “incurably rooted in the temporal point of view,” is to live through the muddied prism of ignorance, pain, guilt, and all of the contingencies of mundane life. Phenomenologically speaking, the pristine unity of the mystics and idealists shares nothing in common with everyday experience; morally speaking, it negates and even insults the difficulties and limitations which beset the human condition. The Absolute of monistic pantheism turns out, paradoxically, to be every bit as foreign to us as the God of Calvinism.¹²

Toward the end of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James depicts our awareness as continuous with a wider sea of consciousness, a transpersonal Mind whose concrete effects on our personal life are noted by all of the world’s faiths. The pluralistic pantheism of the Hibbert lectures grounds this picture upon a deeper ontology. This includes a *pansychism*, influenced by Gustav Fechner, wherein all of nature is understood as possessing a degree of consciousness. In his attempt to account for the full range of human experience, James sought to reconcile the facts of spiritual intuition—the sense of our immersion within an immanent and spiritual reality—with his usual concern to preserve the integrity of lived experience and moral purpose. His strategy is to postulate the existence of a superhuman consciousness which, though far more extensive than our own, possesses “an external environment, and consequently is finite.”¹³

As one force among many in the cosmos—including, possibly, other deities—the superhuman consciousness is itself faced with issues to surmount and problems to overcome. In this fashion, one can feel the divine presence surging through his or her awareness, and yet be compelled to struggle against evil; one can refer agreeably to Emerson’s description of becoming an invisible eyeball in *Nature*, and yet not deny the existence of the mundane realm. Finally, dwelling within the heart of an unfinished and precarious cosmos, this is a deity for whom human beings are partners instead of mere subjects. Our actions and decisions *add* something to the universe.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 34.

¹² Ibid, pp. 38–40.

¹³ Ibid, p. 311.

In a relatively recent study of James, this reconciliation between mystical experience and moral purpose has been challenged. In *The Divided Self of William James*, Richard Gale argues that James's thought faces two *aporias* or inconsistencies. First, there is the clash between the *passive* self which seeks blissful union with the sacred, and a morally *active* self which engages in a perpetual struggle against evil. Even if God, being finite, possesses an environment and is set off by other forces or deities, mystics aim to transcend their private will in order to identify with this larger and supernatural entity. The will is to be either nullified or affirmed; one cannot have it both ways at once.¹⁴ A second and far more intractable clash, according to Gale, is between the respective worlds inhabited by each self. The morally active self is linked to James's notion of Ontological Relativism (as labeled by Gale), the "metadoctrine" wherein our perspectives on reality are mediated by the use of concepts and are relative to a particular person at a particular time. By contrast, the metaphysical claims of the mystics are non-relative intuitions into the very heart of things, direct and unqualified revelations of the real.

At one point Gale admits that the clash between the mystical and moral selves, the first aporia in the thought of James, has been exaggerated. Perhaps, he suggests, passive immersion in the divine is a kind of rest and recuperation after which the self is then able to devote more energy to the ethical life. Gale here approvingly quotes Andrew Reck: "Refueled by relating to the divine, the individual is, in James's account, readied to cope once again with the arduous moral tasks of human existence."¹⁵ There is ample support for this interpretation in James's work. In the *Varieties* for instance, James argues that mystical experience can kindle and animate the moral quest (he quotes Saint Theresa of Avila, for instance, on how ecstasy leaves one "admirably disposed for action").¹⁶

There is yet another issue concerning the tension between the mystical and moral selves in James's thought, one far more integral to the religious life and by no means mollified by the rest and recuperation thesis of Gale and Reck. True faith, for Paul Tillich, is aptly defined as the whole-hearted devotion to "the object of our ultimate concern."¹⁷ Contemplatives East and West do not seek absorption in the god-head primarily for the feeling of ecstasy it brings, nor solely for a respite from the vicissitudes and contingencies of life. Rather, the greatest attraction of mysticism is the possibility of uniting oneself with the core of all meaning and value. In James's metaphysics however, god, being one force among many, is *itself* involved in a struggle for the good—an aim toward which morally awakened human beings are also directed. Even in the rest and recuperation model, the ethical self does not pine for God in any final sense, since unity with the deity is but a pit-stop for a renewed

¹⁴ Gale also points out the difficulties of how one mind can be morally autonomous while being a part of another, broader consciousness. See Gale (1999), *The Divided Self of William James*, pp. 271 and 304.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 312. Gale of course reaffirms that this synthesis fails to solve the second aporia between the Ontological Relativism of the moral self and the non-relative reality claims of the mystics.

¹⁶ James (1958), *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 318.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Tillich (1957), *Dynamics of Faith*.

engagement with evil. The ethical self seeks not God, but what God seeks. Thus, the superhuman consciousness of James's religious philosophy is merely an object of *relative concern*. It is a means to another end, and not quite the supernal goal of human existence which has ignited the hearts of the devout for centuries. All of this may seem trivial to professional theologians and philosophers seeking to harmonize different perspectives. But this would be no consolation for James, who, after all, not only sought to capture the authentic and defining character of spiritual experiences, but claimed his pluralistic and finite theism to reflect the true religious sensibilities of the common people.¹⁸

Can James's theological perspective overcome its problems? Perhaps another proponent of a finite theism, a philosopher profoundly influenced by James, can point us in the right direction.

In *Process and Reality* Alfred North Whitehead argues for a deity with persuasive as opposed to coercive power; a being who cannot force its will upon the living events or "actual occasions" which constitute reality. In Whitehead's theodicy, humans work with the divine in order to enhance the harmony and aesthetic intensity of the universe. But our moral efforts are not merely *with* God, while passing him for some other purpose. According to Whitehead's dipolar theism, the "primordial" aspect of God grounds the possibilities which structure the universe while the "consequent" part inherits each and every stage of its development. Including and preserving the memory of every actual occasion within its everlasting nature, the deity is therefore the beneficiary of our collective moral striving. Alternatively stated, our good deeds continually enrich the inner life and being of God. Here is a divine reality which, though finite, is simultaneously the object of *both* our spiritual and ethical vocations.

In "Is Life Worth Living?" James likewise suggests the existence of a deity who draws sustenance from our beliefs and actions. He goes as far as to depict the expansion of God as a vindication of the "sweat and blood and tragedy of this life."¹⁹ According to the overall tenor of James's mature philosophy however, the foremost endeavor of the moral self is not to perfect the deity, but to assist God in amending the universe. In rushing to wrestle with the loose ends and hazards of the cosmos, the corners of the universe lying outside of God's domain, the aspiration of the ethical self diverges from the need of the mystic to bask within the divine presence. In this context, the peace of the contemplative, even if an essential part of the story, is of auxiliary importance for the urgency of the moralist.

Whitehead defines metaphysics, or "speculative philosophy," as the fashioning of a set of categories through which to interpret the full range of human experience.²⁰ He argues that any philosophical generalization weaned from experience should not only be logically compatible with the rest of our generalizations, but must be revisable in light of our future experiences. In holding *all* insights as equally

¹⁸ See James (1958), *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 396.

¹⁹ James (1956), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, p. 61.

²⁰ Whitehead (1978), *Process and Reality*, p. 3.

tentative—religious, scientific, and aesthetic alike—the thought of Whitehead is less afflicted by the second aporia perceived by Gale in the work of James. Of course, this can never placate the contemplative who typically feels as if his or her knowledge of the ultimate reality is beyond all doubt. But this is of little consequence for Whitehead, who famously equates dogmatism and “finality of statement” with folly.²¹ Whitehead’s position still runs afoul of Gale’s contention that to treat mystical experiences as mere hypotheses is to rob them of their “salvific consequences.”²² But this is to assume that it is the aura of infallibility alone which grants a religious experience its potency and meaning. It is telling that Whitehead’s philosophy of organism, with its flat rejection of “axiomatic certainties” and absolute knowledge-claims, continues to speak to the most integral moods and instincts found within every major faith-community.²³

In his discussion of “Mysticism” in *The Varieties*, James repeatedly asserts that the non-contemplative is under no obligation to accept the declarations of the mystic.²⁴ That James occasionally takes the *noetic* or revelatory character of mysticism quite seriously however is evidenced by his last published article, “A Pluralistic Mystic.” Referring to the intuitions of Benjamin Paul Blood, a friend and fellow experimenter in nitrous oxide, James expresses genuine relief that his pluralism has gained “the kind of support which mystical corroboration may confer.”²⁵ No longer, James triumphantly explains, does the monist have a choke-hold on this most compelling form of human feeling and cognition.

It is frequently claimed that Whitehead unpacks and systematizes many of James’s most novel contributions to philosophy.²⁶ One of the more Jamesian features of Whitehead’s mature thought is the important role given to experience as a testing ground for even our most rarefied concepts.²⁷ Although Whitehead pushes the ideas of James into further consistency, for both philosophers a general condition for

²¹ Ibid, p. XIV.

²² Gale (1999), *The Divided Self of William James*, pp. 309–310. Gale also states that religious experiences can never become “working hypotheses” because they cannot be translated into full propositions (complete with a specific person, a time...etc). He further argues that moral agents require more than hypotheses upon which to base their actions. To fully assess Gale’s take on these important matters requires a study beyond the scope of the present essay.

²³ The quote is located in Whitehead (1978), *Process and Reality*, p. 13. As for the relevance of Whitehead for different theological and religious systems, a good place to start is David Ray Griffin’s *Deep Religious Pluralism* (2005).

²⁴ See James (1958), *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 325–328.

²⁵ James (1978), “A Pluralistic Mystic” is found in *Essays in Philosophy*.

²⁶ For instance, John Cobb Jr. claims that Whitehead “accepts and adopts many of James’s key insights, and then goes on to develop them in rich and rigorous detail.” See Cobb (1993), *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, p. 166.

²⁷ In Whitehead (1978), *Process and Reality*, Whitehead compares “the true method of discovery” to the movements of an airplane. When conducted properly, abstract thought both takes off, and lands, in the particulars of experience (p. 5). In James (1996c), *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James states that “Perception prompts our thought, and thought in turn enriches our perception” (p. 108).

accepting a concept is that it serves to deepen and broaden our perception of the world. In *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James explains that all higher-order abstractions, including the sciences, are but elaborate schemes of such ideas; working models designed to steer us through the flux of experience. James's finite god, a notion continually refined throughout his philosophical career, is one such scheme. It is a model intended not only to illuminate our perception, but to intensify our sense of moral direction.

Despite publishing a volume of his father's writings, James never did make good on his promise to Henry James Sr. The son's defiance of Absolutism was never harmonized with the man who perceived the self to be a pernicious illusion. While the elder James rejected the title of "pantheism" for his theology, William thought the term more than apt (intending it, of course, in the monistic sense), and describes his father's thought as one wherein God "is the sole positive substance in the universe, all else being nothingness."²⁸

To be fair, James does note the presence of a synthesis of sorts in the writing of his father, a theological position "monistic enough to satisfy the philosopher, and yet warm and living and dramatic enough to speak to the heart of the common pluralistic man."²⁹ Regardless, James explains that a philosophical pluralism, one fashioned consciously and "hardened by reflection," is set against monisms of *all* kinds.³⁰ This includes any ontology which places all power in the hands of a single principle.³¹ James utilizes one effective way to maintain a spiritual worldview while avoiding such a hegemonic and centralized cosmology: To argue for a god limited in scope and influence.

The cogency and appeal of this brand of theism was not lost upon many subsequent theological currents. From the "process panentheism" of Whitehead's intellectual descendants, to Open Theism with its denial of a deity who can foresee the future, the doctrine of a finite god remains a "live" theological option—to quote *The Will to Believe*.³²

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²⁸ James (1885), Introduction to *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James*, p. 19.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 115.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 116.

³¹ The metaphysics of James Sr. is not a "bald monism," states William, "yet it makes of God the one and only *active* principle; and that is practically all that monism demands."

³² James (1956), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, p. 3.

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Hartshorne's Dipolar Theism and the Mystery of God

Donald Wayne Viney

[No] necessary being, so far as necessary, can include anything contingent. From this it follows that if God is aware of all truth then the divine knowledge must have contingent aspects.... The theological conclusion is that God must be supposed just as truly contingent as necessary; and the apparent inconsistency disappears when one takes into account the distinction between the divine existence and the divine actuality. If I have explained anything clearly, it is this distinction, which so far as I know I am the first to make definitely and clearly. All theology, I hold, implies it.¹

Anselm's most memorable formula is his characterization of God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived. In the same work, however, in which this formula is found, he says that God is greater than can be conceived. For Anselm, the second formulation is a consequence of the first. A being that is greater than can be conceived is greater than a being whose greatness is completely conceivable.² In order to avoid a nasty problem of self-referential incoherence, we should qualify Anselm's second formula to say that, *in some sense*, God is greater than can be conceived. If God is greater than can be conceived *simpliciter* then God simply cannot be conceived. I consider Anselm to have hit upon an insight that is central to any responsible theological discourse. An adequate concept of God must point beyond itself to a mystery not wholly available to our conceptuality. Somewhat

¹ Hartshorne, C. (1991). A reply to my critics. In L. E. Hahn (Ed.), *The philosophy of Charles Hartshorne* (p. 619). La Salle: Open Court.

² Anselm (1966). *St. Anselm: Basic writings* (translated by S. N. Deane, with an introduction by Charles Hartshorne) 2nd ed. (p. 7). La Salle, IL: Open Court; Proslogion, ch. II, and p. 22; Proslogion, ch. XV.

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paradoxically, but within the tradition of faith seeking understanding, God may be conceived as calling us from beyond the understanding to understand the God that lies beyond.³

The danger in speaking of the mystery of God is that it too easily becomes an excuse for uttering nonsense about God. This is part of what Whitehead meant by paying God metaphysical compliments.⁴ One attributes to the divine that which contradicts the understanding or the ability to do something that contradicts the understanding. For example, Descartes held that God could create circles with unequal radii.⁵ Whatever may be said for this as an account of omnipotence, it is self-defeating as an expression of the mystery of God because it locates that mystery in something we fully understand, namely, that constructing a “circle with unequal radii” is a contradiction in terms. One constructs a circle by fixing the arc of the compass and enclosing the figure. The fixed arc ensures that the radii are equal.

A more usual way of exalting God above all others is the *via negativa*.⁶ Thomas Aquinas put the point succinctly, “... we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not”⁷ Aquinas then proceeds to remove from the description of God whatever he conceives to be unbefitting of the divine. For example, God is not composed of parts, is unchanging, is lacking in passive potency, and so on. Use of the negative way does not prevent Aquinas from employing positive terms for God; however, the positive terms never come out from under the umbrella of negative theology. They are understood not to be univocal and Aquinas develops a sophisticated theory of analogical predication to make sense of theological affirmations.

Charles Hartshorne accused negative theology of a “metaphysical false modesty.”⁸

The modesty is false, in Hartshorne’s view because, in order to deny that a description of deity is fitting, one must have some prior positive notion of God. For

³ Kierkegaard faulted Kant for failing to establish the inexplicable as a category. “It is specifically the task of human knowing to understand that there is something it cannot understand and to understand what that is.” Hong, H. V., Hong, E. H. (assisted by Malantschuk, Gregor, Eds.) (1975). *Søren Kierkegaard’s journals and papers*, Vol. 3 (p. 406, L-R). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

⁴ Whitehead, A. N. (1925). *Science and the modern world* (p. 258; ch. XI, final paragraph). New York: Macmillan.

⁵ Anthony Kenny ably brings together the evidence for Descartes’ view on omnipotence and necessary truths in Kenny, A. (1979). *The God of the philosophers* (pp. 17–20). Oxford: Clarendon. On this point, Aquinas is a model of moderation, for he denied God this ability. See Aquinas, T. (1956). *On the truth of the Catholic faith, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two: Creation* (p. 75; chapter 25, paragraph 14; Translated by James F. Anderson). Garden City: Hanover House.

⁶ Within the apophatic tradition I distinguish an intellectual claim and a meditative practice. The intellectual claim is that the most appropriate language for God is negative. The meditative practice is the emptying of concepts from the mind to find or prepare the way for feeling the presence of God. It is only the intellectual claim with which I am here concerned.

⁷ Pegis, A. C. (Ed.) (1945). *Basic writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Vol. 1, p. 25). New York: Random House; *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. III, Introduction (I make no effort to camouflage the exclusive language in quotations, including quotations from Hartshorne. As an octogenarian, Hartshorne began to use inclusive language for deity).

⁸ Hartshorne, C. (1948). *The divine relativity: A social conception of God* (p. 35). New Haven/London: Yale University Press.

Aquinas, analogical predication presupposes negative theology. For Hartshorne, negative theology presupposes some positive knowledge of the essence of God. What I present here is a formalization of Hartshorne's central argument against Aquinas's attempt to keep consistently to the negative way. The larger task of explaining or defending Hartshorne's own account of theological language is beyond the scope of this brief paper.⁹ I close by explaining Hartshorne's own metaphysical modesty, his attempt to locate the mystery of God or the ways in which God is greater than can be conceived.

Hartshorne's Central Argument

One of Aquinas's most striking theological denials is that God is unaffected by the creatures. Aquinas says:

Since, therefore, God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea inasmuch as creatures are really related to Him.¹⁰

According to this view, what the creatures do has no affect on God. This goes hand-in-hand with Aquinas's denials that there is passive potency in God and that there are accidents in God. Indeed, God's very knowledge lacks potency since it is causative. For Aquinas, God is the peak of nobility and thus is the first cause—this, because, according to Aquinas, causes are nobler than effects.¹¹ In other words, God is through and through lacking in contingency.

Hartshorne argues that the denial of real relations in God cannot be sustained if one affirms, as Aquinas does, that God has perfect knowledge of all contingent realities.¹² Hartshorne's argument is stated several places in his writings.¹³ I here reconstruct it

⁹In my view, the most searching discussion of Hartshorne's views on God-talk is Ogden, S. (1984). *The experience of God: Critical reflections on Hartshorne's theory of analogy*. In J. B. Cobb, Jr., & F. I. Gamwell (Eds.), *Existence and actuality: Conversations with Charles Hartshorne* (pp. 16–37). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. See also Hartshorne's response in the same volume, pp. 37–42.

¹⁰*Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, p. 124; *Summa Theologiae* I, Q 13, a. 7.

¹¹For God's knowledge as causative: *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, p. 147; *Summa Theologiae* I, Q 14, a. 8. God as the peak of nobility: Aquinas, T. (1955). *On the truth of the Catholic faith, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God* (pp. 100 and 121; chapters 16 and 23). Garden City: Hanover House. Causes as nobler than effects, *Ibid.*, p. 104; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk One, chapter 18, paragraph 6.

¹²*Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 135–161; *Summa Theologicae* I, Q 14.

¹³Hartshorne, C. (1990). *The Darkness and the light, A philosopher reflects upon his fortunate career and those who made it possible* (pp. 232–33). Albany: State University of New York Press. Essentially the same argument occurs many places, most notably in *The Divine Relativity*, pp. 13–14 and in his questions to Wild, J. in Rome, Sydney and Beatrice (Eds.) (1964). *Philosophical interrogations* (pp. 158–160). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. William P. Alston discusses, and approves of, this argument and this aspect of Hartshorne's theism. See Alston (1984). Hartshorne and Aquinas: A Via Media. (In *Existence and Actuality* (pp. 83–84), Op cit.).

in the weakest modal system so that its validity is more readily apparent.¹⁴ Let us use the following symbols:

G	God knows all worldly events.
W	Worldly event x exists at t. The variable x can stand for any worldly event that exists at a given time, t, for example, a bird singing.
^	and
~	not
→	only if (Philonian, or material, conditional)
□	it is necessary that

The proof is a *reductio*. The first two premises are accepted by all parties to the debate. The third premise, accepted only by Aquinas, is introduced as the assumption from which a contradiction is derived.

1. □ (G → W)	Axiom of God's infallible knowledge
2. ~□ W	Assumption of the world's contingency
3. □ G	Thomas's denial of contingency in God
4. □ G → □ W	From 1 by the modal principle: □(p → q) → (□ p → □ q)
5. □ W	From 3 to 4 by <i>modus ponens</i>
6. □ W ∧ ~□ W	From 2 to 5 by conjunction
7. ~□ G	From 3 through 6 by <i>reductio</i> argument

In effect, Hartshorne presents one with the following alternatives. Either God does not know worldly events ($\sim G \wedge W$)—Aristotle's theism or the view of anyone who denies the existence of God; or God's knowledge of worldly events and those events are equally necessary ($\square G \wedge \square W$)—pantheism; or God's knowledge of worldly events and the events of the world are equally not necessary ($\sim \square G \wedge \sim \square W$) — Hartshorne's alternative. The alternative that is not possible is Aquinas's view that God's knowledge of worldly events lacks contingency but those events are not necessary, ($\square G \wedge \sim \square W$).¹⁵

Aquinas was aware of something like this argument. He replied that the world is indeed necessary, but only with respect to God's knowledge, and not as the world is in itself. God knows the world *as present*, and “*for everything that is, while it is, must necessarily be*.”¹⁶ Thus, the world is necessary only in the trivial sense that it is necessary

¹⁴ The system used here, commonly known as T, was set out in 1937 by Robert Feys. Its modal axioms are “ $\square p \rightarrow p$ ” and “ $\square(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (\square p \rightarrow \square q)$ ”. See Hughes, G. E., & Cresswell, M. J. (1991). *An introduction to modal logic* (pp. 30–31). New York: Routledge. George Shields gives an alternate formalization of the argument using the much richer Lewis S5. See Shields, G. (1983). God, modality and incoherence. *Encounter*, 44/1, 27–39. Using the variables and symbols as I have defined them here, Shields' version concludes to the modal contradiction ($\square \square W \wedge \sim \square W$).

¹⁵ Hartshorne also presents the argument in terms of a choice among an inconsistent triad of propositions: “(1) The world is mutable and contingent; (2) The ground of its possibility is a being unconditionally and in all respects necessary and immutable; (3) The necessary being, God, has ideally complete knowledge of the world.” Hartshorne, C. (1976). *Aquinas to Whitehead: Seven centuries of metaphysics of religion* (p. 15). Milwaukee, : Marquette University Publications. Hartshorne says (2) is the offending statement.

¹⁶ *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, p. 156; *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 14, a. 3, Obj. 2.

for a thing to exist in order for propositions about it to be known, and this is the case whether the knowing is creaturely or divine. Hartshorne counters that what God knows, supposing the world to be contingent and God's knowledge to be perfect, is that a world exists but *it might have failed to exist*. The addendum, *it might have failed to exist*, is enough to introduce contingency into God's knowledge. This is true also of creaturely knowing. One's knowledge that q is contingent if q is contingent.

Aquinas's counter-argument is merely a restatement of the first two premises. He argues that the world's events (W) are given on the condition that God knows them (G), from which it does not follow that the world's events are necessary ($\Box W$). Neither Aquinas nor Hartshorne believes that the first premise, by itself, entails the conclusion of the necessity of the world's events. In other words, " $\Box(G \rightarrow W) \rightarrow \Box W$ " is false. The falsity of this formula, however, is logically equivalent to the conjunction of the first two premises, as the following derivation demonstrates (\vee , means and/or):

$\sim [\Box(G \rightarrow W) \rightarrow \Box W]$	Assumption: falsity of " $\Box(G \rightarrow W) \rightarrow \Box W$ "
$\sim [\sim \Box(G \rightarrow W) \vee \Box W]$	Definition of material conditional
$\sim [\sim \Box(G \rightarrow W) \wedge \Box W]$	DeMorgan's rule
$\Box(G \rightarrow W) \wedge \sim \Box W$	Double negation

On the truth of these propositions, Hartshorne and Aquinas agree. Aquinas affirms, however, not only that God's knowing of the world's events entails that those events exist; he also affirms that there is no contingency in God, symbolically, ($\Box G$), and that's what leads to the contradiction.

It is open to Thomists to question whether Aquinas is committed to $\Box G$ in any sense that would be damaging to Aquinas's theory. The expression " $\Box G$ " means that it is necessary that God knows a specific worldly event. However, Aquinas holds that God freely creates the universe. If God freely creates the singing bird, then the singing bird's existence is not necessary and therefore God's knowledge of the bird singing is not necessary. Aquinas maintains that God necessarily wills God's own goodness, but because the divine goodness can exist whether or not the things willed by it exist (e.g. the bird singing), it follows that God does not necessarily will the created order.¹⁷

Hartshorne's reply is that Aquinas cannot hold that God freely, or nonnecessarily, creates the universe and also maintain that there is no contingency in God. Aquinas's explanation of divine willing posits necessary and nonnecessary volitions in God. God necessarily wills divine goodness, but does not necessarily will things willed by that goodness. Hartshorne concludes:

Yet all the being of God is held [by Aquinas] to be purely necessary. Ergo, the nonnecessary acts are not in the being of God. Still they are either in God or not in him. If in him, then he has accidents, additional to what is necessary in him. If not in him, what is meant by calling them "his" acts, and why are we assured always that "God's will is his essence"?¹⁸

¹⁷ Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas: 198–199; Summa Theologicae I, Q. 19, a. 3. See also, Aquinas, T. (1955). *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, Bk Two (p. 68). Garden City: Hanover House; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, chapter 23.

¹⁸ Hartshorne, C., & Reese, W. L. (2000). *Philosophers speak of God* (p. 133). Amherst: Humanity.

Hartshorne's point is that the problem of contingency in God's knowledge resurfaces as the problem of contingency in God's willing the universe into existence. No self-consistent theology can *deny* all contingency in God and *affirm* God's knowing of or God's willing of contingent truths or realities.

Locating the Mystery of God

Why does Aquinas insist on a lack of contingency in God? He offers the following argument:

The being whose substance has an admixture of potency is liable not to be by as much as it has potency; for that which can be, can not-be. But, God, being everlasting, in His substance cannot not-be. In God, therefore, there is no potency to being.¹⁹

In other words, if God's substance included potency, God might fail to exist; but this is absurd, so in God there is no potency. The image that Aquinas gives of contingency resembles a kind of metaphysical virus that infects the whole being of the one that has it. Hartshorne is sympathetic to this reasoning insofar as he agrees that God must be incapable of not existing; in this sense, the existence of God has no "admixture of potency." Thus, Hartshorne agrees with Aquinas that God's essence is one with God's existence: to be God is to exist.²⁰ It is typical of Hartshorne, however, to ask (a) whether principled distinctions can be made that prevent contingency from affecting God's very existence, and (b) whether there are forms of contingency that it would be better for God to have than not to have. Daniel Dombrowski points out that Hartshorne's question is not "Must a perfect being be immutable?" but more precisely, "Must a perfect being be immutable in every respect?"²¹

Hartshorne's claim is that God, to be conceived as perfect, must be immutable in some respects and mutable in others. He draws a three-fold distinction among *essence* (what a thing is), *existence* (that a thing is), and *actuality* (the particular state in which a thing is). Because Hartshorne agrees that essence and existence in God are the same, the three-fold distinction is occasionally abbreviated as "existence and actuality." If existence and essence in God are the same, and if God's existence is immutable, then God's essence—or in ordinary language, God's character—must also be immutable. This is indeed Hartshorne's view: God necessarily exists and is necessarily perfect in power, knowledge, and goodness (see Table).

¹⁹ *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, Bk One, p. 100; *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, chapter 16, paragraph 2.

²⁰ *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 28–31; *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q 3, a. 3 and a. 4. *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, Bk One, pp. 116–121; *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, chapters 21 and 22.

²¹ Dombrowski, D. (1996). *Analytic theism, Hartshorne, and the concept of God* (p. 39). Albany: State University of New York Press.

	<i>Creatures</i>	<i>God</i>	
<i>Actuality</i>	Man listening to bird singing (contingent)	God knowing the man as listening to the bird (contingent)	<i>Concrete</i>
<i>Essence</i>	Human nature as including various cognitive capacities (contingent)	God as knowing whatever is knowable, i.e. as omniscient (necessary)	<i>Abstract</i>
<i>Existence</i>	The man existing (contingent)	God existing (necessary)	

There are contingent states in God, and hence God is mutable, in two senses. The particular items of God's awareness, and thus the divine experiences of those items, are contingent. Suppose a particular man (like Charles Hartshorne researching his book on birdsong) is listening to a bird sing at time t. This is different than the same man not listening to a bird sing at time t. It is contingent whether he is listening or not listening to a bird sing. Consequently, it is contingent whether God knows the man as listening to the bird sing. In other words, God-knowing-this-man-as-*listening*-to-a-bird-at-time-t is a different state, and is equally as contingent as, God- knowing-this-man-as-*not-listening*-to-a-bird-at-time-t. The two hyphenated phrases differ only in the expressions, "listening" and "not listening"; the identity of the phrases reflects God's necessity while their differences reflect God's contingency. What is not contingent is God's character as all-knowing. Whatever state the man is in, God knows it. Another sense in which God has contingent states is that God experiences and knows the processes of the world. As a new day dawns, so to speak, God comes to know it. Insofar as the events of the day are contingent, so are God's states in knowing them.

The distinction between existence and actuality is one of *logical type* and therefore provides a principled and non-arbitrary way of introducing contingent states into God without threatening God's existence. If this is correct, then the criticism that surfaces from time to time that Hartshorne's dipolar theism is contradictory in attributing contrary properties to God is easily answered.²² Hartshorne maintains that existence and/or character are related to actuality as the abstract is related to the concrete. This equation is evident in Hartshorne's account of personal identity. One persists from moment to moment as the same person, yet one also changes over time. For Hartshorne, the identity over time is abstract relative to the particular experiences which embody that identity. He analyzes the identity as comprised of two elements:

- (1) Some "defining characteristic" reappearing in each member of a sequence or family of occasions; (2) direct inheritance by appreciably positive prehensions of this character from previous members.²³

²²John Wild dismisses dipolar theism in these terms: "So Professor Hartshorne concludes that God is a little bit of both, something in him (existence) being necessary and something else (his knowledge of the world) being contingent. This splits God up into parts that are not only different (which is bad enough), but absolutely contradictory." *Philosophical Interrogations*, op cit., p. 160.

²³Hartshorne, C. (1972). Personal Identity from A to Z. *Process Studies* 2/3, p. 211.

Rather than interpreting the states as being in the self-identical person (as Leibniz did), Hartshorne interprets the self-identical person as being in a causally related sequence of states. He makes a related point—concerning the existence of universals in particulars—as follows:

It is not that John has the predicate sick-now, but that John-now has the predicate sick. Universals have a certain time independence. For instance, having a temperature of about 104° Fahrenheit is just that, whether at time t or time t¹. But it is not the man simply, but the man-at-time-t that has this property.²⁴

The asymmetry between existence and actuality is evident in Hartshorne's claim that to be actual is to exist and to exist is to be *somewhat* actualized. The logic of the matter does not change when applied to God. "That God exists is one with his essence and is an analytic truth ... but how, or in what actual state of experience or knowledge or will, he exists is contingent in the same sense as is our own existence."²⁵

What, then, of the mystery of God? The confidence with which Hartshorne spoke of God has led some critics to accuse him of knowing too much about God. For example, Martin Gardner, the popular science writer and Hartshorne's one time student said that it bothered him that Hartshorne always seemed to know so much more about God than he did.²⁶ Hartshorne responded:

[What Gardner] and so many miss is that what I claim to know is *very little*. The mystery is not what *extreme abstractions* apply to God, but what the divine life concretely is, how Godprehends you or me or Hitler, or the feelings of bats, ants, plant cells, atoms. The one "to whom all hearts are open" knows, or loves the concrete concretely. We know nothing in that way.²⁷

Elsewhere, Hartshorne makes a similar point when he says that to know God as omniscient is not the same as having divine knowledge. In short, to know the God who knows all is not the same as knowing all that God knows. The former is tantamount, in Hartshornean terms, to knowing the essence of God, which is abstract; the latter is the same as knowing the full actuality of God, which is concrete.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 214.

²⁵ *The Divine Relativity*, p. 87. While medieval philosophers never achieved a dipolar conception of deity, they held a kind of dipolar conception of angels. Aquinas says that angels are not subject to decay and destruction by natural means; they are incorporeal and have no corruptible bodies and so are immortal. Like God, their existence is not affected by the flow of time. Unlike the Thomistic God, however, they are susceptible to change. While their existence is immutable, they have free will, their knowledge can increase, and in a certain sense they can even move from place to place. Aquinas says that between the unqualified changelessness of God's eternity and the qualified changeableness of corporeal existence, there is the qualified immutability of angelic being. The technical expression for this is *æviternity*, which is the mean between the extremes of eternity and time. What neither Aquinas nor any other scholastic philosopher, nor even philosophers to the time of Kant, could conceive is an *æviternal* God. See, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, p. 499; *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q 10, a. 5.

²⁶ Gardner, M. (1983). *The Whys of a philosophical scrivener* (p. 251). New York: Quill.

²⁷ Viney, D. W. (Ed.) (2001). *Charles Hartshorne's letters to a young philosopher*: 1979–1995. Logos- Sophia: The Journal of the Pittsburg State University Philosophical Society, 11, 46.

Since the essence of deity is abstract compared to the actual divine states, what is known of God is very little. To avoid confusion it is necessary to add that the dipolar structure of deity is itself the essence of God. It is an abstract feature of God to have both abstract essence and concrete states. This dipolar structure is embedded in the concrete states of the divine life. Hartshorne noted that what Whitehead called the Consequent Nature of God, no less than the Primordial Nature of God, is grounded in the Divine Actuality.²⁸ As Hartshorne says, "... what we fail to know about the Eminent Actuality can scarcely be exaggerated."²⁹

This lack of knowledge of God is an in-principle lack of knowledge. In one sense, all actuality escapes language since language trades in abstractions. The actuality of our fellow creatures, however, is on a level with our own. We know what it is like to be a human even if we do not know in the concrete what it is like to be this or that particular human individual. Nor are we completely devoid of understanding of what it is like to be another kind of creature. As Hartshorne says, we know that an animal caught in a trap does not have to become human to suffer.³⁰ Nor do we have to be the animal in order to know something of the quality of its suffering. The distance, however, between a fragmentary human experience and a non-fragmentary divine experience is beyond all of the powers of our imagination to conceive. For example, the divine experience includes, as Hartshorne emphasizes, all past cosmic epochs, whereas our experience includes *knowledge about* only one such epoch.³¹

One must add, finally, to the difference between divine and creaturely experience the qualitative difference between knowledge that is fully open to—and in Hartshornean terms fully sympathetic to—its objects and knowledge that necessarily abstracts from its objects. For example, Hartshorne argues that God knows not only that one suffers, but God knows the quality of that suffering. God knows fully *how* others feel without feeling *as* others feel. We do something similar, says Hartshorne, when we vividly remember how we felt trust in something that we now distrust.³² To be sure, questions can be raised about the very possibility of this sort of knowledge which Henry Simoni-Wastila calls knowledge of "radical particularity."³³ My point, however, is that Hartshorne's dipolar theism provides a robust account of the divine mystery without thereby pretending to sound its depths.

²⁸ Hartshorne, C. (1991). Peirce, Whitehead, und die sechzehn Ansichten über Gott. In M. Hampe, & H. Maassen (Eds.). *Die Gifford Lectures und ihre Deutung: Materialien zu Whiteheads Prozeß und Realität*, Band 2 (p. 202). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

²⁹ Hartshorne, C. (1976). Mysticism and Rationalistic Metaphysics. *The Monist*, 59/4, 469. Also published in Wood, R. (Ed.) (1980). *Understanding Mysticism* (p. 421). Garden City: Image.

³⁰ Hartshorne, C. (1975). *Beyond humanism: Essays in the philosophy of nature* (p. 120). Gloucester: Peter Smith.

³¹ Charles Hartshorne's *Letters to a Young Philosopher*, p. 44.

³² Hartshorne, C. (1984). *Creativity in American philosophy* (p. 199). Albany: State University of New York Press.

³³ For references to Simoni-Wastila's interesting articles and a reply to him, see Viney, D. W (2001). Is the Divine Shorn of Its Heart? Responding to Simoni-Wastila. *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, 22/2, 154–72.

What is said here concerning divine knowledge holds also for other attributes of God. Omnipresence: We know what it is like to have spatial and temporal location. We do not know what it is like to exist in every place and time. Omnipotence: We know what it is to effect and to be affected by aspects of our environment, including our bodies. We do not know what it is like to effect and to be affected by all creatures, to have the universe itself as our internal environment. Also, unlike deity, we do not know the extent of our freedom; sometimes we overestimate our freedom and sometimes we underestimate it. Omnidbenevolence: We know what it is to love another, but our love is necessarily restricted and even competitive (we live at the expense of others, even if only the nonhuman others). We do not know what it is like to love in a way that is all-inclusive, unqualified, and entirely non-competitive. Hartshorne speaks of religion as the acceptance of our fragmentariness, of the fact that we are fragments of the whole and not the whole itself.³⁴ Arguably, an essential aspect of this acceptance is to develop a deep appreciation of all of the ways in which God is greater than we can conceive. Hartshorne's view meets the twin Anselmian criteria for the supremely worshipful divine reality, namely, that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived and that God is greater than can be conceived.

³⁴ Hartshorne, C. (1987). *Wisdom as moderation: A philosophy of the middle way* (chapter 6). Albany: State University of New York Press.

From Models of God to a Model of Gods: How Whiteheadian Metaphysics Facilitates Western Language Discussion of Divine Multiplicity

Monica A. Coleman

In her influential work, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age*, Sallie McFague argues that theology should be a “theology for our time.”¹ It must, she states, address the postmodern context that is characterized by an appreciation of nature, a recognition of the benefits and limitations of technology, the importance of language, the reality of religious pluralism, the de-centering of a universal perspective in light of the voices and experiences of the dispossessed, the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, and the acknowledgement of the radical interdependence of life.

Acknowledging the inextricable link between metaphor and concept, McFague criticizes dominant Christian theology for maintaining religious metaphors that have become idols – static reified models that are outmoded, oppressive, triumphalist, monarchical and patriarchal. Rejecting a return to anachronistic models or to abstract language, McFague posits a metaphorical theology that remythologizes the relationship between God and the world; a theology that boldly experiments with different metaphors, and extrapolates them into theological models with the goal of offering “a new picture that will bring the reality of God’s love into the imaginations of the women and men of today”².

The question before us is: Does process theism do that? Can it offer a plausible model of God? Or more accurately, can it give us the kind of “theology for today,” about which McFague speaks? When I think about what a “theology for today” must do, both independent from and in light of the criteria that McFague articulates, my attention is immediately drawn to the issue of religious pluralism. While

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¹ Sallie McFague (1987), *Models of God*, x.

² Ibid., xii.

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McFague is focused on the challenge of ecological destruction in the face of nuclear capacities, and is clearly and unapologetically working within a Christian context, I want to ask whether process theism can offer a model of God that can work with a non-Christian religion. My particular concern is African traditional religions, and other religions, that complicate the issue of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue, because their understanding of God is so radically different from the God of Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions. More particularly, can we speak of, think of, and conceptualize models of God when what is needed is a model of Gods? Can we, and if so how do we, do theology when certain religious traditions do not have a singular image of God, but a belief in a plurality of divinities?

I think it is clear that we must. McFague insists that the religious language and the images we use are connected to how we conceive of God and the world, and that is ultimately connected to how we live in the world in light of our understanding of the divine.³ I think that Laurel Schneider⁴ best articulates where the theological sticking point is in this discussion, and why process theism can help to address it. In her lecture, “When Hell Freezes Over: Feminism, Ontology and Multiplicity,” Schneider argues that the rigid adherence to monotheism creates a “logic of the One” that necessarily creates a marginalized or even demonized and condemned “other,” and ultimately leads to the negation and invalidation of the diversity of women’s embodied experience – the primary authority by which women can criticize a tradition that excludes them.⁵ Let me explain: Looking at the history of Western Christianity, Schneider perceives a rigid (icy, she says) adherence to Oneness, best demonstrated in the radical monotheism of Christian theology. In the “logic of the One,” an “other” is created, a condemned other (Hell, she states in this lecture), where we locate the multiplicity of the world that we cannot escape. Multiplicity always rears its head of reality in the face of the logic of the One – the Trinity is an excellent example of this – but there continues to be a drive towards Oneness that usually devalues multiplicity. This “logic of the One” carries with it two major problems. First, Schneider argues, the logic of the One “split[s] the empirical from the intuitive” creating a true/false dualism that is reduced to what which is (usually scientifically or empirically) verifiable. “Without the possibility of ontological multiplicity, there is only being within the horizon of the same, of the One.”⁶ Second, ontological Oneness is reductive as it seeks to locate existence within a single explanation. In this case, “Otherness, especially otherness that cannot be somehow resolved into a recognizable frame of the One, indicates an error in knowledge or in judgment precisely because fundamental otherness is not real.”⁷ Schneider connects these assertions with feminist theology because this oneness,

³ McFague (1982) outlines this in greater depth in *Metaphorical Theology*.

⁴ Schneider is one of McFague’s former students – and in the interest of full disclosure, I am a former student of McFague as well.

⁵ Laurel Schneider (2006), “When Hell Freezes Over: Feminism, Ontology and Multiplicity”.

⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷ Ibid.

has by default, been conceived of as “male;” thus the feminist theological problem is *not* the maleness of God, but the insistence on oneness. This “logic of the One” concerns me personally, as I am interested in, and oftentimes representative, of the Other. Where are women, people of color, those with faith in multiple divinity – let alone colored women who believe in multiple divinity – in a logic of the One? Where are they in a Western Christian model of God?

Schneider suggests that process theism and non-Western religions may hold a theological key to this lock. Schneider is clear that non-Western religions seem to avoid the empirical-intuitive split of the logic of the One: “So many non-Western cultures … that are open to many other possibilities for existence, make the finality of true-false a non-sequitur, a bit of nonsense.”⁸ Indeed, “criticism of ontologies of the One has flourished among indigenous story-tellers for centuries.”⁹ But we also need a different logic, Schneider argues; “a resistant logic of becoming” that can be a “fluid logic of multiplicity” where the Other is “neither projected nor contradicted by the One.” In this ontology of multiplicity, “there … simply … *are*.”¹⁰ This ontology of multiplicity must imagine divine multiplicity¹¹ and incarnational and embodied experience. For, to return to Schneider’s feminist beginning, divinity must be concretely, not just metaphorically, embodied in the diversity of women’s experiences.

Process theism can do this. Yes, process theology is a theology of becoming. If there is no other constant in this open system, change is constant. “The many become one and are increased by one” over and over again. Process theology is an incarnational theology. It is radically incarnational. The panentheism of process theology, that God is in and yet distinct from the world and that the world is in and yet distinct from God, makes incarnation a universal fact in process theism. As the world conforms to (or simply just responds to) God’s initial aim, God is quite literally a part of who we are and what we do. In every moment, we can become an incarnation of God’s self, of God. But can process theism imagine divine multiplicity? That is the question I seek to answer.

I believe that it can, and that certain religions demand that it must. African traditional religions have always posed a problem to Western theological categories of “monotheism” and “polytheism.” They simply don’t fit. I want to use Yoruba traditional religion and its derivatives throughout the world as an example, as a case study.

Traditional Yoruba religion can be described as the worship of a supreme deity, *Olódùmarè/Olorun*,¹² under various forces or deities, the *òrìṣà*. There is no adequate

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹¹ Schneider (1998) suggests this in the conclusion of her book, *Re-Imagining the Divine: Confronting the Backlash Against Feminist Theology*. Schneider (2008) gives these arguments greater attention in *Beyond Monotheism*.

¹² Many *òrìṣà* in Yoruba religion have multiple names although they signify the same force. This is partly attributable to the distribution of the religion throughout Yorubaland, and the Yoruba-based religions in the New World. This paper may refer to *Olódùmarè/Olorun, Obatala/Oríṣa-nla*,

description for the *òrìṣà* outside of the Yoruba universe. They have been variously described as ministers of *Olódùmarè*, forces of nature, angelic forces, lower gods and sub-deities. According to Yoruba stories, the *òrìṣà* are ancestors who did not return to earth because their *ìwà* (human character or human consciousness) was so closely aligned with the character of *Olódùmarè*. While *Olódùmarè* is neither male nor female, nor embodied, the *òrìṣà* have genders, stories, geographical and natural associations. The *òrìṣà* have their own characteristics, herbs, personalities and devotees. Veneration of the *òrìṣà* is such an important part of Yoruba religion, that the entire religion is often referred to as “*òrìṣà* worship.” The telos of Yoruba religion is *ìwà pele*. Yoruba religion identifies 401 *òrìṣà*, with five to ten *òrìṣà* having more importance and appearances than the others. The wisdom and content of Yoruba is traditionally transmitted orally in the wisdom contained in myths, songs, and the *odù*, verses of wisdom and divination. Through both the Triangular slave trade and contemporary reversionist attempts, the religion of the Yoruba people (of current-day Nigeria) constitutes a base for African-derived religious practices throughout the Caribbean, South America, the United States. Although all these different manifestations of Yoruba-based religions share a similar cosmology about the structure of the world and key religious concepts, due to the different historical and religious contexts of the encounter between Yoruba religion and the various New World situations, they differ in ritual detail and linguistic referrals. As Yoruba traditional religion travels through space, time and circumstance, it syncretizes, or blends, with other religious and cultural traditions – most particularly Western Christianity and other African traditional religions.

African theologians have wrestled with ways of characterizing the theism of African traditional religions (ATRs) such as Yoruba-based religions. Most of these theologians are responding to the missionary and early anthropological characterization of ATRs as polytheistic, and therefore animistic, primitive and somehow “lower on the evolutionary scale” of civilization and religions. “[Polytheism] is regarded as the bastion of superstitions, even by Africans.”¹³ (Alfred North Whitehead himself is guilty of this in *Religion in the Making*.) It is also noteworthy that no African scholar refers to ATRs as “polytheistic” – this is a purely etic description – in part because of its connotations, but also because polytheism is virtually absent from African theologies of the Divine. Polytheism usually means separatism among the gods or a polytheism that “separates the Divine nature into many disparate parts.”¹⁴ While African scholars may discuss distinctive and hierarchical relations within divinity, there is never an assertion that there is a separation of natures within the general understanding of the divine.

Orunmila/Ifà, Èṣù/Elegba/Elegbara. This paper will also use the “ṣ” to indicate the sound of “sh.” There is no consistency in scholarship (usually because of the capability of word processors and attempts to translate into English) so “àṣé” is also “ashe” and “òrìṣà” is also “orisha.” Note *òrìṣà* is the same in the plural or singular usage.

¹³ A. Okechukwu Obannaya (1994), *On Communitarian Divinity*, 21.

¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

The logic of the One pushes African scholars into a dualism such that a rejection of polytheism has necessitated an affirmation of monotheism. E. Bolaji Idowu's popular *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* compares creation accounts and stories of the *òrìṣà* to the political structure of the Yoruba to describe the relationship between *Olódùmarè* and the various *òrìṣà*.¹⁵ He describes the *òrìṣà* as the ministers of *Olódùmarè* who do the work of the high God in everyday life just as ancient kings of the Yoruba had ministers do their work. He argues that traditional Yoruba religion is, therefore, a "diffused monotheism." Idowu concludes that the Yoruba not only knew God before Christian and Muslim contact, but were receptive to it because their beliefs were already monotheistic. Philip Neimark follows suit in *The Way of the Orisa* as he describes *Olódùmarè* as a monotheistic single god of the Yoruba religion and the many *òrìṣà* as energy forces of nature that people must assimilate through the guidance of divination.¹⁶ This places *Olódùmarè* at the remote apex of the religious hierarchy and the *òrìṣà* at the center as energy forces. E. E. Evans-Pritchard argues that ATRs have levels of divinities. In this scheme, the high God is a principle of ultimacy that gives an underlying unity to the multiplicity of deities and spirits. The many powers are understood to be aspects of, or intermediaries for, the One God. These characterizations are problematic because they all reify the ontological Oneness that creates an "Other" out of the practitioners of ATRs. They are, with little success in my opinion, trying to impose a "logic of the One" on a divine multiplicity that will not go away – after all, the multiplicity is strikingly real – there are 10–401 *òrìṣà*. It's difficult to avoid and deny them.

In *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community*, Benjamin Ray notes the real problem – the language of monotheism and polytheism (and pantheism¹⁷). Choosing one of these terms, Ray believes, "distorts the rich diversity of African religious experience by oversimplification."¹⁸ I agree. The problem with having to choose between terms like monotheism and polytheism (and pantheism) is that traditional Yoruba religion has multiple figures that are eternal and active within the finite human world. It is, Ray admits, a problem of how to consider "unity and multiplicity within the same religious system."¹⁹ To make things more complicated, Yoruba traditional religion also maintains that the end of life within the finite world does not necessitate the end of life within a divine or ancestral world, and that there is constant, continuous, embodied (sometimes malevolent, sometimes benevolent) contact between that which is divine, eternal and ancestral, and that which is human, animal and planetary.

The most creative portrayal of African traditional religions is in A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya's *On Communitarian Divinity* where Ogbonnaya critiques his African theologian counterparts for rejecting the Western conception of African

¹⁵ E. Bolaji Idowu (1994), *Olodumare*.

¹⁶ Phillip J. Neimark (1993), *The Way of the Orisa*.

¹⁷ Benjamin Ray (2000), *African Religions*, 25. Ray defines pantheism as "an underlying notion of sacred 'force' or 'power' that permeates the gods, humans and the natural world."

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 27.

religions as polytheistic without offering an alternative proposal that is truly liberating.²⁰ Too often, he writes, African scholars speak of the Divine in the same way as their Eurocentric counterpart.²¹ He believes that they need to use their own experience in conjunction with philosophical categories. What Ogbonnaya refers to as “Eurocentric” is, in my estimation, really the problem of ontological oneness. Also critical of monotheistic and polytheistic characterizations, Ogbonnaya posits a conversation about “a community of gods” under a term he coins as “communotheism.”

Communotheism is a divine communalism. “Divine communalism is the position that the Divine is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and ontologically equal while at the same time distinct from one another by their personhood and functions.”²² In communotheism, there is immanence in that there is radical relationality among the members of the divine community and between the divine community and the world, and there is transcendence because geographic distance and “physiological de-carnation” (death) cannot destroy the radical relationality. While there is distinction (eroding any real classification of pantheism), there is no idea of a separation between the human and the divine.

Jacob K. Olupona affirms this concept of divine communalism in his description of ancestors. Olupona describes four distinct types of deities within African religious systems.²³ There is a Supreme Being; “lesser deities,” where he would locate most of the *òrìṣà* of whom we have been speaking; “culture heroes,” who are “mythic founders of communities and villages who go through an apotheosis after their heroic sojourn on earth;”²⁴ and “ancestors,” the deceased members of the lineage of the living. Culture heroes are hard to classify because they seem to have some of the same characteristics of both the lesser deities in that “they are regarded as greater in importance and authority than the ancestors, whose sphere of influence is more or less limited to their lineage and their descendants.”²⁵ Within African traditional religions, “ancestors” have a different role than the lesser deities and culture heroes. At death, one can become an “ancestor;” however not all deceased persons are regarded as “ancestors.” In order to be an “ancestor,” one must have lived a morally exemplary life, lived to a very old age, died a “good death” (not by a disease such as smallpox or leprosy), and received a proper burial by one’s family. Ancestors are not simply human beings who maintain activity after death. “Through the process of death, ancestors undergo a change in their ontological status that makes them into supernatural entities.”²⁶ Ancestors are transformed in the afterlife;

²⁰ Ogbonnaya, 13–22. He also recapitulates the monotheism/polytheism debate within African traditional religions.

²¹ Ibid., x.

²² Ibid., 23.

²³ Jacob K. Olupona (2001), “To Praise and to Reprimand”, 51.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 58.

they have a divine quality to them. In summary, African traditional religions affirm that human beings can live on after death. The ancestors, along with lesser deities and culture heroes, constitute a divine community. Their difference in divinity is one of degree, not kind. There is divine multiplicity.

Any conception of Oneness cannot apply to ATR, says Ogbonnaya, because ATRs do not properly believe that the worship of *òrìṣà* encroaches on the worship of any “high God,” and they do not believe that there is one single personal God who alone deserves worship. If there is oneness, “it is the power or vital principle that is one.”²⁷ In the Yoruba universe, this power is the power of life, *àṣẹ*, or the power to make things happen.

Ogbonnaya connects communotheism with Tertullian and an African concept of the Trinity. He engages in conversation with Joseph Bracken’s Trinitarian theology, and recognizes that there are process roots in his theological construction. I prefer to stay in the realm of ATRs and assert that a Whiteheadian process metaphysic can offer a theology of divine multiplicity, a model of Gods, when we locate the community of gods precisely where Christian Whiteheadian theologians have located the “community of God” (or “kingdom of God” to use the patriarchal monarchistic language that McFague rejects) – in the consequent nature of God.

In Alfred North Whitehead’s model of God, God is an actual entity that is the chief exemplification of the metaphysical principles of the working of the world. The process God is dipolar, with a primordial nature and a consequent nature. The primordial nature of God contains all the infinite possibilities that will be directed towards the actual entities of the world. The consequent nature of God receives the actual entities of the world, feeling them as the world has experienced them. Whereas the two natures of God can be separated in abstraction, they form a unity that receives, evaluates and lures the world to a vision of the common good.

In the fifth chapter of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead describes the “kingdom of heaven” within the consequent nature of God. I start here because the “kingdom of heaven,” is also coined in variations of the biblical term *basileia*: the reign of God, the kingdom of God, the city of God, and in feminist theological parlance of inclusive language, “the community of God.” In classical Christian theism, the kingdom of heaven is the realm wherein evil is eradicated, God’s will prevails, and the righteous dwell. The kingdom of heaven is the believer’s telos and current ideal. It is the place where we want to be sent when “the last things” come about, and it is also the standard by which we are to work to eradicate evil on earth.²⁸

For Whitehead, the ultimate evil is the perpetual perishing of the temporal world. That is, as each actual entity becomes something new, it is no longer what it once was. So as each actual entity is constantly in the process of becoming, it is also perpetually perishing. It remains only as it has influenced other actual entities. In this sense, it is immortal because its influence is felt beyond its own perishing.

²⁷ Ogbonnaya, 26

²⁸ For a concise explanation of eschatology in classical theism, see David Basinger (1988), “Eschatology: Will Good Ultimately Triumph in the Process System?” For a more thorough explanation, see Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *End of Evil*.

But it is only objectively immortal since it no longer exists for itself. It exists only as it has been felt by other actual entities. Objective immortality within the world does not provide the everlastingness that the world craves, the everlastingness that generally frames our ideas of “heaven.”

As the completed actual entity increases the manyness of the world by one, it is also felt by God—received into the consequent nature. In this sense, every actual entity is a part of God and thus lives on everlasting in God. That is, God is constantly receiving from the world, but retaining in God’s own everlasting present all that is past in the temporal world. Thus, one can say that no matter how much our actions and decisions may fade in the course of time, they matter in the divine life.²⁹ The consequent nature of God receives every aspect of the world and highlights the best of it.

The consequent nature of God also receives the multiplicity of the world and holds it in a unity. Whitehead writes that “[the consequent nature of God] is just as much one immediate fact as it is an unresting advance beyond itself. [Like all other actual entities,] the actuality of God must also be understood as a multiplicity of actual components in the process of creation. This is God in [God’s] function as the kingdom of heaven.”³⁰ Simply put, in the consequent nature of God, the loss of perpetual perishing does not occur. Heaven is this place where immortality is perfectly or completely achieved. To use Whitehead’s language: “The problems of the fluency of God and of the everlastingness of passing experience are solved by the same factor in the universe. This factor [the kingdom of heaven] is the temporal world perfected by its reception and its reformation, as a fulfillment of the primordial appetition which is the basis of all order.”³¹ Heaven is received and reformed. God receives the world in the consequent nature, but also evaluates the world according to intensity and harmony. God orders the experiences of the world and forms a vision that will be used to constitute the initial aim that will be given to actual entities within the world.

For me, the emphasis is not upon locating a place where evil does not exist (although I do not argue this point within Whiteheadian metaphysics), but I’m interested in finding a place where there is everlastingness or immortality, and multiplicity is held together and affirmed. This “place” is in the consequent nature of Whitehead’s God.

In the consequent nature, all actual entities live on and participate in God eternally, to the ordering of what has been received (God’s concrescing), to the primordial nature where the vision is returned to the world. This “heaven” or the “community of God” is both something that is apart from the world – in God – and yet in the world. Whitehead concludes: “The kingdom of heaven is with us today.... What is done in the world is transformed into a reality in heaven [or the community of God], and the reality in [the community of God] passes back into the world.”³²

²⁹ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (1988), *The End of Evil*, 122.

³⁰ Alfred North Whitehead (1978), *Process and Reality*, 350.

³¹ Ibid., 347.

³² Ibid., 351.

While the term “community of God,” substitutes for “heaven,” in terms of inclusive language, “community of God” also describes a kind of multiplicity – the manyness of the world that finds immortality within God. It is more properly “God’s community,” or when valued, God’s ideal community. But why must it be just the manyness of the world? Why not the manyness of the divine? And, as a fair question, why not locate this manyness in the primordial nature of God?

For practitioners of ATR, divine multiplicity is not a possibility, but it is a reality. This alone removes divine multiplicity from the primordial nature where Whiteheadians locate the eternal objections, or the possibilities available for actualization within the world. Following Olupona’s discussion of deities, we must also acknowledge that divine multiplicity is composed as much of a “primordial God,” *Olódùmarè*, and *òrìṣà* who were present at creation and are just as “primordial,” as it is of “culture heroes” like *Sango*, who is treated as an *òrìṣà*, but whose stories describe him as an earthly king in Yorubaland who disappeared into the earth and became an *òrìṣà*. Likewise, those who Olupona identifies as “ancestors” are clearly individuals who once led a human life. These are all concrete divinities. Some are received into the divine realm and transformed into a divine life. Others appear to be primordially divine. Thus they exist (but do not remain) in the consequent nature. As they are related to the primordial nature, the community of Gods is available to reception by the world, available for incarnation in the world.

Admittedly, this description relies upon Marjorie Suchocki’s construction of subjective immortality – that God can know us fully (and others in the world can know in part) as we know ourselves. Suchocki admits that the distinction between subjective and objective immortality, what Whitehead describes as occurring within the consequent nature, while important, is not totalizing. The concept of subjective immortality enlarges the scope of how the present prehends the past and the way God prehends the world. Like Olupona’s understanding of the four kinds of deities, objective and subjective immortality reflect “a difference of degree rather than kind ... for each mode indicates and to a degree includes the other.”³³

Suchocki uses the concept of subjective immortality to assert the way in which a satisfied actual occasion experiences itself. In the consequent nature of God, the actual occasion continues to experience itself as itself, itself in God, and God’s valuation of itself. This allows Suchocki to describe a post-historical existence for the actual occasion, or a kind of life after death in the consequent nature of God.³⁴ This occasion is now broader than it was in its satisfaction because it can feel itself in relation to other occasions in the temporal world. This is possible because of God’s concrescence. God compares and contrasts the occasions according to the primordial vision. In this process, an occasion can feel its relationships to other occasions. To use my language, because of subjective immortality in God, a community of Gods can continue to experience themselves as themselves, themselves in this

³³ Suchocki (1988), *The End of Evil*, 96.

³⁴ This (inside the consequent nature of God) is where one might locate an “ancestral realm” wherein ancestors commune with one another and God while “looking in” on the activity of the temporal world.

singular actual entity that Whitehead calls God, and the experiences of the world. The community of Gods exists in the consequent nature, therefore, not just with the fact of their existence, but with the subjectivity of their existence – with experience, knowledge and agency.

The community of Gods maintains constant relationship, interaction and embodiment with and in the world. In the initial aim, the content of the consequent nature is objectively immortal and partially subjectively immortal, and available for prehension by the present world. Here I also assume Suchocki's description of God's initial aim as more than a propositional sentence that God offers to us: "God will indeed offer guidance, but the guidance will not be in the form of a clear voice in the night, but in the form of options to weigh, factors to consider, friends to consult."³⁵ In other words, there is multiplicity within the initial aim. For Suchocki, this is a multiplicity of available and relevant possibilities. For me, this is also a multiplicity of gods. Process theism offers a theology of divine multiplicity, a model of Gods.

There is still a problem with what I have laid out. How can I claim divine multiplicity and locate the community of Gods within the consequent nature of the singular actual entity that Whitehead calls "God." Is there one God, in alignment with Whitehead's metaphysic of God as a singular dipolar actual entity with a consequent and primordial nature with a community of Gods that is somehow located within the one God? If I affirm this, I have only reiterated Idowu's idea of "diffused monotheism." Rather I take Whitehead's proposition of an everlasting actual entity with consequent and primordial aspects, and affirm that it really *is* an actual entity in the most basic understanding. This everlasting actual entity is a "drop of experience," an event, a verb, if you will. Recalling Obannaya's assertion that the unifying one to the divine community is this power, then that actual entity, that gerund verb, that experience that is everlastingly primordial and consequent is what the Yoruba call *àṣẹ*, "the power to make things happen"³⁶ *Àṣẹ* is the name given to a fundamental element in the Yoruba cosmos. It is spiritual command, a morally neutral force that is found in all things everywhere in varying degrees. It imbues all creation empowering people, objects and natural elements with the influence of *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣà*, and yet the people who possess it also determine it. It is the life-force of creation and the *òrìṣà*. It is quantifiable, movable, transferable, giveable and receivable as if it is a substance, and yet it is power, action, ability and efficacy. It is "dynamic stuff" without which the world cannot operate.

I believe that this theology of divine multiplicity is consonant with McFague's requirements for a theology of today. To be more true to McFague's theology, I should discuss more than a conceptual model. I should also talk in images, pictures, metaphors, stories and narrative.³⁷ This is integral to McFague's metaphorical theology. While this essay does not address the issue of narrative and story as I would

³⁵ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (1994), *The Fall to Violence*, 60.

³⁶ Robert Farris Thompson (1983), *Flash of the Spirit*, 5.

³⁷ Sallie McFague (1975), *Speaking in Parables*.

like, it is important to say that African traditional religions are narrative religions. The *odu*, or wisdom literature, are stories. We know the personalities of the *òrìṣà*, not through writings or doctrinal statements, but through stories about how they interact with each other and the world. In other words, all I have said and most of what is known about African traditional religions is through orally transmitted stories and divine embodiment in ritual, nature and in the phenomenon that anthropologists call spirit possession.

To return to the beginning: I've subtitled this presentation, "How Whiteheadian Metaphysics Facilitates Western Language Discussion of Divine Multiplicity." As I posit a model of Gods in process theism, I'm expressing Yoruba traditional religion in Western philosophical language. I think that this begs an important question: Must Western intellectual thought have language and concepts for non-Western religions? Why not, one can argue, live in a Yoruba universe? Perhaps we should stop trying to translate a non-Western religions into a Western language that was never intended to account for non-Western religious experience. Perhaps we should learn Yoruba language, understand *Olódùmarè*, *òrìṣà*, and *egungun* from the inside out, from within the religion itself. Perhaps we should insist on this language world as primary for the discussion of Yoruba traditional religion. My honest answer is that we should. We should live in a Yoruba language world when discussing Yoruba religion. No, we don't need Western intellectual thought to have language for non-Western religions; the religions have their own language.

So my answer is no, but it helps. In the academy, it helps. Western intellectual language, a model of Gods based on a Western philosophical system, allows those of us who identify as religious scholars to engage ATRs and other faiths with divine multiplicity in our work in religious pluralism. This is not unlike John Cobb's work with the non-theistic Buddhist faith and Whitehead's concept of creativity.³⁸

It's also important to have Western language for ATRs because many of the practitioners of ATR live in a Western world. Yoruba-based religions constitute a world religion. Blended forms of traditional Yoruba religion exist throughout the Americas. The religion has been even further syncretized in the Diaspora of those practitioners. In the Americas, Haiti's *Vodun*, Cuba's *Santería*, Brazil's *Candomblé*, and Trinidad's Shango and Orisha Worship are Yoruba-based religions. These Yoruba-based religions are the result of a unique religious and cultural blending between the Yoruba religion of African slaves and Catholicism, or in the case of Trinidad's Shango, Baptist faith. When I teach traditional Yoruba religion, my students always ask me how many people in the United States and Caribbean practice *Vodun*. I tell them that it's impossible to get accurate data on that question because most of these people go to mass. Many people who adhere to ATRs have dual religious affiliation. Tracey E. Hucks investigates the spirituality of an African American woman who maintains dual affiliation as a religious leader in a black Christian denomination and a Yoruba-based religious tradition.³⁹ Traditional understandings of an individual

³⁸ John B. Cobb, Jr. (1982), *Beyond Dialogue*.

³⁹ Tracey E. Hucks (2001), "Burning with a Flame in America," 89–90.

who adheres to a single religious tradition do not often apply. We need, Hucks insists, another term all together to discuss this practice. To further complicate this point, most practitioners of ATRs outside of Africa speak English, Spanish, Portuguese or French as their first language. What I am saying is that people who practice Yoruba traditional religion, this non-Western religion, live in a Western context, often within or alongside a Western Christian religion and while speaking a Western language. The use of Western intellectual thought in discussing this non-Western religion is not just a convenience for Western-trained scholars, but a reflection of the lived reality of the faithful.

In conclusion, I find that process theism offers a rich model of Gods through a construction of a community of Gods located in Whitehead's consequent nature of God. It boldly and unapologetically uses Western philosophical language to talk about the divine multiplicity found within the traditional African Yoruba-based religions. But this is not just a model for philosophers –as wonderful as that can be. Affirming divine multiplicity, a model of Gods, is a radical theological act. Like McFague's description of her models of God, "its radical character lies not primarily in programs for revolutionary action but in changes of consciousness, the assumption being that a new imaginative picture of the relationship between God and the world must precede action."⁴⁰ A model of Gods is an act of de-centering, a rejection of ontological Oneness, and a refusal to accept the position of "Other" as other. It is a postmodern, feminist, African-centered theological act.

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⁴⁰ McFague (1987), *Models of God*, xiv.

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Ultimate Complexity: A Hindu Process Theology

Jeffery D. Long

Introduction

This paper will present an overview of a Hindu process theology (specifically, a theology located in the Neo-Vedānta tradition of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda). The specific problem this paper will address, utilizing this theological model, is the question of whether there is only one ultimate reality, or more than one.

A source of recent controversy in relation to the field of process thought is the approach to religious pluralism that has been developed by such process thinkers as John Cobb and David Ray Griffin. This approach operates with the idea that there is more than one ultimate reality. But does this not contradict the very notion of what an *ultimate reality* is? Or are Cobb and Griffin operating with an understanding of the term *ultimate* that differs from conventional understandings? This paper will suggest that Cobb's and Griffin's basic thesis can be preserved with the idea of a single, but internally complex, ultimate reality, and that this idea is available from within the Vedānta tradition.

The Problem

In the volume *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Griffin 2005), David Ray Griffin, John Cobb, and a variety of other process thinkers (myself included), operating from out of several different religious traditions present both a critique of and an expansion upon models of religious pluralism such as that famously posited by

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John Hick.¹ At the center of the critique presented by these thinkers is the claim that such models are not pluralistic enough: that they constitute what Griffin calls an “identist” pluralism that presumes that all religious aims are one (Griffin 2005: 24–29).

Griffin and his colleagues are in broad agreement with Hick and other religious pluralists in advocating what Griffin calls “generic religious pluralism,” which he defines in the following way:

For members of a particular religious tradition to accept religious pluralism is [for them] to accept two affirmations—one negative, the other positive. The negative affirmation is the rejection of religious absolutism, which means rejecting the *a priori* assumption that their own religion is the only one that provides saving truths and values to its adherents, that it alone is divinely inspired, that it has been divinely established as the only legitimate religion, intended to replace all others. The positive affirmation, which goes beyond the negative one, is the acceptance of the idea that there are indeed religions other than one’s own that provide saving truths and values to their adherents (Griffin 2005: 24–29).

Unlike, therefore, most critics of pluralistic theologies and philosophies of religion such as Hick’s, the authors of *Deep Religious Pluralism* are not religious absolutists, seeking to re-assert claims of supremacy on behalf of their traditions against the claims of those with a more positive evaluation of religious diversity. Theirs is an internal critique, made from within the fold of those who have already, like Hick, rejected religious absolutism, and who already find much to affirm and celebrate within other traditions.

Like the more traditional critics of religious pluralism, however, these authors are concerned to address two problems in particular to which more conventional approaches to religious pluralism tend to give rise. These are the problems, first, of avoiding what Griffin calls (following Alan Race) a “debilitating relativism,” and secondly, of affirming the distinctiveness of the world’s religions. The problem of a debilitating relativism can be addressed if religious pluralists acknowledge that their pluralistic models operate, inevitably, out of a definite worldview, which entails that some claims are true and others are false. This is, of course, in tension with the pluralists’ desire to affirm many religious perspectives. But the alternative is a relativism that makes it impossible for a pluralist to affirm anything at all. The authors of *Deep Religious Pluralism* address this problem by working explicitly from what may broadly be called a Whiteheadian, process worldview.

The second problem, however—the problem of affirming the distinctiveness of the world’s religious traditions—is the chief object of these authors’ critique of Hick and other pluralistic thinkers who have presented an “identist” model of religious pluralism—that is, a model which presupposes that all religions have the same ultimate goals and objects. It is to present an alternative model of religious pluralism—a “differential” or “pluralistic pluralism,” or “deep religious pluralism”—that preserves

¹ Hick has presented his “pluralistic hypothesis” in a number of works published throughout the course of his long and distinguished career. The most thorough and complete statement of his perspective, I think, is that presented in his Gifford Lectures, published as *An Interpretation of Religion* (Hick 1989).

the differences among religious aims and objects while simultaneously affirming that many religions are true and salvific that these authors posit their controversial claim that there are multiple ultimate realities.

The assumption with which Hick and other identist religious pluralists operate is that, in order for many religions to be true and to affirming saving values and practices, the ultimate aim or goal of these religions—the “salvation” to which their practice leads—and their ultimate object—the deity or ideal to which they are oriented—must be one and the same.

This assumption, however, according to the authors of *Deep Religious Pluralism*, is not necessary; for it may be the case that we exist in a universe of sufficient complexity to allow for multiple types of salvation, and multiple ultimate realities. And if we assume otherwise, like Hick and others, our philosophies of religious pluralism will unnecessarily distort what religious people traditionally take themselves to be believing and doing—a common criticism of such philosophies by more traditional religious thinkers.

The problem with this approach, however—or at least the objection it has evoked—is that it seems to fall back into the debilitating relativism that these authors wish to avoid by positing a non-unified, incoherent universe. A conventional understanding of the term *ultimate* is that it refers to something unitary that is above all else. An *ultimate reality* is a reality that is the ultimate locus and source of all value, the ultimate *telos* of all action. By the very meaning of the term *ultimate*, therefore, it seems that there can only be one ultimate reality. An ultimate reality that was one among many would not, then, truly be an ultimate reality. If there are many ultimate realities, then there is *no* ultimate reality.

Responding to the Problem: The Role of a Hindu Process Theology

The objection to Griffin’s, Cobb’s, and others’ deployment of the concept of there being many ultimate realities rests, in part, on a question of semantics: namely, the meaning of the word *ultimate*. For the tradition of process thought—in this, as in a variety of other areas—has its own peculiar vocabulary. The authors of *Deep Religious Pluralism* are not relativists—at least not in the thoroughgoing sense that would be implied if they meant by *ultimate reality* what most people mean when they use this term. Again, such relativism is precisely what they seek to avoid by approaching religious pluralism from the vantage point of a definite metaphysical worldview, rather than from an abstract perspective that operates with, but conceals (or is unaware of) its own ontological assumptions—one of the charges leveled against more conventional religious pluralists.

When process thinkers deploy the term *ultimate reality*, they follow Whitehead in using this term to refer to an irreducible fact of existence. A reality is a metaphysical *ultimate*, in a Whiteheadian sense, if it is fundamental to the philosophical explanation of existence and is not itself reducible to any further, more fundamental

element. In this sense, then, there is not just one ultimate reality in a process worldview. There are, in fact, three ultimate realities—or rather, three *types* of ultimate reality.

Each of these ultimate realities, significantly, corresponds to one of the ultimate objects of the world's religions, which can be organized in a threefold typology according to the type of ultimate reality to which they are salvifically oriented:

1. *Theistic Religions* are oriented towards a Supreme Being, a personal God, and are productive of *salvation*, or a right relationship between God and the religious practitioner. This relationship is conceived in various ways, such as loving union or eternal life with God in Heaven. These traditions typically have a strong ethical emphasis, with a right relationship with God being conceived as behaving in a manner that is acceptable to God. Examples include Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta traditions of Hinduism.
2. *Acosmic Religions* are oriented towards an impersonal Absolute, or Ground of Being, and are productive of *realization* or *enlightenment*. Such religions typically emphasize contemplation, wisdom, and the transformation of consciousness through the practice of meditation. Examples include Buddhism, Jainism, Daoism (particularly “philosophical” Daoism), and the Advaita Vedānta tradition of Hinduism.
3. *Cosmic Religions* are oriented towards the cosmos—the cosmic order and the spiritual beings that inhabit it. They are productive of harmony and right relations amongst these beings. Examples include the so-called “animist,” indigenous traditions of the Americas, Africa, Australia, Asia, and pre-Christian Europe, as well as Shinto, popular Daoism, and much of popular Hinduism, as well as the ancient Vedic religion, or “Brahmanism,” from which contemporary Hinduism emerged.

Although all religions contain at least a thread of all three of these orientations, it is generally the case that one will be the predominant theme of the tradition in practice. It is significant, though—as the reader may already have noted—that a strong current of all three is present in Hinduism.

The three types of ultimate object to which the world's many religious traditions are oriented correspond, again, to the three types of ultimate reality—in the peculiar sense of this term deployed by process thinkers—affirmed in a process worldview. The personal God of the theistic religions corresponds to the God of process thought. Whitehead sees God, much as classical Western philosophy does, as a metaphysically necessary being, but as one who both influences *and is influenced* by the events that make up the cosmos. God is thus a stable, but not static, reality: “a stable actuality whose mutual implication with the remainder of things secures an inevitable trend towards order.” (Whitehead 1967: 115) The ultimate principle of the acosmic religions corresponds to the unchanging and eternal “primordial nature” of God, the divine conceptualization of all possibilities.

Finally, the cosmic religions are oriented, in process terms, to the cosmos made up of actual entities—centers of experience whose activity is coordinated by God in such a way as to constitute a coherent universe, a divine activity which is itself

pursued with the aim of realizing the optimal possibilities envisioned in the primordial nature. This nature is also identified in process thought with the concept of “creativity,” the aim of which is the realization of the maximum number of ideal possibilities. Creativity itself is, to use Whitehead’s terminology, “deficiently actual.” It can only be realized by actual entities. And God is that entity which makes creativity available to the actual entities, providing them with their initial aim for realization, but which they themselves are free to realize in whatever particular way they choose.

The three “ultimate realities” of process thought, invoked by Griffin and Cobb in their “more pluralistic” model of religious pluralism, are thus not ultimate realities in the conventional sense of the term, a sense which in any case only allows for one ultimate reality. They are also not “competitors.” They are, rather, three mutually necessary parts or aspects of what is ultimately a unified and internally coherent picture of the universe.²

But if the issue raised by Griffin and Cobb’s usage is merely a semantic one, then what need is there for a specifically Hindu contribution to this discussion? Is there a real, substantive issue lurking behind the semantic one? I would suggest that such an issue does exist—while freely admitting that I have myself deployed the terminology of “many ultimate realities” in my own work.³ While I do not eschew this usage, I also think it is important to clarify the understanding within which this usage operates—one which does see reality as ultimately one, albeit a complex unity, admitting of *internal* diversity.

Process thought has distinguished itself from other philosophical currents, such as absolute idealism, by placing primary value on the realm of the actual, the concrete—the realm of change and difference—as opposed to an abstract, unmanifested, and unchanging absolute. To cite Whitehead, between the two primary approaches to metaphysics, “One side makes process ultimate; the other side makes fact ultimate.” (Whitehead 1978: 7)

Hindu thought makes a similar distinction between approaches to philosophy that emphasize the primacy of “being”—usually taken to refer to a static absolute—and others that emphasize “non-being”—or rather, that do not affirm the prior existence of the cause within an effect: philosophies of process and change. These approaches are referred to, respectively, as *sat-kārya-vāda* and *asat-kārya-vāda*.

Hindu systems of thought have tended to fall into the category of *sat-kārya-vāda*: those who say that the cause exists within the effect, an approach that ultimately implies a kind of absolute idealism, as exemplified in Advaita, or non-dualistic,

²I should probably note, too, that when I use the term “universe” in this essay I am referring to the totality of that which is, both possible and actual, and not to the universe in the sense of scientific cosmology—the roughly 14 billion year old expanding product of the Big Bang, which may only be one of many of its kind. Better terms might be “cosmos,” “multiverse,” or “reality”—or better yet, the Sanskrit *tattva*, or “that which is.”

³This has been the case in a number of my writings on the topics of Hindu process theology and religious pluralism, the primary statement of which is my first book (Long 2007).

Vedānta, with its teaching that all things are ultimately one, being identical with Brahman, the transcendent and highest reality. Advocacy for the *asat-kārya-vāda* point of view in classical Indian philosophy fell largely to the Buddhists, and the affinities between Buddhism and process thought are many and well known, largely through the extensive inter-religious dialogues undertaken between John Cobb and the late Masao Abe. Though not all Hindu systems of thought have tended toward absolute idealism, they have tended to give emphasis to Brahman as the underlying unity of existence. Advaita Vedānta does this, one could say, to the extreme, and is rejected, accordingly, by the equally extreme philosophy of Dvaita, or dualistic, Vedānta. But the many “intermediate” systems of Vedānta, such as the well known qualified non-dualism, or Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja, also give emphasis to the idea of a unity that underlies plurality, and that connects diverse entities as elements in an *internally* pluralistic, yet ultimately singular, system.

The Hindu emphasis on an underlying unity is, I think, one that could have value for the process tradition. For though Whitehead does ascribe ultimate value to process, to the relative world of change, he also values the idea of unity, without which his system provides “absolutely no reason why the universe should not be steadily relapsing into lawless chaos.” (Whitehead 1967: 115) It is of course for this reason that his system must include a supreme actuality—God—to ensure an underlying unity to existence: to ensure that the multitude of actual entities are coordinated in such a way as to constitute a universe. Whitehead does not name this deeper unity which God, like Viṣṇu, preserves, though he does speak of the necessity of what he calls “Law” or “a certain smoothness in the nature of things,” apart from which “there can be no knowledge, no useful method, no intelligent purpose.” (Whitehead 1967: 109)

This notion of Law correlates well with the Hindu idea of *dharma*, which is often defined as correct moral behavior, but which also includes such ideas as cosmic order and the laws of nature. The existence of God ensures the basic stability of existence—the fact that things proceed in an orderly fashion, according to *dharma*.⁴

But what ensures the existence of God? A process thinker might reply that God, as conceived in process thought, is a logical necessity of the metaphysical system. But what is logical necessity but the interrelationship of ideas in a coherent, *unitary* system of thought? Logic, one could say, is a manifestation of unity, in the sense of an underlying, necessary interconnectedness of things. Unity *precedes* logic, being, as Whitehead says, ontologically ‘primordial.’⁵ Brahman, one could then say, is not so much *logical*, as it is logic itself: the transcendental condition for any system of thought or reality whatsoever. Brahman is Law. Brahman is *dharma*. Brahman is universal order, the meta-foundation of the system of reality described in process thought, the primordial nature of God.

⁴This is the main function of God as personified by Viṣṇu, the preserver of the cosmic order from the forces of chaos, or *adharma*, themselves personified as various demonic beings that Viṣṇu must combat.

⁵John Cobb, personal communication.

The Hindu emphasis on the fundamental unity of existence addresses a tendency in process thought to emphasize process and change over ultimate fact. Both philosophical tendencies—to emphasize either the one or the many, the absolute or the relative—should complement and balance one another, rather than either being taken to an extreme. It is not that I perceive any particular process thinker as having gone to such an extreme. But it seems that, for a Hindu process thinker, an emphasis on process *and* reality will always be central. The fact that Griffin and Cobb both instinctively speak of multiple ultimate realities rather than of a single, but internally complex, ultimate reality gives rise to the confusion among their critics that they are affirming a radical relativism. Hindu process theology can correct this tendency by injecting a healthy dose of monism into a system of thought that emphasizes changes and difference.

The remainder of this essay will be devoted to depicting precisely how a Hindu process theology in the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna might serve this function.

Outline of a Hindu Process Theology in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna

There cannot be a generic Hindu theology any more than there can be a generic Islamic or Christian or Jewish theology. Theological reflection always occurs within a particular tradition—a concrete community of belief and practice. Terms like *Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam* are relative abstractions—“semi-fictional entities,” as Paul Griffiths has aptly described the world’s religions (Griffiths 1991: 5). The particular tradition in which my Hindu process theological reflection occurs is the modern Vedānta tradition associated with the Bengali sage, Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886) and his disciple, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the first prominent Hindu master to bring Hindu teachings to the Western world. I am a lay practitioner in this tradition, which informs my understanding of Hindu thought. I am not a monk, and my views do not reflect any official teaching of the Ramakrishna Order—which, in fact, has no “official teaching,” but affirms freedom of thought.

My tradition is distinguished from earlier forms of Vedānta, or Hindu theology, by its emphasis on direct experience of the divine as the ultimate source of authority. In contrast with classical Vedānta, which views the *Vedas*, the Hindu scriptures, as the final word on all things spiritual, modern Vedānta views the Vedic scriptures as the records of the experiences of enlightened sages. It is their experience that makes the sages and their words authoritative, and these words are sacred as guides to the ultimate realization. But final authority rests with experience itself, and no revelation is final. Enlightened masters and divine incarnations continue to appear in the world to guide the rest of us toward our final goal. Revelation is therefore of a progressive nature, to be constantly tested against reason and experience. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, as enlightened beings, are considered to be authorities on a par with the ancient Vedic sages. But even they, by their own accounts, are not to be followed blindly.

In terms of its substantive teaching regarding the nature of Brahman, the Vedānta of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda shares many characteristics of what I referred to earlier as the “intermediate” forms of Vedānta, such as the Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja. Again, if one were to place the classical systems of Vedānta on a spectrum, with Advaita at one end, affirming absolute unity, and Dvaita at the other, affirming ontological diversity—a real pluralism of God, souls, and the world—the other schools of Vedānta generally try to reconcile these. Probably the most logically elegant such attempt—and one with striking similarities to process thought, as noted by both Griffin and Charles Hartshorne (Griffin 2001; Hartshorne 1970)—is that of Rāmānuja, who affirms, with Śaṅkara and the Advaita school, the ultimate unity of all beings in Brahman, but also affirms a real diversity of God, souls, and the world internal to that ultimate unity. The unity Rāmānuja affirms is an *organic* unity. God is the soul of the cosmos, which is the body of God. The unity of both—the whole—is Brahman.

The Vedānta of Sri Ramakrishna does not seek to find a middle path between the extremes of Advaita and Dvaita so much as to synthesize the insights of all the schools of Vedānta into a single view, seeing each approach to reality as valid and appropriate for a different type of spiritual practitioner.

To be sure, Ramakrishna himself was a brilliant, insightful, inspired, but far from systematic thinker. He was a sage, not a theologian. Vivekananda had more of the bent of mind of the traditional intellectual than did Ramakrishna. But he left his body at the young age of 31, and devoted much of his time on earth to organizing the Ramakrishna Order and its service activities for the uplift of the poor. His collected works are primarily lectures, his main work of systematization being his influential books, published posthumously, on the four yogas, or spiritual paths.

But a system of thought can certainly be gleaned from the teachings of both these masters—a system that, to my way of thinking, comports well with the process thought of Whitehead and his successors, particularly in regard to the issues of religious pluralism.

Theistic religion and its ultimate object, in terms of the Ramakrishna tradition, is reflective of the dualistic perspective of those forms of Vedānta that affirm the reality of the distinction between God and the world, and to the practice of *bhakti yoga*, the path to the divine that is characterized by an intense and loving relationship between the devotee and his or her *iṣṭadevatā*, or chosen personal form of the divine. This is consistent both with the distinction that process thought also draws between God and the actual entities that constitute the universe and with the strong emphasis on relationality and the mutual ontological participation that God and actual entities share according to process thought. For bhakti is not merely an emotion, but a profound and mutual sharing in the life of God and God’s devotees. For the devotee, this sharing creates unsurpassed bliss. The path is the goal. Devotion is its own end. Ramakrishna calls bhakti, “the one essential thing” (Nikhilananda 2002: 111).

On the other hand, acosmic religion is also affirmed in Ramakrishna’s Vedānta in the form of Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta. Indeed, many have identified the Vedānta of

Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda with Advaita because of a number of claims made by both—particularly Vivekananda—that would appear to privilege the Advaita perspective over the dualistic, bhakti-oriented, theistic perspective just mentioned. Both have tended to place the classical Vedāntic perspectives in a hierarchy, with Advaita at the top, such that dualism is identified with an early stage in the spiritual path, when one first begins to approach God, and sees God and oneself as separate beings. The intermediate systems of Vedānta, such as Viśiṣṭādvaita, are identified with an intermediate stage, in which one is able to see God and oneself as both part of one larger being—Brahman. But in the final stage, one comes so close to God that all distinction between God and self vanishes and only Brahman remains—which is the teaching of Advaita.

At the same time, there are a number of places where both masters see all of these perspectives as simply different, and equally valid, approaches, to reality. Ramakrishna, in particular, was highly devotional in practice, and sometimes seems to extol bhakti over *jñāna*, the path of non-dualistic wisdom, saying that he would rather taste the sweetness of sugar than *become* sugar (Nikhilananda 2002: 133). His most consistent refrain, though, is the ultimate unity of the personal deity of devotion and the impersonal Brahman of contemplative wisdom. In a number of places in the teachings remembered by his disciples, he says things such as, “I accept both the Nitya [the eternal and unchanging Brahman] and the Līlā [the divine play, the changing universe], both the Absolute and the Relative.” (Nikhilananda 2002: 480) “Kālī,” the goddess who was Ramakrishna’s *iṣṭadevatā*, “is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kālī. It is one and the same Reality. When we think of It as inactive … then we call It Brahman. But when It engages in … activities, then we call It Kālī or Śakti.” (Nikhilananda 2002: 134–135)

In terms of process thought, Ramakrishna’s “inactive Brahman” corresponds to Whitehead’s “deficiently actual” primordial nature of God—God’s abstract essence as the principle of creativity, the primordial conceptualization of all possibilities. The acosmic religions, corresponding to the Hindu *jñāna yoga*, or spiritual discipline of knowledge, orient their practitioners to an awakening to the ultimate nature of reality in its abstract perfection. Just like bhakti for the theistic devotee, this awakening is, for the enlightened sage, a source of unsurpassed bliss, as the ego vanishes and the sage’s consciousness is absorbed like a drop of water in the infinite ocean of pure being.

Though one does not find much, if any, explicit reference to the nature religions or religions of cosmic harmony in the teachings of Ramakrishna or Vivekananda, one can arguably find relevance to this type of spiritual path in Vivekananda’s reflections on the *karma yoga*, or spiritual discipline of action, which consists of selfless service to all other beings with no thought given to any immediate benefit to oneself. One serves God in and through others—the actual entities that make up the cosmos. This seeing of the divine in and *as* other beings would seem to comport well with the cosmic religions’ emphasis on harmonious relations with other beings in the here and now.

Conclusion

To the degree that the Hindu process theology I have outlined affirms an ultimate unity of existence with its concept of Brahman—the whole, the organic unity that gives cohesion to the universe—the “multiple ultimate realities” of Griffin and Cobb’s deep pluralism can be seen to refer to different aspects or dimensions of what is, finally, a single ultimate reality in the conventional sense of the term: the abstract, primordial nature of God; the concrete, consequent nature of God; and the cosmos of actual entities—or, in Hindu terms, the nitya, or eternal, unmanifested (*nirguna*) Brahman; Īśvara, or Bhagavān, the Supreme Lord; and the universe made up of the many souls, or *jīvas*, whose collective experience constitutes the *jagat*, or flow of existence over which the Lord reigns (or, in process terms, that God coordinates and constitutes *as* a universe).

This injection of Vedāntic monism into a process understanding of reality might be seen by some to go against the grain of the process tradition, which has emphasized change and difference largely as a corrective to absolutist philosophies that have tended to give primacy to the abstract over the concrete. Indeed, to term the whole of reality that God and the world constitute a single entity—Brahman—might be seen by some as a case of the infamous “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” that Whitehead took great pains to correct.

But Whitehead and his followers certainly do take the universe to be an organic whole, and take equally great pains to distinguish their view from a debilitating relativism that would not allow one to assert this. A Hindu process theology seeks to present a view that balances diversity and unity, change and ultimate fact, process and reality, in a way that addresses the critiques to which the approach taken by the authors of *Deep Religious Pluralism* has been subject.

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Part VI

Panentheism

Introduction to Panentheism

Philip Clayton

Panentheism is no monolith. This quality, at least, it shares with virtually all the other models of God described in this book.

For this reason, those of us who are interested in how humans have sought to conceive ultimate reality would be wiser to think in terms of *families* of models. Theistic and non-theistic models are clans; the different sections of this book are families; and each chapter is its own individual. Sharply different identities can manifest in different members of a single family, just as in everyday life, and in most cases it is unhealthy to downplay them. Moreover, families and even clans intermarry and consort together in all sorts of ways, both licit and illicit. Because families are such a significant form of shared identity, it's unwise to overlook family bonds. But few individuals or positions are *fully* defined by their family of origin. The perceptive reader will observe a plethora of friendships, flirtations, weddings, adoptions, gifts, borrowings, and stealings across the family units that structure this volume.

Some will read the present section with a primary interest in what the seven chapters share in common, whereas others will be more entertained by the differences. The best way to keep both parties happy, I believe, is to stress the commonalities up front and to be honest about the divergences as we proceed.

Common Features

At its simplest, panentheism is a model of the God-world relation that emphasizes inclusion rather than separation. It holds that the world is contained within the divine, although God is also more than the world. The term, as you will read shortly,

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is usually ascribed to a German philosopher named Krause in an 1828 publication, although Schelling had already used the phrase “pan+en+theismus” in his 1809 *Essay on Freedom*. Panentheists do not affirm a God who is completely transcendent of the world, but they also resist treating the “immanent” reality, the reality that we see around us, as all that is.¹ The “en” of panentheism is almost always a two-fold “in”: the transcendent is in the immanent, and the immanent is in the transcendent. Or, in the beautiful words of the Bhagavadgita, “He who sees Me everywhere and sees all in Me; I am not lost to him nor is he lost to Me” (VI, 30).

Every theistic model represents an emphasis within some set of debates about the Ultimate. Like classical theists in the West, panentheists stress that there is something in the nature of God that is more than, something that transcends, the universe as a whole. Yet they do not get to this conclusion by insisting that God is completely separate from the world. They may say that God is present to, or in, every finite thing; or that God responds to events and experiences in the world; or that God is affected by, changed by, or even depends on events in the world. They may make this affirmation only in the most general terms, or they may argue more radically that God is transformed by every moment of finite experience.

However they handle the conundrums of God and change, or God and time, panentheists share with pantheists the sense that the divine is in all things. Nothing exists, or could exist, without being God-infused. But no panentheist maintains that God *just is* the aggregate, the sum total of all existing things. Always, they say, there is something of God—the divine experience, the essential nature of God, divine eternality or perfection, God’s goodness—that exceeds (the experience of) all finite beings.

The Story Behind the Story

The following seven chapters tell the story of panentheism by moving through some of the key figures in its history: Nicholas of Cusa, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Peirce, and Karl Rahner. The first and the last of these are primarily known as theologians, the others primarily as philosophers. Moving consecutively through these six figures is not a bad way to tell the story, actually. We don’t often think of models as stories or narratives, but perhaps we should do so more often. Hearing the common story across these different figures in the coming chapters, the reader will be struck by common themes, shared emphases, and an agreed-upon sense of what are the mistakes to be avoided.

Of course, we would need a different narrative if we were focusing on panentheism in the Eastern traditions. I have written elsewhere on the similarities and differences between panentheisms East and West (see Clayton 2010; Biernacki and Clayton 2013).

¹ For an important presentation of a panentheistic view of ultimate reality, see Arthur Peacocke’s posthumous book, Clayton, ed. (2007).

Although six of the following seven chapters focus on the Western story, that fact should not be allowed to leave you with the impression that panentheism is solely the child of the West. I conclude with a brief reflection on Francis Clooney's work on south Indian texts and on the power of panentheism in some of the Hindu traditions.

Even when we turn our focus to Western history, however, there is a significant danger here of losing the forest for the trees. Thus I propose to take the liberty of telling a bit of the story behind the story here at the outset.

Every story has a background, and this one is no exception. We might begin the Western story with the evolution of the concept of God in the biblical documents. (In fact, of course, where one begins one's story is actually somewhat arbitrary. But every storyteller has to start somewhere.) Beginning as a tribal deity, Yahweh evolved to the most powerful of the gods and, finally, to a status so great that there could be "no other gods beside Him" (see Armstrong 1994; Miles 1996). Scholars have charted the changed assumptions as the Israelite understanding moved from polytheism (there are many gods, but Yahweh is the greatest among them), to henotheism (there is only one God), to what Reinhold Niebuhr called "radical monotheism" (God as the absolute source of all things).

As the Jewish philosopher Philo realized in the first century CE, the last stage of the development meant that philosophical attributes such as omnipotence and omniscience could now be ascribed to the Hebrew God. But it also meant that the more personal and responsive qualities of the biblical God—lovingkindness and mercy, repenting of his actions, providential care—now sat awkwardly on this highest principle, ground, and source. For the first time (but not for the last), tensions arose between the God of the "omni's" and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The New Testament documents, minimally beholden to Greek philosophy, appear to have recovered the earlier strata of the Hebrew Bible. The One that Jesus called "Father" was close, listening, responsive; Yahweh's more fearsome attributes, while not completely absent, certainly did not stand at the center. The phrase *en Christo* is repeated some 93 times in the New Testament epistles. In Paul's famous response to the Greek philosophers in Athens, he speaks of God as the one "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:29).

This idea that the world might be located within God clashed with the substance metaphysics of the Patristic period. According to the philosophy of the day, God could create a world of finite substances. But God as Creator would necessarily be a separate substance from that world. Unfortunately, substances cannot co-inhabit; conceptually or logically, at least, one substance cannot be "within" another. Hence God can be at best present to finite substances. The *en* of "in God" or "in Christ" can be at most the "in" of location, not the mystical or metaphysical "in".

Since this was the ruling philosophical framework at the time the central Christian creeds were being formulated, the requirements of substance metaphysics came to define Christian orthodoxy. (Jewish theology was rather more fortunate in this regard.) It wasn't so much that panentheism was declared *anathema*; it was rather that its version of the God-world relationship just couldn't be thought. Little speculative space was left for genuinely panentheistic models within this philosophical framework.

Such speculation continued outside the bounds of orthodoxy, however. Though they were frequently marginalized and at risk, interesting and intriguing panentheistic models of God were advanced and developed. Many arose under the (direct or indirect) influence of Plotinus, whose brilliant synthesis of Plato and Aristotle still retained all things as emanations of the One. The Neoplatonic tradition, which he influenced, continued to expand the space available for these models. Figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Johannes Eriugena, Meister Eckhardt, and Giordano Bruno—to name just a few—presupposed and utilized a panentheistic framework in one form or another.

The Six Western Chapters

1. *Cusa*: As Nancy J. Shaffer's paper shows, Nicholas of Cusa represents one of the greatest thinkers in this lineage. Cusa's writings are packed with bold models of the God-world relation, most of which are panentheistic in structure. He conceives God as a circle whose radius is infinite and whose center is located everywhere—a model that makes it impossible to conceive anything outside of God. A moment's reflection shows that this fifteenth-century model of God already has many of the same implications as Hegel's famous argument about the infinite. The infinite, Hegel would later write, cannot exclude the finite, for then it would be a “bad” or false infinite. Whatever is truly infinite must include all finite things within itself. When Cusa insists that God is *non aliud*, not-other, he seems to be working from the same intuition.

Cusa's models also provide place for the kind of change and development that will have to pertain to a God who includes the world within the space of the divine being. Shaffer's insightful treatment of the notions of *complicatio* and *explicatio* shows how deeply they imply a notion of pervasive process, even within the divine being. She frames them under the heading of divine appearing, theophany, in ways that nicely convey the spirit of Cusa's work. As long as all things are enfolded with God, and God unfolds outward, changes in the world can be conceived as basic to the divine being as well. As Shaffer rightly notes, “In fact, the created order in its entirety is God unfolded...”

Shaffer also reminds the reader that each of the panentheistic models in this section has implications for understanding ourselves and our obligations to other living things. “Creation” on this model, she says, “lends itself to a holistic vision of human interaction with the natural world.” Cusa's radical affirmation of divine immanence “infuses the world with immeasurable value and gives rise to a Christian spirituality that can address the current ecological crisis.”

Interlude: The awkward omission in this section, of course, is Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677), whose thought is relayed by Edwin Curley in a comparison with Toland's pantheism in the section of this volume entitled “Ultimate Unity.” Expelled from his Dutch synagogue at the age of 14 for (allegedly) teaching that God has a body, Spinoza developed one of the most radical models of

God in modern Western philosophy. Spinoza famously claimed that, when the implications of the concept of substance are thought through in a rigorous fashion, only one substance can exist. What we normally think of as separate things or persons turn out, on this model, to be merely modes of the one substance. It immediately follows that God cannot be separate from nature. Instead, Spinoza speaks of *deus siva natura*: “God, that is, nature.”

Spinoza represents one of the most fascinating thinkers in all of modern philosophy; I refer you to Curley’s essay for a sense of the dance of monism and plurality that is his understanding of the God-world relation. Spinoza is equally indispensable because of the huge influence that he exercised on the following 150 years of philosophy following his death in 1677. Again and again during these years, the epoch-making philosophers in the development of German Idealism were the ones who were wrestling, privately or publicly, with the implications of this great heretic in modern thought. Two of Spinoza’s famous successors, Lessing and Fichte, are omitted in the narrative told in the following pages, but the three figures we do encounter (Kant, Schelling, and Hegel) are all panentheists as a direct result of struggling with the legacy of Spinoza.

2. *Kant*: As Stephen Palmquist realizes, Kant works with a panentheistic model of God. It is sometimes hard to discern this view in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, since its primary thrust is anti-metaphysical. But Palmquist nuances his thesis appropriately in his abstract: “*If* Kant regarded himself as a theist, what kind of a theist was he? The theological approach that best fits Kant’s model of God is panentheism...” (italics added).

The arguments for this conclusion are rather involved. Still, within the complex framework of the first Critique, in the detailed presentations of the forms of sensibility and categories of the understanding, Kant does appear to lean in this direction. So, for example, he affirms that the totality of space is prior to its parts. The framework of the *ens realissimum* in the Transcendental Dialectic likewise places the level of unity before its parts. (Note, however, that this claim pertains to the unity of *reason*; the proposition is transcendental, not metaphysical.) Palmquist marshals a wide range of further arguments, running from the *Critique of Practical Reason* through the *Opus postumum*, including some from the secondary literature as well.

Now it should be acknowledged that Palmquist offers here a rather controversial reading of Kant. Specialists may well have some qualms about Palmquist’s reading of Kant’s critical philosophy, that perplexing position known as transcendental idealism. They may worry whether Kant actually affirms belief “in a *living God*,” or whether Kant really makes “amply clear” that “the phenomenal just *is* the noumenal, viewed from a different standpoint.” I doubt, for example, whether Kant really intended a substantive doctrine of God in the way that Palmquist’s chapter (sometimes) seems to imply. But one doesn’t have to agree with all the details of Palmquist’s presentation of the *status* of Kant’s language about God in order to grant his main point: that Kant’s construal of God is best understood as panentheistic.

3. *Schelling*: Klaus Ottmann never uses the term “panentheism” in his chapter on “Schelling’s Fragile God.” And yet this extremely knowledgeable reading, which mostly focuses on Schelling’s earlier philosophy, nicely communicates many of the key features of panentheism that would influence philosophers and theologians over the coming 200 years.

Ottmann rightly notes at the end of the chapter that Schelling’s approach “represented the first step of a radical new approach [to] resolving the problem of the manifestation of the finite world and human freedom.” Schelling did not ask “how Man becomes divine” but rather “how God becomes human through freedom.” Schelling’s story, like Tillich’s, is the story of the becoming of real finite agents out of the Infinite or Absolute. This story has two surprising features, both of which would deeply influence subsequent panentheisms. The first is that the whole story of creation takes place within the divine. As Ottmann writes, quoting Schelling’s *Philosophy and Religion*, “History is an epic composed in the mind of God.”

The second feature of the story is Schelling’s contention that creation can never be either necessary or fully explained through reason, since it involved a free decision/act on the part of the divine.² This appeal to the freedom of the divine will stands in marked contrast to Schelling’s successor, Hegel, whose Absolute Idealism is generally interpreted as a series of necessary steps culminating in the becoming of Absolute Spirit. Schelling’s “Essay on Freedom” rejects that perspective. Here both human and divine freedom are genuine and non-reducible, since it was a free decision of the Absolute that gave rise to finite reality in the first place.

4. *Hegel*: Glenn Alexander Magee is an experienced guide to Hegel. His chapter, like his books, manages to make this difficult philosophical system amply comprehensible, no mean feat. Magee emphasizes the differences from Spinoza that helped Hegel to formulate his own unique position. He affirms unambiguously that Hegel’s philosophy counts as panentheistic: “the key to Hegel’s new theology consists in his rejection of God’s transcendence.” And yet “Hegel is not driven as a result to simply identify God with nature, as Spinoza does.”

Since Magee’s exposition of how this could be is remarkably clear, I’ll leave it to him to explain how one can make both of these affirmations at the same time. We will see how Hegel reconciles transcendence and immanence through pervasive process. God is “portrayed essentially as a process, rather than something fixed and complete.” (The “Process Theology” section of this volume describes some very similar approaches.) Glenn Magee (like Cyril O’Regan) is also famous for showing how Hegel, who is often construed as an arch-rationalist, in fact composes an intensely mystical philosophy. In this respect, perhaps the differences between Hegel and Schelling (and, for that matter, Cusa) are not as stark as is often claimed.

²I spell this argument out at much greater length in Clayton 2000, Chapter 9.

5. *Peirce*: One has the sense that Jeff Kasser doesn't really like the term "panentheism"; he mentions it only once, and that in a reference to the Peirce scholar Michael Raposa, to whom he refers the reader for any further inquiries on the subject. Perhaps his reticence is not so surprising after all. Peirce is usually read for his pragmatism; his epistemology; his philosophy of science; his metaphysics of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness; and of course his semiotics, his famous theory of language. Although he indicates his openness to religion in a few passages, his disdain of theology—at least the theology of his day—is uncompromising.

Kasser's chapter nevertheless offers a rather fascinating case study of how a philosophy of language can give rise to or support a panentheistic metaphysic. I'm thus puzzled by Kasser's claim that "Peirce's conception of God is in many respects unabashedly traditional." It's true that he sometimes used confessional language of God. But the entire thrust of the metaphysics outlined in Kasser's chapter points in a different direction; as he rightly notes at one point, "the more detailed [Peirce's] statements get, the messier, more interesting, and more problematic they become."

I'll leave the details to Kasser's very competent exposition. But the reader should be in no doubt as to the outcome: "to think of God as transcendent is not to posit a state of affairs in which God figures as a kind of thing in some sense outside the universe." In this model, all events are (quoting Kasser quoting Peirce) "bound together in something like a continuous flow." God transcends the universe, but "God is not radically other than the universe either." These pages are a good reminder that one can come to similarly panentheistic views of the God-world relationship from very, very different conceptual starting points.

6. *Rahner*: Like some of the other authors, James J. Bacik never mentions the term "panentheism." Unlike them, however, he does not actually attribute a *de facto* panentheistic position to Karl Rahner. Perhaps this is appropriate, since scholars on Rahner are also divided on whether his theology should be understood as panentheistic. But this reticence may be a bit disappointing to some readers, who may be looking for a chapter that marshals the strongest evidence for Rahner's panentheism from across the wide spectrum of his writings.

In much of his exposition, Bacik actually downplays the panentheistic elements in Rahner's theology. In his list of intellectual influences, classical sources play the primary role, and Rahner's more speculative reading and reflection receives scant mention. Bacik writes, "Rahner opts for a God who is distinct from the world as its creator and yet is intrinsically present as its divine energy." The doctrine of the divine energies led some Eastern Orthodox thinkers to panentheistic construals of the God-world relation, but Bacik does not nod in this direction.³

And yet elements of a panentheistic model of God do surface in these pages. Other themes from Rahner which might support a panentheistic theology—God's

³ But see the section on Orthodox theology in Clayton and Peacocke 2004.

immanence in the world, continuing creation (*creatio continua*), transcendental Thomism, and the radical dependence of humans on God—are presented. Bacik also notes that Rahner's criticisms of the God who stands over against the world lead him to find an element of truth in pantheism, “since it is open to God as the primordial ground and the ultimate goal of transcendence.” We are “embodied spirits,” inseparable from the one Spirit who permeates all things. Rahner tends to link absolute being and God, which would imply that, as existing beings, we are ontologically inseparable from the “luminosity of being,” participating in the one Being that is the source of all things. Thus the reader will find multiple strands that link this final chapter to the other contributions in this section, even if the connections are somewhat understated.

Panentheisms East and West

It might at first seem as if Francis X. Clooney's beautiful chapter on the classic Hindu hymn, the *Tiruvaymoli*, is left high and dry, a lone island of Indian spirituality in the midst of an otherwise thoroughly Western story. And indeed, one might have wished that this section were more evenly balanced between East and West, though doubling its length was probably not an option.

Still, Clooney's close reading of one hymn from the *Tiruvaymoli* plays an indispensable role in this section, and that in several senses. It reminds us, first, that panentheism is not a uniquely Western product. Indeed, I have argued in the past that Ramanuja's “qualified non-dualism” represents in many ways a purer panentheism than anything that one can find in the Western tradition (Clayton 2010). Most of the broad tradition of reflection on *Brahman*, the ultimate reality to which the Vedas and Upanishads point, is uncompromisingly panentheistic. Here, by and large, the Western tendency to reify the natural world is absent; everyday reality understood apart from Brahman is *maya*, illusion.

Second, Clooney's reading reflects the spiritual depths of the *bhakti* or devotional tradition in India. Here worship sets the limits on reflection. The devotee would never claim to be identical with Brahman, for then it would be impossible to devote oneself to extolling the glory and majesty of the Highest. At the same time, she seeks the greatest possible closeness to her Source and Sustainer. She knows herself to be enveloped by the Divine, so that her very existence—including the most distinctive features of her identity—are found within God. In the *bhakti* authors, doxology sets bounds to the metaphysical ascent; one wishes to lose oneself in, but not to become identical to, the source of all things. (Whether or not this is also true of the advaita tradition of Shankara is a hotly disputed question in Hindu scholarship.)

Finally, Clooney's chapter is a reminder that didactic language can never be fully adequate to God, whether understood panentheistically or otherwise. Poetry, feeling, emotion, and finally silence before the ultimate mystery—all these are appropriate, even necessary responses to the One whom the philosophers and theo-

logians also wrestle to understand. The deeply personal nature of the *Tiruvaymoli*, its stress on the internal experience and transformation of the individual, offer a good corrective to the Western writings, which (in most but not all cases) sharply distinguish personal experience from rarified philosophical and theological speculations. Here West and East flow together once more, and—in Rahner’s beautiful words—God is “the final word before wordless and worshipful silence in the face of the ineffable mystery.”

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Nicholas of Cusa's Understanding of Theophany and the Retrieval of a “New” Model of God

Nancy J. Shaffer

The global ecological crisis has spawned intensive reflection about living in right relationship with the earth. Religious views of the natural world and its origins are Christian thought has received special scrutiny since modern alienation from nature has been traced to Christian theology. Theology that would give humanity dominion over the earth, placing the natural world at the mercy of human use and abuse is an embarrassment, even a scandal, for Christian ecologists. Moreover, the traditional Western separation between mind and body that appears to be supported by Platonic readings of biblical texts have made Christian spirituality a target for feminists, people of non-Western cultures, and environmentalists alike. Rosemary Radford Reuther in *Gaia and God* illustrates the historical link between chauvinism and abuse of the environment.¹

The Christian response has been varied. The seminal critic of the Christian attitude toward nature, Lynn White Jr., argued for a return to the reverence for all things embodied in the life of St. Francis of Assisi.² More recently, scholars like Sallie McFague have called for new “models of God,” developed Biblical images of God as mother, lover, or friend, and revisioned the world as the “body of God.” The aim of this enterprise is to rectify the traditionally dominant “monarchical model” that

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¹ Reuther (1994). Radford Reuther agrees (p. 247) in this text that “we need a more imaginative solution to these traditional oppositions [such as spirit and matter, God and world] than simply their reversal; something more like Nicholas of Cusa’s paradoxical ‘coincidence of opposites’ in which ‘the absolute maximum’ and the ‘absolute minimum’ are the same.”

² White (1974).

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has resulted in a “nuclear nightmare.”³ But even the most optimistic of critics, such as H. Paul Santmire, can only point to the “*ambiguous* ecological promise of Christian Theology.”⁴ (Italics mine.) Thus, others grope toward the pantheism of deep ecology or abandon Christianity for Taoism, or aboriginal and Native American mythology. The absence of a strong Christian tradition of respectful interaction with the natural world has spawned everything from a rethinking of Biblical imagery to an exploration of non-theistic traditions. Still, the question as to whether or not there is a traditionally Christian answer to these alternatives remains to be fully explored.

I would suggest that undiscovered within the mystical theology of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) lies a historical model already available to us. His understanding of divine immanence is far more compelling and intimate than contemporary stewardship notions. Nicholas of Cusa is no different from other medieval Christian theologians in seeing the natural world as the created order. However, Cusanus views theophany as a divine self-manifestation in creation that results in divine immanence. Mystical presence is the primary relationship between Creator and creation. In contrast, traditional notions of theophany suggest an ontological divide between the latter. God creates the world, including human beings, as things separate from himself. This separation is affirmed and finalized by the Fall. Although the divide is ultimately reversed through the reconciliation effected by the Christ event, it is nevertheless a condition of existence in this world. It is a constant component of the human condition since the distinction between human minds or souls and the physical world, including the body, reflects the larger division between Creator and creation. Clearly a paradigm of dominance, of God over creature, of human being over nature, emerges from this view of theophany.

However, for Cusanus, theophany means an act of intimate self-expression in which the divine never abandons the created order to its own independent existence. Thus, the immanence implied by Nicholas of Cusa’s version of theophany preserves “creation” from implying “creation for human dominance.” The world is no more “for us” than God himself is “for us,” since it is the manifestation of God’s very self. Cusanus understands the natural world, including human beings, as fundamentally oriented toward God because of divine immanence. Similar to Eastern Christian theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, there is thus no break between humanity and the natural world. Augustine’s medicinal notion of a grace that restores the world after its fall into sin is absent. Although the created order does not surrender its own ontological status, it is nevertheless inextricably linked to God. Nicholas of Cusa’s concept of divine immanence infuses the world with immeasurable value and gives rise to a Christian spirituality that can address the current ecological crisis.

Cusanus’ mystical philosophy owes its uniqueness to its position at the end of the middle ages and the beginning of modernity, as well as to the tension it successfully maintains between Eastern and Western Christianity. Despite having no true followers

³ McFague (1987).

⁴ Santmire (1985).

of his own, Cusanus is being rediscovered today. His concept of divine immanence is evidence of a rich spirituality that is inclusive, rather than exclusive, of the bio-physical world. Human beings are not intrinsically privileged in the natural order of things. Creation, in its very existence as God's self-manifestation, lends itself to a holistic vision of human interaction with the natural world. Borrowing from Pseudo-Dionysius and Neoplatonism, Cusanus develops his notion of God's intimate presence in the world in a wealth of striking metaphors.

Each of his texts tends to focus on a particular schema or set thereof: De docta ignorantia on the complicatio-explicatio,⁵ the coincidence of opposites, and Christ as the maximum contractum or contracted maximum,⁶ De conjecturis on participation and unitas-alteritas,⁷ Trialogus de possest on Actualized-possibility or possest⁸ and De Non-Aliud on God as the "Not-other,"⁹ This study will examine some of the major, interrelated rubrics essentially expressive of theophany and will avoid the controversy of Cusanus' shifts among models.¹⁰ Additionally, it will deal only with Cusanus' concept of theophany and the resulting possibilities for thinking of the world as sacred. Thus the extensive and complicated topic of its final deification will be omitted; it will concentrate on theophany alone, and exclude the parallel movement of theosis. First, Cusanus' notion of divine presence must be examined against

⁵ *De docta Ignorantia* (1985). Hereinafter abbreviated as *DDI*. Translated as "enfolding-unfolding," complicatio-explicatio refers to the way in which God enfolds all things in himself such that, in God, they are God, and to the parallel unfolding of God's self in the world. These constructs were originally used by Boethius and Thierry of Chartres. The schema is expressive of the way that Cusanus perceives the relationship between the one God and the multiplicity of the universe.

⁶ Contraction is the delimitation of a species of universal to an individual thing. It is the concretization of a generality into a particular which has the effect of locating it in space and time and making it finite. The "Absolute Maximum" refers to God.

⁷ *Unitas* or unity and *alteritas* or otherness are Neoplatonic terms that in Cusanus' thought involve the notion of participation. Unity generally denotes God or being that communicates or participates itself, not in itself or it would replicate itself, but in otherness. Thomas McTighe has shown that a difference between Cusanus and Neoplatonist thought is that for the former *alteritas* is the multiplicity while for the latter it is a principle that accounts for multiplicity. See McTighe (1990).

⁸ Possest is the combination of the two terms: posse, to be possible, and esse, the infinitive of the verb sum, to be or exist. It is also the union of the words of the phrase "Possibility exists" (posse est). Translated as "Actualized-possibility," possest is a name for God that refers to the fact that God is the actuality of every possibility and that not even possibility precedes or escapes him. *Trialogus de possest* (1980). Cf. *De venatione sapientiae* h 13, translated by Jasper Hopkins. "On the Pursuit of Wisdom," *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations*. (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1998).

⁹ Nicholas of Cusa *Directio speculantis seu de Non-aliud* (1981).

¹⁰ J. Koch argues that Cusanus actually moves from one metaphysical system to another, while Rudolph Haubst sees his later thought as a natural progression from his earlier works. Others like Thomas P. McTighe take the more middle road of finding new elements in his later texts, but no significant breaks from his previous thought. The difficulty of proceeding systematically through his metaphors or schemas is his own shifting employment of them. He moves freely from one rubric to another, often using a set of terms yet undeveloped in a particular text to buttress or elucidate terms he has been using all along.

the background of the paradoxical and equal notion of divine absence that engenders negative theology. A look at complicatio-explicatio from his early text De docta ignorantia and of De Non-aliud from his eponymous work of 21 years later will bring us to the heart of Cusanus' spirituality. These two rubrics will lead to an essential discussion of the related metaphysical and epistemological issues of hierarchy and analogy. Finally, a look at Cusanus' understanding of Christ as the Absolute Maximum will confirm a theology that has great potential for providing a more holistic view of the environment.

Nicholas of Cusa's theology of Divine presence in the world must be prefaced with a look at his theology of Divine absence, or negative theology. For Cusanus, the transcendence that demands apophatic language about God can be understood in the dual context of divine Supereminence and the limitations of human reason. Nicholas of Cusa stands squarely in the tradition of negative theology established by Pseudo-Dionysius.

Indeed, echoes of Pseudo-Dionysius are heard in the following excerpt from Idiota de Sapientia:

Hence Wisdom [Nicholas' term for God in this text] ... is known in no other way than [through the awareness] that it is higher than all knowledge and is unknowable and inexpressible by any speech, incomprehensible by any intellect, unmeasurable by any measure, unlimitable by any limit, unboundable by any bounds, disproportionable in terms of any proportion, incomparable in terms of any comparison, unbefigurable by any befiguring, unformable by any forming, immovable by any movement, unimaginable by any imagining, unsensible by any sensing, unattractible by any attracting, untasteable by any tasting, inaudible by any hearing, unseeable by any seeing, inapprehensible by any apprehending, unaffirmable by any affirming, undeniable by any negating, undoubtable by any doubting, inopinionable by any opining. And because [Wisdom] is not expressible by any expression, the intended object of these expressions cannot be thought, for Wisdom is unthinkable by any thought—Wisdom, through which and in which and from which are all things.¹¹

Cusanus is adamant about the difficulties of positive language about God. Indeed, his major work On Learned Ignorance (De docta ignorantia) is a lengthy treatise on the extent to which the human mind resides in ignorance when it comes to divine things. Even a recognition of the limits of reason brings us only to a learned ignorance. It does not banish ignorance itself. Within this larger context of the pervasiveness and importance of negative theology for Nicholas of Cusa's thought, theophany is an intriguing and paradoxical theme.

Theophany affirms the uniqueness of individual things and mitigates the rigid hierarchy traditionally found in medieval cosmologies. According to the complicatio-explicatio (enfolding-unfolding) schema found in De docta ignorantia, God enfolds the created order in himself and unfolds or self-manifests in the world. Accordingly, creation is not a fabricated object apart and against God, but is intimately related to the divine. He offers an understanding of the created order that gives each created thing its own unique self-identity, makes it a perfect reflection of the divine, claims the being of God as its own being, and provides it a place in a united cosmos (a universe).

¹¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de sapientia* I, 10 (1996, 99).

God's unfolding of himself in creation does not curse it with monist uniformity, nor replicate God. Though Oneness is the source of plurality, it is not itself multiplied, a fact that surpasses understanding and is the subject of learned ignorance. Neither does it set up a system of decreasing perfection as one moves from complex, rational creatures to simple, non-sentient things. The self-identity bestowed upon created individuals is distinct, both in regard to God and in regard to other members of the created order. The former avoids pantheism and monism; the latter avoids the kind of hierarchy that is the source of much criticism among feminists and environmentalists today. Nicholas shows a modern appreciation for individual identity when he says:

No one [human being] is as another in any respect—neither in sensibility, nor imagination, nor intellect, nor in an activity (whether writing, or painting or an art). Even if for a thousand years one strove to imitate another in any given respect, he would never attain precision (though perceptible difference sometimes remains unperceived).¹²

In Cusanus' thought, there is no hint of the substantial definition of things found in Plato. What makes something *itself* is not the inherence in it of impersonal form, but a uniqueness inclusive of individual characteristics. The reality of someone or something is its contracted¹³ individuality because it is in this individuality that God has manifested.

But it is not just human beings who are granted an individuality apposite to their own selves. Precisely because the absolute manifests in plurality, each member of the plurality has its own proper character. In an illuminating passage Cusanus explains:

Every created thing is, as it were, a finite infinity or a created god, so that it exists in the way in which this can best occur. [Everything is] as if the Creator had said, "Let it be made," and as if because a God (who is eternity itself) could not be made, there was made that which could be made: viz., something as much like God as possible. Wherefore, we infer that every created thing qua created thing is perfect—even if it seems less perfect in comparison with some other [created thing].¹⁴

Every created thing is what it is because it has freely received its being from God, not because God poured only a limited amount of himself into it. Each individual thing is as much like God as possible; nothing can be said to be more perfect than another.

But if Nicholas did not argue for complete uniformity, what is the source of the difference between things? Although theophany is divine self-manifestation, Nicholas did not hold that God could remake himself, because "making" implies

¹² DDI 2.1 h 94. Hopkins, 59–60.

¹³ Contraction is the delimitation of a species or universal to an individual thing. It is the concretization of a generality into a particular which has the effect of locating it in space and time and making it finite.

¹⁴ DDI 2.2 h 104. Hopkins, 64–65. Cf. *De dato Patris lumen* 2 h 102–103. Translated by Jasper Hopkins as "The Gift of the Father of Lights," in *Nicholas of Cusa's Metaphysics of Contraction* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1983), 121: "Yet, provided our construal be sound, we can accept Hermes Trismegistus' statement that God is called by the names of all things and that all things are called by the name of God, so that a man can be called a humanified God and so that, as even Plato claimed, this world can be called a perceptible god." The notion that the created world is the most perfect world possible and that its deficiencies arise from its limitations (for Plato, matter; for Cusanus, possibility of being) is Platonic. Cf. Plato's *Timaeus* 29e ff.; Plotinus's *Enneads* 2 9, 17; and DDI 2.8 h 139, Hopkins, 81.

temporality, or at least finitude. An exact Self-replication would also result in an untenable limitation of the infinite God. The antithesis of making and infinity meant that God could only manifest in something less than himself, in contingency.

Thus, when God is removed, nothing remains. There are no empty receptacles. God creates in nothing and is the very being of things. The finite plurality's difference stems entirely from the Absolute Unity itself. If it did not, it would, indeed, suggest an ordinary Thomistic hierarchical system. If some things simply did not possess as much of God as other things, the latter could be improved and one could move nearer to God as one moved up the ladder of reception of divine being. Therefore, contingency is not a limiting thing, but is a criterion of theophany itself, a demand of divine self-revelation in otherness.

This is not to say that Nicholas does not see a ranking of higher and lower beings (angels over humans and humans over animals, for instance) or gradations of nature (such as intellectual vs. sensible). It is merely to place the origin of this hierarchy in God's fecundity. It is essential to distinguish its legitimate use as a revelation of the latter, from Neoplatonists who would see such a ranking as comparative within the order of creation and would make use of it for an ascent to God.

Furthermore, God imparts himself, not with "envy and difference," but "freely." Precisely because it is God's (indivisible) self that is communicated, it is impossible to attribute to Cusanus the entirety of the traditional notion of the created order in which "order" implies a ranking of ever more perfect things. Though he is viewed as part of the dawn of modernity, Nicholas saw himself as firmly embedded in the medieval tradition. In no way, then, does he do away with hierarchy. He does, however, present it in a new light that softens its harsher implications. Every created thing qua created thing is perfect. It is not perfect in its place or perfect in subservience to other more lofty creatures, but simply perfect as a created thing and as an aspect of unfolded Oneness. Clearly, the plurality and variety of the created order are a result of divine fecundity, not of the filling in of the slots of a hierarchy reflective of medieval society.

Instead, the Being or essence of God is the essence of all things, and the created order is united in a uni-verse. The oneness of the universe depends upon the plurality that derives from theophany. "Universe bespeaks universality—i.e. a oneness of many things."¹⁵ It is because the One reveals itself in multiplicity that the universe is indeed a uni-verse. Although the Absolute Quiddity of the sun is identical to the Absolute Quiddity of the moon, because, of course, the Absolute Quiddity of each is God, their contracted quiddities are diverse.¹⁶ The One God who is absolutely identical to each and every thing exists actually in difference. The divine manifestation of Unity into difference allows for the created order's existence as a united, singular thing. Thus, to divine Unity can be traced the self-identity of the diversity of things and their incorporation into the universe.

¹⁵ DDI 2.5 h 115. Hopkins, 69–70.

¹⁶ Cusanus uses the term "quiddity" to refer to the essence of something, but it is not a formal or generic essence; it is that thing that makes an individual thing what it is.

The unfolding of God in creation and the enfolding of creation in God means that there is an interdependence within the created order itself which Cusanus expresses by the phrase “each thing is in each thing.”¹⁷

Because God unfolds himself immediately in the entire universe, the relationship between each created individual and the universe is a limited parallel of the relationship between each created individual and God. To this extent, it means that particular individuals cannot be considered on their own, even at the philosophical level. Metaphysically, the whole comes before the part and “in each thing all things are tranquil, since 1° could not exist without another.”¹⁸ Cusanus’ sense of a coherent, interdependent whole is not, then, merely a theological concept, something between the divine order and the physical universe. It is also intra-universal.

The idea that the One is unfolded immediately in each individual of the multiplicity has other consequences for the created order. Most importantly, it gives real, but dependent ontological status, avoiding both the unreality of Platonic particulars and the progressive emptiness of Neoplatonic emanations. Created things are not shadows of what is truly real, nor is their being mediated through emanations that proceed from the One. Thus, they are not merely attenuated versions of divine realities, but they have status in their own right. Furthermore, all things in the created order are worthy of reverence, and not merely because they are useful to humans. The phrase “all things in the created order” is inherently ironic. That is, theophany expresses a divine self-giving that the word “created” does not quite capture. The correlation between our spiritual lives and our relationship to the natural world is best expressed in Nicholas’ plea to God:

How will you give Yourself to me unless you likewise give to me the sky and the earth and everything in them? Indeed, how will You give yourself to me unless You also give me to myself?¹⁹

Theophany gives the universe back to itself, allows it a glimpse of itself as well as of God. Indeed, the immanence of God provides for an innate sacramentalism. Cusanus offers us a model of the universe that is traditional and yet innovative. God reveals himself to us as he also reveals the created order. The link between reverence for the divine and reverence for creation is inescapable. As an expression of the divine, the natural world has its own perfection that commands our respect and care. Hence, “natural” never refers to an order apart from God; nature is never severed from grace.

Nicholas of Cusa’s expression of theophany in terms of enfolding/unfolding is refined by his later metaphor of God as the Not-other. Not-other is Nicholas’s most mature formulation, having been written in 1461, 3 years before his death. The first explanation that Nicholas gives of the term “Not-other” develops the concept of God’s self-referentiality. Not-other is not other than Not-other, i.e. than itself. God is not a different thing from himself. The second explanation refers to the created

¹⁷ DDI 2.5 h 117. Hopkins, 71.

¹⁸ DDI 2.5 h 121. Hopkins, 72–73.

¹⁹ *De Visione Dei*, 7 h 26 (1985, 145).

order or the “other.” What is other is not other than other.²⁰ Both formulations illustrate that “Not-other” is, in fact, the quintessential term for theophany viewed from the side of the divine.

Inasmuch as “Not-other” describes the relationship between God and creation as one of divine self-manifestation, it establishes one side of the crucial equation that balances God’s participability and imparticipability. God is Not-other than his creation. Nicholas’s idea that the created order is a theophany, an expression of God’s very self is underlined by his favorable reference to David of Dinant’s view that “the visible world is the visible God.”²¹ It is an oft remarked fact, especially among Pseudo-Dionysian scholars,²² that without both identity and difference between God and the world, there is a danger of sliding into either dualism or monism. When God is referred to as the Not-other, the presence of God’s self in creation is maintained and, thus, the danger of the former is avoided.

This divine presence is at once the basis and motivation for the movement of the created order toward God. Accordingly... “each thing desires that which is not other than itself. But since Not-other is not other than anything, all things supremely desire it as the beginning of being, the conserving means, and the rest-giving terminal goal.”²³ The Not-other is the source, the conservation, and the goal of the other. Though it is evident from his insistence on divine immanence that Cusanus is not an absolute dualist, Nicholas has been charged with both dualism and monism.

These are serious charges because both totally monistic and absolutely dualistic systems lose the possibility of relationship between God and the world. In the case of extreme versions of the former, the two are identified and the prerequisite autonomy of relating terms is absent. In the case of the latter, the absolute separation of the two terms entails a lack of commonality, also a requirement for relationship. A metaphysical construct in which God is absolutely different from the created order sets the world against him and negates the possibility and reason for the movement of each term toward the other, thus leading, for all practical purposes, to a state of total isolation or atheism. In both cases, the traditional theological goal of discovering the manner in which God deals with the created order and the way in which creatures should react to God is undermined.

Nicholas’ concept of theophany includes the concept of a divine immanence that protects his thought against dualism. In addition, he strongly maintains divine transcendence, resulting in a sharp difference between the created and divine orders. Such difference is, of course, the key to arguing against charges of monism. There is more at stake here than mere theological speculation. The problem is that the neglect of either side of the equation, absolute identity or absolute difference,

²⁰ Note that the other is not equal to the Not-other. The two formulations are significant in their difference. Nicholas is not merely confusing terminology here, but is obeying the law of non-contradiction.

²¹ DNA 17 h 81. Hopkins, 123.

²² Nicholas himself notes Dionysius on this point. DNA 1 h 5.

²³ DNA 9 h 35. Hopkins, 73.

threatens either the self-identity of God or of creation or both. God would not be infinite and absolute, that is, would not be himself, if the world existed utterly apart from him. And the created order would not have its own being if it were absorbed into a monist system.

When God is called "Not-other," the identification between him and creation is clearly indicated. The other half of the paradox, God's absolute transcendence is indicated by Nicholas's references to the Mystical Theology of Dionysius and the fact that "all the names of God signify a participation in Him who cannot be participated in."²⁴ However, it is not as evident here as in the strongly paradoxical language and negative theology that Nicholas uses elsewhere. This does not mean, however, that the language of Not-other alone indicates monism. Rather, embedded within it is a strong defense against such an interpretation: the foundational role that Not-other plays for all of creation. Cusanus writes "Hence, it is evident to anyone that God, though unnameable, names all things; though infinite, defines all things; though limitless, delimits all things; and likewise for everything else."²⁵

God, therefore, is definitive for all of creation, that is, is fundamental to the definition and being of all things. God can also be called "the First" that is itself defined through no other but itself. God's foundational character is itself the reservoir of his absolute difference from the world. No other thing can claim such status. This is, in fact, an enduring theme in Nicholas's thought. *De visione Dei*, for instance, focuses not on achieving union with God, but on God's priority and an already realized union. Yet, no term expresses this idea as clearly as "Not-other."²⁶

Moreover, his anti-Aristotelian position means that Cusanus avoids Aquinas's method of using the philosophical tools of definition for theological purposes. He is not interested in approaching God using human categories based on analogy and a corresponding difference in the meaning of theophany for God. For Cusanus, there is a reversal, not of the importance of definition, but in the use that is made of it. Nicholas understands that definition implies causality, and he uses the metaphor of coldness and ice to describe the absolute causality of God. If coldness ceased, ice, but not water, would also cease. But if the being (of the ice and water) ceased, then ice and water would too. Still, the possibility-of-being-water would continue to exist. If that too ceased, there would yet remain intelligible nothing

²⁴ DNA 16 h 79. Hopkins, 121.

²⁵ DNA 6 h 21. Hopkins, 57.

²⁶ Nicholas has given the philosophical concern for definition a supreme theological significance. He has, in fact, turned the entire project of definition on its head. It is God who defines, not the human mind. For Plato it is impossible to overestimate the importance of definition; he attacks problems of knowledge and even ethics by seeking definitions of terms. While Nicholas follows Plato (and later Neoplatonists) by saying that the divine is the most real or is truly real, he differs from him in an important way. Unlike Platonic essentialism, which sees definitions as characterizing the Forms, for Nicholas, the ultimate Form or God cannot be described, but instead itself does the defining. And though Cusanus, like Aristotle, attempts definition by exploring causality, it is not a causality that makes use of substantial forms.

which would presumably contain the possibility of other things creatable by Omnipotence.

However, if Not-other ceased, all the things it precedes would immediately cease. And so, not only would the actuality and the possibility of the beings which Not-other precedes cease, but so also would the not-being and the nothing of these beings.²⁷

The term “Not-other” illustrates both the absoluteness of divine causation and what one could call its “intimacy.” God is not the cause merely of the actual being of things, nor is he merely an efficient cause. Rather, he underlies the very possibility of all things including nothingness. Both facts point toward the sacredness of creation.

A correlative implication of theophany is God’s ontological priority. God’s self-manifesting presence in creation results in a unique understanding of the traditional notion of God’s infinity. Despite Nicholas of Cusa’s insistence on God’s immanence, the Christian understanding of God is not threatened. What has traditionally been called God’s transcendence or infinity is refined to the point where immanence and manifestation in particularity do not undermine the original intent of the theological construct.

This is illustrated by a further exploration of the concept of the Not-other. In Not-other “we see clearly how it is that in Not-Other all things are Not-other antecedently [to being themselves] and how it is that in all things Not-other is all things.”²⁸ The divine presence to and in the created order is so intense that it is an identity: “in all things Not-other *is* all things.” Nevertheless, this intimacy is founded upon the priority of the divine because in Not-other, before being themselves, all existing and nonexisting things are Not-other. Nicholas clarifies his point by comparing the Not-other to the ratio or “Constituting Ground” of all things.

Through this Constituting ground the sky is constituted as the sky; and in the sky this Constituting ground is the sky. Therefore, it is not the case that the perceptible sky (1) is from an other that which it is or (2) is anything other than the sky.²⁹

Divine priority does not suggest, however, that God can be known apart from the created order. Cusanus is in no way leading up to a secret gnosis or to a kind of decreation, a path to God that leaves the universe completely behind. It is precisely the presence of the Not-other in creation, the presence entailed by theophany, that illuminates this other aspect of the divine: the fact that God manifests. The character of Ferdinand³⁰ observes that “the Creative Will, which is Not-other, is desired by all things and is called Goodness.”³¹ Despite the fact that God transcends the world and that understanding him is a process of learned ignorance, divine manifestation is an

²⁷ DNA 7 h 23. Hopkins, 59–60.

²⁸ DNA 6 h 22. Hopkins, 57.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ One of Nicholas of Cusa’s three interlocutors in *De Non-aliud*, Ferdinand Matim of Portugal was Nicholas’ physician.

³¹ DNA 9 h 35. Hopkins, 73.

incontrovertible and irreversible fact. There is no going behind it to understand God, and even the intellectual darkness that is brought by learned ignorance is not final. The foundational role of the Not-other for the created order means that negative theology does not triumph.

Because Cusanus does not see creation as a hierarchy distinct from God, using objects and concepts from the finite universe to attempt analogically to reach a knowledge of the infinite God is useless. If we do not recognize that theophany is the primary disclosure of God, we try to measure the infinite with the finite. (Of course, there is a secondary kind of analogy present in the cognitive process that Nicholas calls "conjecture.")³² It is clear that Cusanus's apophatic approach is based on his theology of mystical causality and divine presence. God simply cannot be analogized in a proportional manner. Creation has only derived being and is nothing in itself, because when God is removed, nothing remains. There is nothing in the created order that can provide a foothold for an analogical approach to God. There is nothing that exists alongside of God and to which he can be compared.³³

God's infinity thus abolishes the possibility of attributing human characteristics to him, even if they are infinitely described. For instance, one cannot say that because humans possess rationality, God must possess infinite rationality. This absence of analogy is also an absence of the traditional hierarchy of being. While it still may be argued that Cusanus saw varying degrees of development in the universe, human beings, for example, as more developed than lions or stones, his model of God as the Not-other reemphasizes God's infinity, absoluteness, manifestation, and mystical presence to all things.

Nicholas cites Plato's Forms (although not their multiplicity) as parallel to the way in which the Not-other grounds the created order. This similarity will later even

³² The human mind is like God, the Creator of the world, in the way that it constructs the conjectural world. But this analogy is an analogy of proportionality or relation, not a direct analogy of proportion. God is not directly compared to humanity; rather his relationship to Creation is compared to humanity's relationship to the conceptual world. No knowledge, therefore, is gained about God's attributes, but only about his relations. Moreover, this particular analogy is itself dependent on an original human ignorance since the human mind can only construct what is not already there for it to discover. Whereas direct analogy depends on what one already *knows*, the analogy between the creative mind and the Creator God admits that the mind does *not* know any given concepts and so must create them for itself.

³³ In *De visione Dei* 13 h 55–56, (Hopkins,183) Nicholas addresses God:

You, then, O God, are the Oppositeness of Opposites, because you are infinite. And because you are infinite, you are Infinity. In Infinity the oppositeness of opposites is present without oppositeness. Lord my God, Strength of the frail, I see that You are Infinity itself. And so, there is not anything that is other than You or different from You or opposed to You. For Absolute Infinity includes and encompasses all things.... Therefore, Infinity exists and enfolds all things; and no thing can exist outside it.

Thus, the most basic requirement for analogy, opposition or distinction between two things, is removed by God's absoluteness, including both his absolute identity and his absolute difference from the created order.

lead him to speculate that Plato attained knowledge of things through revelation.³⁴ The fact that Nicholas's understanding of Form or Measure was indeed Platonic and not Aristotelian is important because of its implications for the ontology of created things.³⁵ If Nicholas is indicating forms that can be abstracted from things rather than a complex vision that comprises the paradox of divine distance from and divine presence in the world, then there is nothing unique about his vision. Indeed, some thinkers like Rudolph Haubst and John L. Longeway have attributed a Thomistic analogy of being to Cusanus due to an illegitimate imputation of substantial form to Cusanus. Haubst believes that Nicholas' notion of conjecture can be identified with the scholastic *analogia entis*,³⁶ while Longeway agrees, arguing that Cusanus only denied epistemological analogy and not metaphysical analogy.³⁷ Although he sometimes uses the language of formal causality, it is evident that he is far from the Thomistic analogy which these thinkers attribute to him.³⁸

³⁴ "Now what is posterior exists by means of participation in what is prior. Hence, what is the first (by participation in the first all things are what they are) is seen prior to intellect; for it is not at all the case that all things participate in intellect. Therefore, intellect does not attain to 'what is earlier or older than intellect itself'—to use his [Proclus'] words. Wherefore, I think that Plato mentally viewed the substance, or the beginning (*principium*), of things by way of revelation--in the manner in which the Apostle tells the Romans that God has revealed Himself to them." *DNA* 20 h 92. Hopkins, 135.

³⁵ He did, however, adhere to the nominalist position that universals exist only in the mind. *Idiota de mente* XI.

³⁶ Analogy of being.

³⁷ See Haubst (1991), as well as Longeway (1967–1968). Also key to a refutation of the idea that Nicholas accepted the possibility of metaphysical but not epistemological analogy between God and creation is his distinction between enfolding and unfolding.

³⁸ In *De Possest* the question of formal causality arises immediately. The dialogue begins by attempting to unravel the meaning of Paul's statement that the invisible things of God can be known in creation. Does Paul simply mean that one can move from the forms of things to their origin in God, the Beginning? Is enfolding just another version of analogy in which things are traced by their likeness back to their existence in the Creator? No, Nicholas clearly intends something very different. Completely avoiding the language of intellectual abstraction of forms, the cardinal answers by leading his questioners to an understanding of the meaning of the idea that God is actually every possible thing. It is not merely that all things exist in God, but that enfolded in God, all things are God. Since God is the life and essence of things, he can be called the Form of their forms. In fact, things can be said to exist more truly in the Form of forms than they do in themselves. But these are not the Aristotelian substantial forms of Aquinas. The fact that Nicholas is not talking about a removal of things from their contingent creaturehood or simply referring to a divine archetype can be seen by his metaphor of the line. In both cases, he emphasizes the inclusive infinity of God rather than his formal transcendence. Unlike human beings, God is possest, actualized-possibility; he *is* everything he *can be*. If a line had actualized possibility, it would extend everywhere; there would be no shape or figure that was not bounded by it since everything that it could trace, it would trace. At the same time, it would extend minimally, since it would actually fulfill the possibility that it extended nowhere. All figures, no matter how different, how great or how small, would thus be made through it and embraced by it and could be seen in it. Furthermore, according to Mahnke, Nicholas here evinces a clear difference from the Plotinian doctrine of unity in which infinite multiplicity is potentially found in infinite unity. For Cusanus, God, both potentiality and actuality, is the infinite unity that actually contains infinite multiplicity. Mahnke (1937, 86).

For instance, the text that Haubst himself uses to prove his point can also be used against him. De coniecturis links conjecture to the participation between the four unities. Just as the senses' otherness occurs in the unity of rationality, so does rationality's otherness occur in the unity of the intellect, and that of the intellect in the divine unity. But each of these unities experiences its otherness as conjecture, since it can only participate in what is a higher unity than itself and can never fully comprehend it.³⁹ Based on this passage, Haubst argues that Cusanus can be translated into scholastic terminology to the effect that human knowledge is always only in an analogy of proportion or participation to reality.⁴⁰

Haubst is correct that there is a second order analogy specifically cited by Cusanus in the text. Just as God has created the universe of real things (realia), the human mind is the creative source of the world of rationality (rationalia). But the kind of relational analogy found in De coniecturis never approaches the direct analogy of the scholastic analogy of being. Even in combination with the citations of De venatione sapientiae that use the term "analogy," and the references to Cusanus' fondness for mathematical terminology in De docta ignorantia and elsewhere, Haubst's case is weak. The kind of parts-to-whole analogy mentioned in the former is not an example of analogia entis; nor can Cusanus' mathematical metaphors, predicated upon ignorance rather than likeness, be interpreted as the proportion between copy and original as Haubst supposes.

Finally, it makes much more sense to answer the objection "warum Cusanus das Wort analogia kaum gebraucht"⁴¹ by taking Nicholas' own statements at face value than to hypothesize about his desire to avoid controversy. Given the daring nature of some of his theological language, it hardly seems likely that he would shy away from borrowing accepted scholastic language or that such usage would be the focus of controversy. It is his unscholastic position, including his notions about the imprecision of finite knowledge and his positing of extreme immanence that aroused the ire of fellow theologians like John Wenck, not his use of traditional theological terminology.

This is not to say, however, that Cusanus' avoidance of analogical language is the result of an inherent monism in his thought. While Rudolph Haubst outlines a Seinsmetaphysik that admits analogy, Joseph Koch finds both a Seinsmetaphysik, in De docta ignorantia, and an Einheitsmetaphysik, in De coniecturis. The latter denies analogy on the basis of the ultimate unity of all things and the impossibility of taking the step that precedes analogy, i.e. differentiation. Nicholas, however, does not commit himself to either metaphysical schema. From the side of God, Nicholas clearly avoids monism by his insistence on divine autonomy. From the side of creation, monism is denied as Nicholas focuses on the break between the created and divine orders that engenders negative theology.

³⁹ *De coniecturis I h 13 (2001)*.

⁴⁰ Haubst. *Streifzuege*, 237.

⁴¹ Haubst. *Streifzuege*, 240.

Despite Cusanus's emphasis on divine inclusivity and immanence, a Neoplatonic influence, he did not succumb to the Neoplatonic emanationism that would deny reality to the biophysical world. Nicholas replaced the Neoplatonic opposition between the One and nothingness and the classical celestial-terrestrial difference with the Creator-creation distinction in a traditionally Christian move.

Nicholas's denial of levels of hierarchy progressively more distant from the one is a crucial step in his alteration of Neoplatonic emanation. The elements are just as intermingled in the celestial realm as they are in the terrestrial, making the celestial no more a pure emanation from the One than its earthly counterpart. In fact, the created order in its entirety is God unfolded, though contingent, and unnecessary to him. Though the world has no being apart from God, not-being is itself comprehended by God. The enfolding of God is to be understood in such a way that all opposites are reconciled, including that of being and not-being.⁴² To Cusanus, "nothing" is that which has no being, i.e. not-being. Whatever lacks actual being has at least the possibility of being. Even absolute nothingness cannot escape being encompassed by God or absolute possibility.

The coincidence of the opposites of actuality and possibility in God means that not even that which has no being is distinct from the infinity of God. When things are brought from not-being into being they move from a state of possibility into a state of actuality through divine Power. But since God is absolute possibility, all things, even not-being itself, exist in God and, in God, are God. The example of the authorship of a book helps clarify Nicholas' idea.⁴³ A book's author has both the active ability to write it and the passive ability of not writing it. His ability to write the book thus comprises the not-being of the book because its existence or non-existence is in his power. In the same way, nothingness and all things that come from nothingness are enfolded in the possibility that is God. Divine freedom is indicated in a manner different from the Biblical creation ex nihilo. The fact that the distinction lies between God and creation, rather than between actuality and possibility, means that God is absolutely free. Since not-being or possibility is encompassed by, rather than opposed to God, God is not bound by a necessary emanation into nothingness.

Theophany, however, is not a limited, "momentary" occurrence, that leaves the Absolute and the created orders isolated and autonomous. Rather, it is a lasting theophany, a presence that has consequences for both divine and created ontology. The link between the two is the second person of the Trinity, the divine Word.

⁴² See *De Possest* h 6. Hopkins, 916–917: [Absolute possibility] is not able to exist prior to actuality—unlike the case where we say that some particular possibility precedes its actualization. For how would [absolute possibility] have become actual except through actuality? For if the possibility-of-being-made itself actually exist, it would actually exist before it actually existed. Therefore, absolute possibility, about which we are speaking and through which those things that actually exist are able actually to exist, does not precede actuality. Nor does it succeed actuality; for how would actuality be able to exist if possibility did not exist? Therefore, absolute possibility, actuality, and the union of the two are coeternal. They are not more than one eternal thing; rather, they are eternal in such way that they are Eternity itself.

⁴³ DP 29. Hopkins, 929.

Intrinsic to God "in himself" is the outward movement of the Incarnation. Although Cusanus primarily discusses Christology in terms of theosis (indeed in De filiatione Dei⁴⁴ he defines filiatione as such), his understanding of theophany is thoroughly Christological in its own right.

Cusanus begins his earliest Christological text, the third book of De docta ignorantia by a rehearsal of the nature of contracted, that is, multiple and embodied, things. By virtue of its particularity, "no thing coincides with another," nor can any contracted thing "participate precisely in the degree of contraction of another thing."⁴⁵ No contracted thing can be either the maximum, the minimum, or the limit of either its genus or species because before it reaches that point, "it is changed into another species."⁴⁶ Cusanus is arguing for the impossibility for any particular created thing to be the perfection or summit of its species and the total incommensurability between God as Maximum and the created order.⁴⁷ There is always the possibility for higher and lower, greater and less, among contracted things.

Nevertheless, he then explores the possibility of a maximum contractum, that, as "God and creature would be both absolute and contracted, by virtue of a contraction which would be able to exist in itself only if it existed in Absolute Maximality."⁴⁸ Such a thing would share the divine characteristics of being "actually all the things which are able to be in that genus or species"⁴⁹ and would in itself, by virtue of a "hypostatic union" join God and all things. It would be neither a commingling nor a composition of God and creature, nor would either divinity or contraction vanish into the other.

Still speaking hypothetically, Cusanus explores the nature of the contracted maximum. His Christology will rest on the dual notion that the universe is the concrete maximum and that human beings are the middle term of that creation. If God chooses to unite Himself with an individual of a species, that individual would exist as the contracted maximum individual and "such an individual thing would have to be the fullness of that genus and species."⁵⁰ Humanity contains both a lower nature (sensible nature) and a higher nature (intelligence). Nicholas writes "Now human nature is that nature which, though created a little lower than the angels, is elevated above all the other works of God; it enfolds intellectual and sensible nature and encloses all things within itself, so that the ancients were right in calling it a microcosm."⁵¹ Thus, divine union with humanity would infuse the entire created order with absolute value, not merely human beings. Since human nature is representative of the larger world (a microcosm), it is privileged only insofar as it fulfills the role

⁴⁴ *De filiatione Dei* (1994).

⁴⁵ *DDI* III 1 h 183. Hopkins, 112. *DDI* III 1 h 187, Hopkins, 114.

⁴⁶ Maximum and minimum are taken from the language of fourteenth century physics.

⁴⁷ Note that this is in contrast to the universe as a whole, which he describes as a "contracted maximum."

⁴⁸ *DDI* III, 2 h 192. Hopkins, 116–117.

⁴⁹ *DDI* III, 2 h 190. Hopkins, 116.

⁵⁰ *DDI* III, 2 h 191. Hopkins, 116.

⁵¹ *DDI* III, 3 h 198. Hopkins, 119.

of extending the incarnation to all things. Nicholas' discussion of microcosm here, along with his view of a united cosmos in *De Docta Ignorantia* are essential for avoiding the fallacy of locating divine presence in human beings alone. While Nicholas of Cusa does elaborate on the uniqueness of human rationality in knowing God, he nowhere suggests that this facility restricts the mystical presence to rational creatures. Humanity does not exist as an abstraction, but only in concrete form. It would thus be necessary for a real human being to rise up to God and for God to lower himself to the human form. If mankind is a microcosm of the created universe, then the maximum contractum would be the perfect microcosm.

The contracted maximum would be located squarely within the principle of divine theophany:

But it is qua Equality-of-being-all-things that God is Creator of the universe, since the universe was created in accordance with Him. Therefore, supreme and maximum Equality-of-being-all-things-absolutely would be that to which the nature of humanity would be united so that through the assumed humanity God Himself would, in the humanity, be all things contractedly, just as he is the Equality of all things absolutely.⁵²

Through the contracted maximum, God's immanence would be given a contracted mode in addition to its absolute mode. Moreover, it is the divine Word, the Equality of being, that is the creative principle of God and this principle, or God the Son, exists prior, not temporally, but ontologically,⁵³ to God-and-man, or the incarnation. Thus, there is a creative movement within the Godhead that is completely apart from creation itself. And here Nicholas has switched from the hypothetical to the assertive: this contracted maximum individual is Jesus Christ. Theophany as incarnation means that God is fundamentally creative and conciliatory. Consequently, ecology is fundamentally incarnational.

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Kant's Moral Panentheism

Stephen Palmquist

What Kind of Being is Kant's God?

In the two and a third centuries since Immanuel Kant published his Critique of Pure Reason (1781), many scholars have treated the phrase ‘Kantian theology’ almost as an oxymoron. Those who have taken seriously the many claims Kant makes about God have not been able to agree on what kind of theology Kant defends. Many have viewed him as a deist,¹ even though Kant seems to regard himself as a theist. For example, in defining a deist as one who “believes in a God” and a theist as one who believes “in a living God,” he appears to be identifying himself more with the latter than the former.²

If we take into account some of the theories Kant defends in his 1793 work, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*,³ we must admit that if Kant was a

¹ Perhaps the best known recent example of this position is Allen Wood’s “Kant’s Deism”, in P.J. Rossi and M. Wreen (eds.), *Kant’s Philosophy of Religion Re-Considered* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 1–21. For an argument against this way of reading Kant, see Christopher McCammon, “Overcoming Deism: Hope Incarnate in Kant’s Rational Religion”, in Chris L. Firestone and Stephen R. Palmquist (eds.), *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 79–89.

² See *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (Edinburgh: Macmillan, 1929), p. 661; hereafter abbreviated CPR. All references cite the pagination of the second (‘B’) edition, as provided in the margins by both Kemp Smith and the editors of the Berlin Academy Edition. See note 12, below, for a brief discussion of this passage.

³ This is my preferred translation of the title of Kant’s *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*; hereafter abbreviated *Religion*. The use of “bounds” for *Grenzen* and “bare” for *blossen* can effectively counter the tendency to view Kant merely as an ethical reductionist. See Section 1 of my article, “Does Kant Reduce Religion to Morality?”, *Kant-Studien* 83:2 (1992), pp. 129–148, revised and reprinted as Chapter VI in *Kant’s Critical Religion: Volume Two of Kant’s System of Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); hereafter abbreviated KCR.

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theist, he certainly did not wear this label in any traditional sense. For as is well known, Kant shied away from using the name of Jesus in his published writings; he rarely if ever joined organized religious services in his mature adult years (though commentators who discuss this point rarely acknowledge that Kant was raised as a traditional Pietist, that at university he majored in theology not philosophy, and that in his younger adult years he sometimes preached in a country church near Königberg⁴); and he tends to reinterpret traditional religious doctrines by giving them highly refined, moral meanings. While readers of Kant's *Religion* have traditionally taken him to be reducing religion to morality, as if religion itself could simply be replaced by morally good behavior, more recent interpreters have demonstrated that Kant's strategy was not at all eliminative. That is, while he often did argue that the meaning of religious doctrines must be moral at their core, he never argued that human beings can succeed in being moral enough to do away with any need for religion (see note 3). Whether or not Kant thought of himself as a theist, the question remains: what theological label best describes his position?

Throughout most of the twentieth century, interpreters who granted that the principles of Critical philosophy do allow Kant to have a theology tended to regard Kant's God as, above all, an abstract, philosophical God.⁵ While Kant undoubtedly wrote primarily for philosophers and therefore adopted the language of philosophy when discussing theological and religious issues, this does not mean the God in whom Kant believed and belief in whom his writings attempt to justify and encourage, was merely a 'philosopher's God.' That the abstract nature of Kant's argumentation has prompted interpreters so often to regard him as either a deist or a closet atheist⁶ should not prevent us from taking seriously his own declared intentions: as we shall see in Section II, he attacked this philosophical God in the first *Critique* in order to make room for the God of genuine religious faith in his subsequent writings (see CPR, xxx–xxxi). For two centuries the bulk of interpreters mistakenly thought Kant was slaying God (see note 30, below) because the limits of knowledge he identifies in the first *Critique* do slay any conception of God based solely on the kind of pure, logical argumentation that philosophers often take as their primary task.

⁴These and other relevant facts about Kant's personal faith can be gleaned from any good biography, including the excellent effort by Manfred Kuehn, in his book, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a critical assessment of his account of Kant's life, with special emphasis on his rather skewed interpretation of Kant's personal faith (or alleged lack thereof), see my review of Kuehn's book, in *Metapsychology* 5, Issue 41 (October 2001); online version at: http://metapsychology.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=de&id=722/.

⁵For a recent example of this tendency by a seasoned philosopher who rejects more recent trends in Kant scholarship, insisting the strictures of the first *Critique* simply disallow any meaningful theological affirmations (especially those involving any personal God), see Keith E. Yandell, "Who Is the True Kant?", *Philosophia Christi* 9.1 (2007), pp. 81–97.

⁶Kuehn's biography (see note 4, above) treats Kant this way, as do a number of other Kantians who would rather read Kant as conforming to their own, anti-religious preferences. For a thoroughgoing refutation of this option, see John E. Hare, "Kant on the Rational Instability of Atheism", in *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, op cit., pp. 62–78.

The central misconception has been that in slaying the God of the philosophers Kant was promoting an anti-religious secularism driven by the intellectual elite, when in fact he was awakening philosophers to a view of God as necessarily available to every human person – or at least, to every rational human person. The latter interpretation raises quite a new question. If Kant was not defending belief in a remote, deistic God, nor encouraging us to give up all religious belief in favor of an enlightened humanism, then what kind of God did Kant believe in? In my book, KCR, I attempt to synthesize the various options by portraying Kant as a “Critical mystic”⁷ – an option that has not received much serious attention up to now. In what follows I shall advance a position that is not so much an alternative to the others as an attempt to draw many loose strings together in one all-encompassing model of how Kant believed we should think of God.

Kant's model of God was so new, so forward-looking, so deeply ingrained in his thinking about a wide range of other philosophical topics that he never thought of giving it a distinctive name to set it apart from past approaches to theology. As such, we should not be surprised if someone writing in the period immediately following Kant and directly influenced by Critical philosophy were to have come up with a term that can be read back into Kant's theology as a good ‘fit.’ My claim here is that Kant's philosophy is best viewed as presenting a special, morally-focused version of what has come to be called ‘panentheism.’ This apparently outrageous suggestion becomes more plausible once we recall that the term ‘panentheism’ was first coined in 1828 by a post-Kantian German philosopher with a mystical bent, Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781–1832). Born in May of 1781, when Kant was busy delivering pages of the first *Critique* to the printer, Krause was a schoolboy when Kantian philosophy enjoyed its heyday in Germany. He then studied under Fichte and Hegel and later was one of Schopenhauer's teachers.⁸ Like so many others during this period of German history, Krause claimed his philosophical system represented “the true Kantian position.”⁹ Fortunately, we need not evaluate this rather questionable claim, nor even describe or assess how and to what extent Kant influenced Krause's development, in order to explore the possibility that Kant's

⁷ See Part Four of KCR. By “Critical mysticism” I do not mean that Kant explicitly accepted ‘mystical’ as a label for his own world view. Rather, I argue first that Kant's own understanding of the word ‘mysticism’ was rather narrow (see notes 22, 31 and 33, below), and second, that a broader understanding of the word as it is used in the writings of mystics shows it to have many resonances with Kant's own philosophical and theological disposition.

⁸ For a brief introduction, see Arnulf Zweig, “Krause, Karl Christian Friedrich”, in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), pp. 363–365, and the Encyclopedia of Britannica article (accessed 6 September 2007) at <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9046217/Karl-Christian-Friedrich-Krause>. While he remained an obscure and largely neglected figure in Germany and throughout most of the world, Krause enjoyed a generation of popular (almost cult-like) influence in Spain. See Neil McInnes, “Spanish Philosophy”, Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), p. 514.

⁹ Zweig, op cit., p. 363.

theological position is best described as a form of panentheism. For in defending the latter claim, I am not assuming that Krause's own, rather peculiar and highly obscure version of panentheism¹⁰ was a faithful development of Kant's own thinking.

For philosophers and theologians who use the term, panentheism typically refers to a synthesis between traditional theism and pantheism, whereby the whole world (and everything in it) is believed to be in God, though God transcends the boundaries of the natural world and is more than nature.¹¹ Krause's special term, like the label "Critical mysticism," was not available to Kant, so we will never find a text where Kant explicitly affirms or denies being a panentheist. However, this does not prevent us from recognizing a close fit between his ideas and this theological model, provided we know where to look and how to interpret his key terms.

My argument will proceed in three steps: two premises and a conclusion. In Section II I shall defend the premise that Kant's God is (and must be) moral. In Section III I shall then demonstrate that Kant conceives of the whole physical world as existing within a larger, moral reality that permeates the physical world yet goes beyond it. Finally, Section IV will conclude that 'panentheism' describes this theological model in a way that explains why Kant has been viewed as an atheist, a deist, a theist and even a mystic.

Kant's God is Moral

The theological implications of Kant's philosophy have so often and so badly been misunderstood throughout over two centuries of interpretation mainly because the theology he presents in his most influential work, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), is essentially negative. After defining strict limits on what can properly be regarded as knowledge, Kant denies that theoretical (or logic-based) arguments can be used to prove God's existence. He seems prepared to think of God as

¹⁰ As Zweig explains (op cit., p. 363), Krause developed a tortuously complex vocabulary with many compound German terms that were newly invented to serve Krause's mystical purposes. The fact that 'panentheism' was simply one of Krause's many neologisms may explain why the term was virtually ignored by English-speaking philosophers until it became popularized by Wolfhart Pannenberg and others in the last quarter of the twentieth century. That it was an almost unknown term before that point is evidenced by the fact that *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published in 1967, has no entry for 'panentheism' and lists only three brief mentions in the Index, including just one in the article on Krause himself.

¹¹ A brief look of some of the more than 136,000 web sites listed on Google (November 2012) as relating to panentheism reveals the wide variety of ways this term is now used. Many apply it to theologians or writers much earlier than Kant, including in some cases the biblical writers themselves. The current essay, however, is in no sense a review of the history of panentheism. My concern is only with the much narrower question of whether or not this label can describe Kantian theology. At this point in my argument all I am claiming is that the person who first used this term was more deeply influenced by Kant than by any other single philosopher.

“living,” in the sense of being able to influence or relate in some manner to other rational (or “intelligible”) beings.¹² Only near the end of the book, and without sufficient justification, do we read Kant’s unambiguous confession that he believes in God. He there attributes his belief to requirements that arise out of our moral nature – a topic he never thoroughly discusses in the first *Critique*. At just the point where many readers are wondering whether Kant’s God is any more than an idea generated by human reason, he explicitly confesses that he must believe in God and a future life in order to prevent himself from “becoming abhorrent in my own eyes.”¹³

In the second *Critique* (1788) Kant develops this claim in more detail, though only near the end of the book, where he explains why we should believe in God despite our inability to prove God’s existence theoretically: we must “postulate” the existence of a real God to satisfy the requirements of morality, as established by practical reason.¹⁴

Kant uses this moral postulate to argue that we must view God as an actual being, not merely an abstract idea of reason. Until the last few decades, many interpreters failed to realize how important Kant’s theory of the primacy of practical reason¹⁵ is to a proper understanding of Kantian theology. Even though the first *Critique* is far longer and apparently more important than the second *Critique*, the latter shows us, in Kant’s view, the true essence of what human reason actually is. Reason itself is the power of acting and choosing how to act; as such, it is part and parcel of what Kant calls the “noumenal realm.” That we humans have the ability to apply our reason to objects that present themselves to our sensations, thus producing scientific knowledge, is an epiphenomenon of reason’s core nature and purpose. Once we understand this, the claim that practical reason requires us to posit a real God, that the meaning of

¹² In an above-mentioned passage of the first *Critique* (see note 2) Kant distinguishes between deists, who uphold an abstract, theoretical belief in “a God,” conceived as the “supreme cause” of the universe, and theists, who believe “in a living God,” conceived as a “supreme intelligence” (CPR, p. 661). Whereas theism is the view that God exists and has an ongoing relationship with the world (i.e., God is “living”), deism is the view that God exists but remains separate from the world (i.e., God is “dead,” at least as far as the day-to-day lives of human beings are concerned).

¹³ CPR, p. 856. The paragraph is worth quoting in full: “It is quite otherwise with moral belief. For here it is absolutely necessary that something must happen, namely, that I must in all points conform to the moral law. The end is here irrefragably established, and according to such insight as I can have, there is only one possible condition under which this end can connect with all other ends, and thereby have practical validity, namely, that there be a God and a future world. I also know with complete certainty that no one can be acquainted with any other conditions which lead to the same unity of ends under the moral law. Since, therefore, the moral precept is at the same time my maxim (reason prescribing that it should be so), I inevitably believe in the existence of God and in a future life, and I am certain that nothing can shake this belief, since my moral principles would thereby be themselves overthrown, and I cannot disclaim them without becoming abhorrent in my own eyes.”

¹⁴ *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1956), pp. 122–132; hereafter abbreviated CPPrR. All references cite the pagination in volume 4 of the Berlin Academy Edition.

¹⁵ CPPrR, pp. 119–121.

human life would disintegrate if we refuse to undertake such a step of faith, becomes far weightier. That God's reality is confirmed only in the moral-practical realm, not in the scientific-theoretical realm, is a direct outcome of Kant's view that phenomenal reality arises out of a narrower, restricted application of reason than the wider, noumenal reality – a distinction we shall examine in more detail in Section III.

That Kant's God is and must be a moral being can be established without providing a complete explanation of all this claim means to Kant. Here, it will suffice to mention briefly a few key examples of how the primacy of practical reason gives Kantian theology an exclusively moral focus. First, when Kant talks about God's nature he often expresses it in the form of a moral Trinity. Human beings are capable of experiencing God, according to Kant, primarily in three ways, all of them moral: as a righteous Lawgiver, benevolent Ruler, and just Judge.¹⁶ Even though theoretical reason leaves us wholly ignorant on the question of whether God exists as a ‘part’ of nature, practical reason assures us that the nature of the God we must postulate, and in whom we are naturally driven to believe, has these three characteristics. Conceived in this threefold manner, God becomes the guarantor of all the highest and most important concepts in Kant's moral philosophy: we are responsible to bring about the “kingdom of ends” through our commitment to follow the moral law, yet we can conceive of the possibility of success only by assuming a moral God permeates the whole human world.¹⁷ In order seriously to contemplate the possibility that the highest good, the pinnacle of Kant's entire moral system, might become real for us human beings, we must postulate the reality of this moral governor of the human world.

As we shall see in the next section, Kant consistently portrays morality as the key to the meaning of human life throughout the rest of his philosophical System. In the third *Critique* (1790) morality functions as the key to understanding our experiences of beauty, sublimity and the natural purposiveness exhibited by “organisms.”¹⁸

Likewise, in *Religion* (1793) Kant argues that all doctrines and practices that are to retain meaning and power in the life of a religious person must be interpreted in terms of their moral core. This position has been discounted by many as an anti-religious reductionism, whereby Kant is taken to be arguing that only morality matters, that religion should be discarded as an irrelevant aberration (see note 3, above). But this

¹⁶ For a lengthy discussion of Kant's views on the moral nature of God, including his explanation and defense of this moral Trinity, see Chapter V of KCR.

¹⁷ Near the beginning of Part Three of *Religion*, Kant develops a unique argument to the effect that the human race as a whole has a duty to bring about an ethical community, but that we cannot conceive of the possibility of such a community existing without assuming God works together with human beings to make it real. I have examined this much-neglected argument in “Kant's Religious Argument for the Existence of God—The Ultimate Dependence of Human Destiny on Divine Assistance,” *Faith and Philosophy* 26 (January 2009), pp. 3–22.

¹⁸ Kant defines an organism (or “organized being”) as a “product of nature … in which everything is a purpose [or end] and reciprocally also a means” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), p. 376 (German pagination); hereafter CJ).

is a far cry from the way Kant actually argues. His position, rather, is that the reality of “radical evil” in human life threatens to destroy the very fabric of meaning that practical reason offers to give us, so the task of religion is to rescue morality from the debilitating effects of evil through a redeeming belief in and an empowering experience of a real God who is intimately bound up with our practical reason.

The Phenomenal World Exists in the Noumenal World

Nobody seriously denies that Kant’s God is moral; but the second premise of my argument, that the phenomenal world (i.e., the physical world of nature as we know it) exists in the noumenal world (i.e., the world of free rationality that makes us moral beings) constitutes a highly controversial claim. Kant’s phenomenal–noumenal distinction has been the source of great misunderstanding and has given rise to innumerable premature rejections of Kant’s system. Clearly understanding Kant’s intention in making this distinction is perhaps the single most important requirement for understanding the key features of his whole philosophy, including its underlying theological model. Many readers treat it as a simple dualism, not unlike Descartes’ distinction between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, or as a double aspect theory along the lines of Spinoza’s pantheistic identification of the world and God.¹⁹

Kant’s view, by contrast, was that (contra Descartes) these are two perspectives (two ways a rational being can view the world) rather than two self-subsisting substances, and that (contra Spinoza) one perspective (the noumenal) has primacy over the other (the phenomenal).²⁰ This primacy is rooted for Kant in his claim that from the standpoint of practical reason, freedom “is now confirmed by fact”²¹: namely,

¹⁹ Probably the best example of a Kant scholar of this sort is Henry Allison, who has also published extensively on Spinoza. In *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), Allison treats this and several other key distinctions (especially the empirical-transcendental distinction) as depicting two sides of the same coin, or two perspectives on one and the same reality. While I agree with Allison’s approach as far as it goes, it errs to the extent that it fails to recognize a clear hierarchy or order of priority in Kant’s mind between the different perspectives. Kant’s claim that these two senses of reality arise as a result of rational beings adopting two different perspectives does not imply (or at least, need not imply) that the two realities have an identical ontological status. See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*.

²⁰ Kant’s mature distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal realms has probably been responsible for more misunderstandings of his philosophical system than any other single theory he put forward. Anyone who takes these as referring to two separate worlds is likely to view Kant in much the way that Kant viewed Swedenborg (see below in the main text and Chapter II of KCR). But in *Kant’s System of Perspectives: An architectonic interpretation of the Critical Philosophy* (Lanham: University of America Press, 1993), especially Chapters IV and VI, I have shown that Kant intended these terms (like many of the subordinate distinctions that depend upon them) to be regarded not as names for two ontologically separate realities, but as alternate perspectives on one and the same human reality. Even the infamous ‘thing in itself’ makes sense when we view Kant’s System in this perspectival manner, for it then refers to nothing more than the world we live in, viewed as it is apart from any and all of the perspectives we adopt in coming to experience, understand and interpret it.

²¹ CPrR, p. 6.

that the noumenal is where we meet, in our own first hand experience, the reality of human freedom and the whole package of moral obligation that follows from it. That we are also phenomenal beings is a very important fact about our nature, but as already pointed out in the previous section, it is always and only of secondary relevance to Kant.

The roots of this distinction in Kant's thinking go back at least as far as his early interest in the spiritual writings of the Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg, whose influence on Kant any informed interpretation must take into account.²² For our purposes the most important of these influences is evident in Kant's claim, near the end of his early book, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Illustrated by Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766), that our moral action rather than a literal physical 'seeing' must be regarded as the true mode of interaction between the two 'realms' of human experience that Swedenborg describes. In other words, in that early work, Kant never denies the reality of a spiritual world, of which the world of our ordinary experience is a mere appearance; rather, he explicitly affirms it but argues that it must be reinterpreted in moral terms.

Kant refines this early position by defending in the first *Critique* a set of transcendental conditions that we (i.e., freely choosing, noumenal beings) impose onto the phenomenal world, conditions that constitute a 'theoretical standpoint' that guarantees science will 'see' only empirical realities that appear in spatio-temporal guise. Those who only read the first *Critique* usually fail to appreciate that Kant never says or even means to imply that the empirical objects of science are the only realities that exist. They are the only realities that exist for our theoretical knowledge – this is why the only positive role for the idea of God in science is regulative²³ – but the theoretical standpoint is not the only one we use to interpret our experience.

In the second *Critique*, as we saw in the previous section, Kant argues that the human mind is capable of interpreting the world from a wholly different, 'practical standpoint.' When we choose to impose onto our experience not the transcendental conditions of space, time and the 12 categories, but freedom and the categories of good and evil implied by the moral law, it is as if a whole new world opens up to us:

²² Kant was a late bloomer. He wrote the entirety of his great Critical philosophy and supporting writings during a 20-year period starting at age 56. His last book before writing the first *Critique* was published 15 years earlier: *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766) was a poorly received and frequently misunderstood assessment of Emanuel Swedenborg's mystical writings. What escapes the attention of many commentators on that book is that, beneath the shroud of ridicule he uses to cloak his concluding remarks (for example, comparing Swedenborg's ideas to passing gas and saying he belonged in a mental hospital), Kant seriously examines the close correspondence between Swedenborg's account of a "spiritual world" that is right here among us all the time, if we only have eyes to see, and his own belief in what he would eventually come to call the "noumenal" world in its relationship to the phenomenal world of science and everyday empirical knowledge. As I have argued in detail in Chapter II of KCR, many of the key themes and theories of Kant's mature Critical philosophy are present in this early work.

²³ In CPR's Transcendental Dialectic, Kant does argue that the ideas of reason (God, freedom and immortality) can have a positive use in science, but only when employed in a "regulative" (not a "constitutive") manner. He presents this argument in an Appendix, so he obviously did not regard it as a crucial part of his system of theoretical knowledge.

the noumenal realm of moral action. But where is this noumenal ‘world?’ Like Swedenborg’s spiritual world, it is right here among us. From the examples he gives and his concrete manner of treating real moral actions in our world of human experience, Kant makes amply clear (for those who have ears to hear!) that the phenomenal just is the noumenal, viewed from a different standpoint. That is, when we make moral choices and engage in moral actions, we do not somehow transport ourselves out of our bodies to a different place, beyond space and time. Rather, we exercise a basic capacity of human reason to interpret our spatio-temporal experience in a non-spatio-temporal way. We see ourselves as autonomous initiators of causes in nature, rather than as heteronomous receptors of natural causes. Yet when we view our physical bodies from the theoretical standpoint as we perform those very same moral actions, we find ourselves subject to the physical causation that applies to all objects in the phenomenal world.

Perhaps the best support for the second premise of my argument (i.e., the claim that Kant saw the phenomenal as existing in the noumenal and the latter as permeating every aspect of the former) comes from Kant’s third *Critique*. Without going into great detail, we may observe that the theories Kant defends in his third *Critique* make little sense apart from the assumption that my second premise is an accurate description of Kant’s intentions. How could our experience of beauty in natural objects be a “symbol of the morally good”²⁴ if the noumenal did not transcend the phenomenal yet permeate every aspect of it? The same holds for Kant’s claims about our experiences of the sublime as evidence of playful interaction between intellect and sensibility. In short, every major theory Kant defends in the third *Critique* illustrates this basic principle. That Kant had its theological implications clearly in mind is also evident from the fact that the third *Critique*’s lengthy Appendix explores how a moral theology arises out of the theories developed in that book. The overall purpose of the third *Critique* was to bridge the apparent gap between the phenomenal and the noumenal by showing how they are intimately intertwined in every aspect of human experience.²⁵

We can observe a similar tendency in Kant’s *Religion*: he presents many examples of religious beliefs and practices that illustrate how the phenomenal and noumenal realms are thoroughly interwoven in the day-to-day experience of living human beings. Perhaps the most significant of these is Kant’s discussion of the need for a change of heart – an experience of empowerment from God to become

²⁴ CJ, 353. The passage is worth quoting at length, given its emphasis on the interpenetration of the phenomenal and the noumenal: “Now I maintain that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good ... The morally good is the intelligible that taste has in view ... And because the subject has this possibility within him, while outside [him] there is also the possibility that nature will harmonize with it, judgment finds itself referred to something that is both in the subject himself and outside him, something that is neither nature nor freedom and yet is linked with the basis of freedom, the supersensible, in which the theoretical and the practical power are in an unknown manner combined and joined into a unity.”

²⁵ See, e.g., CJ, 176–179, where Kant describes the third *Critique* as “mediating” between the standpoints of the first two *Critiques*. See also *Kant’s System of Perspectives*, Chapter IX, for a thoroughgoing examination of this aspect of the third *Critique*.

good-hearted where before our ability to follow the moral law was debilitated by the corrupting influence of radical evil. Kant's insistence on good conduct as the hallmark of a true believer guards against the temptation, especially among those who lack assurance that the required change of heart has actually taken place, to let superstitious rituals and fanatical experiences replace practical belief and moral action.²⁶ Thus, for example, he says:

Finally, lest perchance for want of this assurance we compensate superstitiously, through expiations which presuppose no change of heart [*Sinnesänderung*], or fanatically, through pretended (and merely passive) inner illumination, and so forever be kept distant from the good that is grounded in activity of the self, we should acknowledge as a mark of the presence of goodness in us naught but a well-ordered conduct of life.²⁷

Throughout his writings, as here, Kant tends to associate mysticism with superstitious beliefs and fanatical practices, rejecting the latter because they inevitably block us from attaining “the good that is grounded in activity of the self.” In lifting this veil, the ‘face’ of true religion that he exposes is not stripped of all religious experience. Rather, as I have argued in Part Four of KCR, Kant prepares us for a genuine or “Critical” mysticism, whereby “the presence of goodness in us” is evidenced by “a well-ordered conduct of life.”

The good life-conduct that forms the core of Kant’s concern in *Religion* takes place in the phenomenal world, for otherwise we could not observe it and know it exists. Yet we can assess it as good only because every moral act of every rational being also exists in the noumenal world, the intelligible realm where a “supreme intelligence” (a living God)²⁸ must exist as the threefold sovereign described in the previous section. Still further evidence could be cited from Kant’s unfinished *Opus Postumum*, where he presents the concept “man” as uniting in one transcendental idea the equal and opposite ideas of “one world” and “one God,” with the former characterized by the all-pervasive reality of heat and the latter by the all-pervasive reality of obligation. But at this point, to attempt a thoroughgoing interpretation of the unorganized notes that constitute that work would be to stray too far from the central point of this essay: demonstrating that Kant’s theology can best be regarded as a form of panentheism.

²⁶ For an extended discussion of this point, see my article, “Kant’s Ethics of Grace: Perspectival Solutions to the Moral Problems with Divine Assistance,” *The Journal of Religion* 90:4 (October 2010), pp. 530–553.

²⁷ *Religion*, p. 83.

²⁸ See note 12, above. If choosing between theism and deism, most Kant-scholars would now regard Kant as a theist. See for example Fendt’s *What May I Hope?*, Hare’s *The Moral Gap*, my KCR, and a variety of other recent books and articles. For a synopsis of these and other relevant writings, see the second section of the Editors’ Introduction to *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, op cit., pp. 15–30; it provides an historical sketch demonstrating that in the past 30 years books that include lengthy interpretations of Kant’s philosophy of religion have almost exclusively adopted what the editors call the “affirmative” approach to interpreting Kant.

Panentheism as the Key to Kantian Theology

If I have accurately portrayed Kant's phenomenal–noumenal distinction as involving a hierarchy of perspectives, whereby the phenomenal exists in and is thoroughly permeated by the noumenal, then the undisputed fact that Kant regarded the noumenal as the source and grounding of our moral nature implies that Kant constructed a moral panentheism. Like Enlightenment deism, such a model views God not so much in terms of any given religious tradition but as a being who transcends the entire physical universe.²⁹ Yet like traditional theism, such a God is also “living” in the sense of being bound up with the way human beings behave.

Unlike both of these traditions, but more along the lines of atheism,³⁰ a moral panentheism acknowledges the lack of evidence we have in the phenomenal world, regarded as such, that any real God exists. Yet as in pantheism,³¹ that same physical world is regarded as an existential carrier of a mysterious divine presence mediated through a wide variety of ordinary human experiences.

Kant's emphasis on morality as the sole criterion for genuine religion will leave many traditionally religious people (many theists) feeling uneasy. Determining whether

²⁹ Almost gone are the days when Kant can be viewed even as a conventional deist: while admittedly a few older scholars (see note 1, above) still present him in this way, the vast majority of younger Kant scholars now view Kant as a theist of some sort – though exactly what sort has proved to be incredibly difficult to pin down. The aforementioned Editors' Introduction to *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (see note 28, above) concludes by pointing out four specific issues on which the recent affirmative interpreters of Kant continue to disagree.

³⁰ Also almost gone are the days when Kant can be portrayed credibly as a qualified atheist, for in place of the lop-sided emphasis once given to his first *Critique*, scholarly attention to all his writings has revealed him to be a man of deep religious faith. Not so long ago, respectable teachers, well-informed of the latest trends in scholarship, could portray Kant as the “God-slayer,” the all-destroyer of metaphysics, who may have given lip service to “moral belief” in a divine being but who never regarded belief in a real God as a viable option. Such claims were first made by Heinrich Heine in *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*, 1852(1834), tr. J. Snodgrass as *Religion and Philosophy in Germany* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959(1882)), p. 119. I respond directly to Heine's claims in Section IV.1 of KCR. The first person ever to teach me Kant presented him in just this traditional way. For an account of my response, see my article, “Immanuel Kant: A Christian Philosopher?”, *Faith and Philosophy*, 6:1 (January 1989), p. 66. Although Kant-scholars over the past 30 years have tended to reject that once common view (cf. note 28, above), some scholars do continue to defend it. See, for example, George di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind, 1774–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), who not only affirms Mendelssohn's portrayal of Kant as the “all-destroyer,” but even regards Kant as essentially an atheist (p. 203 and passim); for a reply to his approach, see my book review in *Kant-Studien* 101.1 (2010), pp. 137–141.

³¹ Whereas atheism is the belief that God does not exist (i.e., nothing is God), pantheism is the belief that God exists but only in the sense that God is identical with the physical world and/or everything in it (i.e., everything is God). Those familiar with my book, KCR, might guess I would label Kant as a pantheist, for I there depict Kant as a (somewhat reluctant) “Critical mystic.” I hope the present essay demonstrates that the latter term is more justifiable than it seems at first to be, despite Kant's frequently negative portrayals of mysticism (for examples, see KCR, pp. 393–395). Although mystics have often aligned with Kant (KCR, pp. 300–307), the term ‘panentheism’ might be even more suitable as a description of Kant's new approach to theology.

this reflects negatively on Kant or on the uneasy adherents of traditional religion is beyond the scope of this essay. For my purpose here has not been to persuade anyone to believe in Kant's moral panentheism, but only to believe that this is an accurate description, perhaps the most accurate description yet offered, for what by all accounts was a wholly new way of portraying the relationship between God, the world and mankind. A closer look at relevant texts from *Opus Postumum* would reveal that Kant was there attempting to flesh out the view he only hinted at near the end of the second *Critique*, in the famous passage where he speaks metaphorically of the hand and voice of God as manifested in the starry heavens above and the moral law within.³² At numerous points in the first and seventh fascicles, Kant refers to this very triad as the key to understanding the most significant aspect of Critical philosophy: "God, the world, and man in the world."³³ Here at the close of his life Kant appears to have been groping towards a final, all-encompassing expression of his lifelong commitment to moral panentheism. Pantheism only sees God and the world as two sides of one coin. But panentheism requires a mediating agent, and this agent, according to Kantian philosophy, is the human being as moral interpreter of the world.

No attempt to recast the whole history of Kant-interpretation could succeed in a single essay. This sketch of an argument would have to be supported by a laborious, exacting analysis of each of the texts mentioned (and numerous others) before a really persuasive conclusion could be reached. The breadth of this sketch was necessitated by the initial skepticism most theologians and philosophers of religion express at the mere conjunction of the words 'Kant' and 'panentheism' (or any other affirmative theological term). What we have seen is that Kant's corpus presents us with no shortage of passages containing statements that could hardly be taken at face value if Kant were anything but a panentheist. We can therefore appropriately close this initial defense of this position by quoting but a single example of the many passages wherein Kant describes God using language we now recognize as panentheistic. In his early (1763) book, *The Only Possible Argument for the Demonstration of the Existence of God*, Kant writes:

The sum of all these contemplations leads us to a conception of the Supreme Being which, when men made of dust venture to look beyond the curtain that conceals from created eyes the mysteries of the Inscrutable, comprehends in itself every thing possible to be thought. God is all-sufficient. What exists, whether it be possible or actual, is but something, so far as it is given by Him. A human language may let the Infinite speak to himself thus, I am from eternity to eternity, besides me there is nothing, something is but so far as it is through me. This thought, the most sublime of any is yet much neglected...³⁴

Also neglected, I suggest, has been the possibility that Kant's philosophical system presents us with a thoroughgoing, moral panentheism.

³² See CPrR, p. 161.

³³ See KCR, Section XII.1, for citations to numerous texts in *Opus Postumum* that employ this or a similar phrase.

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Only Possible Argument for the Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763), tr. John Richardson in *Essays and Treatises on Moral, Political, Religious and Various Philosophical Subjects*, vol. 2 (London: William Richardson, 1799), p. 151, first italics added; pagination refers to volume 2 of the Berlin Academy Edition. For quotations from many more passages in Kant's writings that depict a similar theological orientation, see Part Four of KCR.

Schelling's Fragile God

Klaus Ottmann

There is no other principle of explanation for the world than divine freedom.

—F.W.J. Schelling

God lets the oppositional will of the ground operate in order to foster what love unifies and subordinates to itself for the glorification of the Absolute.

—Martin Heidegger

At the time Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* first appeared in 1781, German academic philosophers were embroiled in the debate between Faith and Reason, and Kant's *Critique* was originally regarded as yet another contribution to the discussion of the latter. Not until the publication of Karl Leonhard Reinhold's *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* in 1786–1787 did the significance of Kant's *Critique* become widely noticed.

Kant explained our a priori knowledge of the phenomenal world and justified the beliefs in that which lies beyond all experience—God, freedom, and immortality—by distinguishing between a knowable phenomenal world and the things-in-themselves, which we cannot know. Understanding cannot give us a priori knowledge of the things-in-themselves, only of appearances. Reason seeks to go beyond what is sensible but stops short of the intuition of the Absolute: “All our knowledge starts with the senses, proceeds from there to understanding, and ends with reason beyond which no higher faculty is found for elaborating the matter of intuition and bringing it under the highest unity of thought.”¹

¹ Kant (1911, p. 191).

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Despite Kant's claim of having finally settled the debate between Reason and Faith with his *Critique*, the discussions were far from over. Kant's *Critique* led, on the one hand, to the metaphysical idealism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) who sought to complete the Kantian program, each on his own idealist path; and, on the other, to a “nonphilosophy” (*Nichtphilosophie*) or “unphilosophy” [*Unphilosophie*] that claimed that Kant's critical philosophy had made room for a separate Philosophy of Faith alongside the Philosophy of Reason, and was discussed most notably by Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788), Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), and Carl August Eschenmayer (1768–1852).

Schelling's path, on which he first trod alongside Fichte and by 1801 increasingly on his own, was that of a “speculative physics” or Philosophy of Nature that sought to solve the “riddle of the world” [*das Rätsel der Welt*], Leibniz's question “Why is there something rather than nothing?”²: “How is the Absolute able to come out of itself and posit a world opposite itself?”³ Schelling's path led from the Absolute to the finite natural world: “As long as we *presuppose* matter, that is, assume that it *precedes* our cognizance, it is not even possible to fully understand what we are talking about. Rather than groping blindly among incomprehensible concepts, instead let us ask what we understand and *can* understand originally. *Originally* we only understand *ourselves*, and because there are only *two* conclusions, one that makes matter the principle of spirit, and the other that makes spirit the principle of matter, for those of us seeking to understand *ourselves*, there remains only one assertion: not that spirit arises from matter but *that matter arises from spirit*.⁴ Schelling propagated an intellectual intuition that enables us to imagine the infinite or Absolute within ourselves independent of sensate perception and rational thought.

In 1799 the influential *Intelligenzblatt* of the *Erlanger Litteratur Zeitung* hailed Schelling as “one of our truly first-rate thinkers and a true universal genius” for having the “great, ingenious idea of extending transcendental idealism to a *system of the whole of knowledge*, that is, of establishing that system not only in *general* but in *deed*.” It designated Schelling alongside Kant as one of the most important philosophers of nature: “Whoever lays claim to the title of *Naturphilosoph* must study the writings of these two scholars.”⁵

² “The Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason” (1714), in *Leibniz: Selections*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1951), p. 527. See also his earlier phrasing of the question in “On the Ultimate Origin of Things” (1697): “You will never find a complete reason why there is a world at all, and why this world and not some other ... it is evident that the reason must be sought elsewhere,” in *ibid.*, pp. 345–346; Ludwig Wittgenstein's adaptation of Leibniz in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922): “The meaning of the world must lie outside the world” (6.41) and “The riddle does not exist” (6.5); and Heidegger's rephrasing of the question in “What Is Metaphysics” (1929): “Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?”.

³ Schelling (1795, p. 310).

⁴ Schelling (1796–1797, pp. 373–374).

⁵ Cited in Kant (1993, p. 275n89).

In 1804 Schelling published *Philosophy and Religion*, mainly in response to Eschenmayer's publication of *Philosophy in Its Transition to Nonphilosophy* in 1803.⁶ Eschenmayer, a philosopher as well as a physician, sought to ground the natural sciences, especially chemistry (which, still bearing the stain of alchemy, had been singled out by Kant as not yet having achieved the status of an apodictic science) in Kant's theory of dynamics by way of two originary forces—attraction and repulsion—that produce various gradations of matter or potencies. He was praised early on by Schelling for applying the Kantian principles of dynamics “in genuine philosophical spirit [*mit ächt-philosophischem Geiste*]” to empirical natural sciences.⁷

Eschenmayer, with whom Schelling maintained a lasting friendship that was uncharacteristically warm and collegial, provided Schelling's philosophical development with crucial impetus along the way. Each publication by Schelling was countered with a corresponding article or letter by Eschenmayer, who carefully dissected Schelling's theories and often pointed out inconsistencies in his arguments. The “sharp-witted” (*scharfsinnige*) Eschenmayer was Schelling's most diligent and constructive critic.

But Schelling's book also represented a new approach to the goal initially set in 1801 with his *Representation of My System of Philosophy*, the first system of philosophy he had conceived entirely on his own, independent of Fichte, after having seen “the light in philosophy,” which led him to philosophize, as it were, out of the Absolute itself: “All philosophizing begins, and has always begun, with the idea of the Absolute come alive.”⁸ In *Philosophy and Religion*, he tackled the problem of the manifestation of the finite world and human freedom by evoking Plato and Spinoza, yet by his own admission he did not reach his goal “with complete determinateness” until 1809 when he published his *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*.⁹

While Schelling's *System* of 1801 was only the first of numerous works to construct an objective idealism, the fundamentals of the *System* Schelling conceived during his *annus mirabilis* remained valid until his death. As Horst Fuhrmans writes, Fichte's work “challenged him to come into his own, to draw up *his* system, which, in all its transformations, he would never again abandon.”¹⁰ Schelling regarded his *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* as a synthesis of both his *System* and *Religion and Philosophy*; he would later write that it was in the latter work that he finally overcame the rigidity [*Starrheit*] of Fichte's philosophy.¹¹

⁶ Eschenmayer (1803).

⁷ Schelling (1797/1802, p. 313).

⁸ Schelling (2010, p. 16).

⁹ “The author has confined himself to investigations into the philosophy of nature ever since the first presentation of his system (in the *Journal of Speculative Physics*), the continuation of which was unfortunately interrupted by external circumstances until a new beginning was made in *Philosophy and Religion*—which, admittedly, remained unclear due to the fault of its presentation. Therefore, the present essay is the first in which the author puts forth his concept of the ideal part of philosophy with complete determinateness ... Up to now the author has nowhere expressed himself regarding the main points, the freedom of will, good and evil, personality, etc. (except in *Philosophy and Religion*).” Schelling (1809, pp. 333–37).

¹⁰ Schelling (1962, vol. 1, p. 231).

¹¹ Schelling (1856, p. 465n).

As Schelling explains in the preliminary remarks to *Religion and Philosophy*, a second work in the Platonic style of a philosophical conversation was to follow the publication of *Bruno or On the Divine and Natural Principle of Things*, which had appeared in 1802.¹² “External circumstances,” not further elaborated on by Schelling, prohibited the completion of said work, and in light of Eschenmayer’s publication of *Philosophy in Its Transition to Nonphilosophy* Schelling decided to use much of the same material for a new work. Because it is the only work prior to the *Philosophical Investigations* that discusses the issue of freedom of will, it is regarded as a precursor to Schelling’s 1809 magnum opus on human freedom.

With his book, Eschenmayer sought to accomplish for nonphilosophy what Fichte and Schelling did for philosophy. His criticism of Schelling boiled down to the questions of how the Absolute in Schelling’s system can come out of itself and become difference. In Eschenmayer’s view, this question cannot be answered by philosophical reflection, only by a Philosophy of Faith: “That higher act, which encompasses all but that which to include into philosophical reflection would be a fruitless effort, is *faith*, and it alone resolves the entire field of speculation in the most perfect manner by limiting volition and cognizance but is itself unlimited and will remain unlimited for eternity.”¹³

Schelling responded to Eschenmayer’s criticism in *Philosophy and Religion* by proposing a new theory, that of the falling-away [*Abfall*] of the finite world from the infinite by way of a qualitative leap: “There is no continuous transition from the Absolute to the actual; the origin of the phenomenal world is conceivable only as a complete falling-away from absoluteness by means of a leap [*Sprung*.]”¹⁴

But Eschenmayer remained unconvinced of Schelling’s new solution. He wrote to Schelling’s friend Johann Jacob Wagner: “Schelling has saved himself just as little with his idea of a falling-away (in ‘Philosophy and Religion’ 1804) as with his other attempts.”¹⁵ Eschenmayer and Schelling continued to be divided on one major point, which Eschenmayer summed up to Wagner: “Here is the point where I part with Schelling. For him God is the Absolute, for me the Absolute is the after-image [*Nachbild*] of reason, and God is beyond it.”¹⁶

For Schelling, as later for Heidegger,¹⁷ Philosophy is “onthotheology”; there is no need for a separate Philosophy of Faith¹⁸ or nonphilosophy in order to discuss the concepts of God, freedom, and immortality: “Any philosopher would be weary of

¹² Schelling (1802).

¹³ Eschenmayer (1803, par. 76).

¹⁴ Schelling (2010) (1804), p. 26.

¹⁵ Letter from Eschenmayer to J.J. Wagner, November 26, 1804, in Schelling (1962, vol. 1, p. 320n).

¹⁶ Letter from Eschenmayer to J.J. Wagner, April 5, 1805, in ibid.

¹⁷ “Philosophy’s questioning is always and in itself both onto-logical and theological in the very broad sense. Philosophy is *Ontotheology* ... Schelling’s treatise is thus one of the most profound works of philosophy because it is in a unique sense ontological and theological *at the same time*.” Heidegger (1985, p. 51).

¹⁸ He had already written in 1801 to Fichte, in rather terse tone, that “you have been forced ... to transfer [the Absolute] into the sphere of faith, of which, in my opinion, it can be no more a question in philosophy than it is in geometry.” Letter from Schelling to J.G. Fichte, October 3, 1801, in Schelling (1962, vol. 2, pp. 348–356).

not gaining a much clearer cognition of those same subjects through knowledge and in knowledge than what emerges for Eschenmayer from faith and premonition.”¹⁹ Schelling stayed true to Kant’s spirit by rejecting the idea of a separate Philosophy of Faith. Kant had argued for just such a unity of philosophy and religion in the preface to his 1794 edition of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*: “Otherwise one would have two religions within each person, which is absurd, or one religion and one cult … both would have to be shaken up so that they become mixed together for a short period of time, after which they would separate again like oil and water, with the purely moral (the religion of reason) floating on top.”²⁰

Schelling’s *Philosophy and Religion* was written during one of the most eventful periods of his life. In June of 1803 Schelling finally married his longtime lover, Karoline Schlegel, who had received permission from Carl August, Duke of Saxe-Weimar to divorce her second husband, August Wilhelm Schlegel. At the time, Schelling, who was educated at a prestigious Protestant school, the Tübinger Stift (along with his friends Hegel and Hölderlin), was teaching philosophy at the predominantly Catholic university of Würzburg that had attracted many followers of Jacobi and Jacob Friedrich Fried, another declared enemy of Schelling. Consequently, Schelling’s philosophy became the target of incessant attacks. As Xavier Tilliette writes, “by settling in Würzburg, Schelling stirred up a hornet’s nest.”²¹

The sharp, polemic tone of *Philosophy and Religion*, especially manifest in Schelling’s preliminary remarks, was not directed at his friend Eschenmayer but at “the horde of rowdy opponents”²² led by two influential high-school teachers from Munich, Kajetan Weiller and Jacob Salat, who, according to Tilliette, “dedicated their lives to pillorying Schelling.”²³ Horst Fuhrmans describes the attacks against Schelling in 1803 as a “furious drumfire”: “In lowbrow reviews and endless polemic commentaries and publications, an assault was launched against the new ‘obscurants’ and ‘mystics,’ the ‘hierophants of the new Eleusinian mystery cults’ in order to defend against the advance or even victory of the Romantic mindset.”²⁴

Schelling’s little book on religion and philosophy itself, however, was largely ignored, as Schelling himself noted in obvious consternation in 1809. Its reputation may have become tarnished early on by Schelling’s own admission of its faulty presentation. In a letter to Eschenmayer, written shortly after he had sent him a copy of his book, Schelling provided Eschenmayer with clarifications in regard to his definition of the Absolute: “It might be necessary to improve upon my in many instances faulty expressions as far as the main idea is concerned. Would the following exposition meet with your approval?”²⁵

¹⁹ Schelling (2010) (1804), pp. 8–9.

²⁰ Kant (1982, vol. 8, 659–660).

²¹ Tilliette (2004, p. 145).

²² Schelling (2010) (1804), p. 4).

²³ Ibid., p. 144.

²⁴ Schelling (1962, p. 297).

²⁵ Letter from Schelling to Eschenmayer, July 10, 1804. In Schelling (1962, p. 321 and below, p. 60).

The cruel judgment delivered in 1887 by Heinrich Heine, who has been credited by Adorno with almost single-handedly dealing the death blow to the German Romantic soul,²⁶ did not help the stature of Schelling's book. In *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, Heine writes, "Anno 1804 God finally appeared to Herr Schelling, full-fledged, in his book entitled: *Philosophy and Religion* ... Here philosophy stops with Herr Schelling, and poetry, that is to say, folly begins."²⁷

As Mason Richey's writes so pointedly, Schelling "is the Don Quixote of nineteenth-century German philosophy; his philosophy is not beholden to a rule ... when his work succeeds it does so spectacularly, and when it fails it does so spectacularly."²⁸ Schelling's works constitute a *minor philosophy* in the sense of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's definition of a "minor literature."²⁹ But a minor literature does not come from a minor language; "it is rather that which minority constructs within a major language."³⁰ According to Deleuze and Guattari, a minor literature is "always connected to its own abolition."³¹ It is a language "affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization ... [that] turns language into something impossible."³²

Because of Schelling's determination to philosophize on the edge of the "originary abyss" (*anfängliche Ungrund*),³³ i.e., in the face of the Absolute, his philosophy is associated—almost by default—with *failure*, with its own impossibility. In wanting to complete Kant's philosophy, Schelling ended up failing philosophy altogether in an endgame of theory by repeatedly tearing down his own achievements. Just as Kafka introduced the practice of writing as failure in his story *The Penal Colony* with the metaphor of a writing-apparatus, which was designed to inscribe the judgment onto the skin of the condemned-to-death but ultimately failed, so Schelling attempted to philosophize out of the Absolute itself in spite of its impossibility.

In his study of Schelling, Slavoj Žižek describes the philosopher as "a kind of 'vanishing mediator' between the Idealism of the Absolute and post-Hegelian universe of finitude-temporality-contingency, that his thought—for a brief moment, as it were, in a flash—renders visible something that was invisible beforehand and withdrew into invisibility thereafter."³⁴

This description echoes Jean-François Lyotard's famous definition of the post-modern as that which puts forth "the Nonrepresentable in presentation itself" by not allowing the "unrepresentable to be put forward as the missing contents" while

²⁶ See Adorno (1991).

²⁷ Heine (1887, pp. 117–118).

²⁸ Schelling (2007, p. xvii).

²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari (1986).

³⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

³¹ Ibid., p. 6.

³² Ibid., p. 16.

³³ Schelling (1809, p. 408).

³⁴ Žižek (1996, p. 8).

retaining form for “solace and pleasure.”³⁵ By understanding postmodernism as a condition rather than as a historically defined period of time, as Lyotard does,³⁶ Schelling could arguably be regarded as a postmodern philosopher because he put forward the Absolute as the unthinkable, as the abyss or *Ungrund* of that prior to which we cannot think [*das Unvordenkliche*],³⁷ in philosophy itself: “In presupposing a merely mediated knowledge of the Absolute (irrespective of how the mediation occurs), the Absolute in philosophy can only appear as something that is presumed in order that it can be philosophized about.”³⁸

Rather than executing a somersault that would land him safely on the ground, with one foot on reason and the other on faith, as advocated by Jacobi with his *salto mortale* analogy,³⁹ Schelling attempts a reverse *leap* into the Absolute within philosophy in order to initiate a “reverse formation [*Zurückbildung*] of difference into oneness”⁴⁰ that is a decisive leap in the face of certain failure.

As Žižek notes, the deterritorialized philosophy of Schelling speaks with three tongues: “the language of speculative idealism; the language of anthropomorphic-mystical theosophy; the post-idealist language of contingency and finitude. The paradox, of course, is that *it was his very ‘regression’ from pure philosophical idealism to pre-modern theosophical problematic which enables him to overtake modernity itself.*”⁴¹

Schelling’s folly was his attempt at an ontotheology from the standpoint of the Absolute or God, as if written on the edge of the “originary abyss” or *Ungrund*.⁴² Leibniz’s insight that the reason for our world must lie outside our world, in an extramundane entity—the Absolute or God—led Schelling to position his philosophy on the very edge of the abyss, which Wittgenstein later would call the “mystical,” in an attempt to retrieve what is unthought and in some sense inherently unthinkable.

Schelling follows Spinoza’s path of the *amor Dei intellectualis*, which presumes that ideas are active conceptions rather than passive perceptions:

By ‘idea,’ I mean the mental conception which is formed by the mind as a thinking thing . . . I say ‘conception’ rather than perception, because the word perception seems to imply that the mind is passive with respect to the object; whereas conception seems to express an activity of the mind [*dico potius conceptum, quam perceptionem, quia perceptionis nomen indicare videtur; mentem ab obiecto pati. At conceptus actionem mentis exprimere videtur*].⁴³

³⁵ Lyotard (1984, p. 81).

³⁶ Ibid., p. 79.

³⁷ Cf. Schelling (1858, p. 347): “The existence prior to which we cannot think [*das unvordenkliche Existirende*] precedes all concepts.”

³⁸ Schelling (2010) (1804), p. 16.

³⁹ Jacobi (1785).

⁴⁰ Schelling (2010) (1804), p. 33.

⁴¹ Žižek (1996, p. 8).

⁴² “There must be an essence prior to any ground and prior to all that exists, that is, prior to any and all duality; we cannot call it by any other name than the originary ground or rather *nonground*.” SW 7, p. 406.

⁴³ *Ethica II*, d3. de Spinoza (1914, vol. 1).

Thus Spinoza's notion of ideas as mental activities was connected to his notion of free will:

Suspension of judgment is, therefore, strictly speaking, a perception, and not free will [*est igitur iudicii suspensio revera perceptio, et non libera volunta.*].⁴⁴

Spinoza calls the joy that arises from the fact that man contemplates himself and his power of action "self-contentment [*acquiescentia in se ipso*],"⁴⁵ a coming into a state of repose in relation to one's desires. He identifies man's power of action and its accompanying pleasure with the mind's highest good, with eternity of mind and love of God. In this state of contentment lies man's highest blessedness or Beatitude (*beatitudo*).

Thus in life it is before all things useful to perfect the understanding or reason, as far as we can, and in this alone man's highest happiness or blessedness [*felicitas seu beatitudo*] consists, indeed blessedness is nothing else but the contentment of spirit, which arises from the intuitive knowledge of God.⁴⁶

Spinoza's discourse on Beatitude is found in the *scholia*, the *subterranean* level of the *Ethics*. The path through the hierarchy of knowledges led by Spinoza is a *reclaiming* of beatitude—a return to the state "*before the letter*" (before language). It is the ultimate gift of the third kind of knowledge (Spinoza's *beatitudo*). This gift must be actively asserted, since religious revelation, which is passively received via miracles or signs, would constitute only inadequate knowledge. Beatitude is claimed by love, a love that is "common to all men,"¹⁵ in the act of the *amor Dei intellectualis*, the intellectual love of God, which is a *labor of love*.

Love towards an eternal and infinite thing feeds the mind wholly with joy, unmixed with any sadness. This is greatly to be desired, and sought with *all our strength* [*quod valde est desiderandum totisque viribus quærendum*].⁴⁷ In the *amor Dei intellectualis*, man's essence becomes a part of God. This enormous goal is accomplished by the simple act of man loving himself. Love is the eternal truth that motivates all ethical acts.

However, in Spinoza's mind, there is no original sin and hence no fall from paradise. In a letter to Blyenbergh Spinoza writes on sin and evil:

For my own part, I cannot admit that sin and evil have any positive existence, far less that anything can exist, or come to pass, contrary to the will of God ... I take for an illustration the design or determined will of Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. This design or determined will, considered in itself alone, includes perfection insofar as it expresses reality; hence it may be inferred that we can only concede imperfection in things, when they are viewed in relation to other things possessing more reality: thus in Adam's decision, so long as we view it by itself and do not compare it with other things more perfect or exhibiting a more perfect state, we can find no imperfection ... It follows that sin, which indicates nothing save imperfection, cannot consist of anything that expresses reality, as we see in the case of Adam's decision and its execution.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *Ethica* II, p49s.

⁴⁵ *Ethica* III, ad25.

⁴⁶ *Ethica* IV, a4.

⁴⁷ Spinoza, *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*; Spinoza (1914, vol. 1, p. 5).

⁴⁸ Spinoza, *Epistola XIX*; Spinoza (1914, vol. 3, p. 62).

It is this abnegation of sin and evil that made Spinoza's philosophy so scandalous for Hegel.⁴⁹ For Spinoza, Adam's original "sin" (his eating from the tree of knowledge) is only the first step in man's path to Beatitude. Thus his path to Beatitude is guaranteed; he cannot fail. It is essentially historical.

Schelling radically parts ways with Spinoza by placing the original sin—and thus failure—at the core of his *Philosophy of Nature* by redefining it in terms of a *Philosophy of History*. The theory of a falling-away forms the core of Schelling's argument: the original sin is not the Fall of Man but rather Creation itself, the fall of the finite world from the infinite or Absolute⁵⁰: "God is the *absolute* harmony of necessity and freedom, and this harmony cannot be revealed in individual destinies but only in history as a whole; consequently, only history as a whole is a revelation of God—and then only a progressively evolving revelation ... History is an epic composed in the mind of God. It has two main parts: one depicting mankind's egress from its center to its farthest point of displacement; the other, its return. The former is, as it were, history's *Iliad*; the latter, its *Odyssey*. In the one, the direction is centrifugal; in the other, it becomes centripetal. In this way, the great purpose of the phenomenal world reveals itself in history."⁵¹ The final cause of history is the "reconciliation of the falling-away."⁵²

Schelling's *Philosophy and Religion* is the first decisive step towards the formulation of a historicized philosophical religion that finds its completion in his philosophies of mythology and revelation of 1856–1858.

With his *Philosophy of Mythology*, which is the first philosophical investigation of mythology, Schelling emerges as a proto-structuralist who already recognized that mythology is a type of speech, a mode of signification:

One could almost say: language is only faded mythology; what mythology still preserves in living and concrete difference is preserved in language only in abstract and formal differences.⁵³

The methodology developed by Schelling in *Philosophy and Religion* and refined in his *Freiheitsschrift* represented the first step of a radical new approach in resolving the problem of the manifestation of the finite world and human freedom by asking not how Man becomes divine but how God becomes human through freedom—a freedom that is fragile as the God who is defined by it, who thus carries in Himself the possibility of nonbeing. As Sartre would later write, "it is through man that fragility comes into being."⁵⁴ It is through Schelling's ontotheology that fragility comes into the Absolute or God. It puts God on an equal footing with man.

⁴⁹ Hegel (1896, vol. III, p. 260).

⁵⁰ Schelling (2010 (1804), p. 31).

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 44.

⁵² Ibid., p. 50.

⁵³ Schelling (1856, p. 52).

⁵⁴ Sartre (1950, p. 43).

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Hegelian Panentheism

Glenn Alexander Magee

Introduction

Hegel often states that God is the true subject matter of philosophy. In his manuscript for the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1824), Hegel writes that “God is the one and only object of philosophy...” and that “philosophy is theology.”¹ In the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel states that both philosophy and religion hold that, “God and God alone is the truth.”² However, Hegel’s idea of God is radically different from traditional theological conceptions. Further, the role God plays in his philosophy is both complicated and controversial.

The traditional idea of God – found in all three of the major, monotheist theologies – is that of a being who absolutely transcends the world. He is also complete, perfect, and invulnerable. On this account, one cannot claim that God *had* to create the world, since this would place God under some sort of compulsion, but what could compel God? Further, God could not have satisfied some sort of need through creating, since a perfect being needs nothing. Indeed, according to the traditional conception, God would have lost absolutely nothing had he never created at all. This leads to some major difficulties for theology. First, the act of creation emerges as a complete mystery. The most one can do is to claim that creation was an unnecessary act of supreme generosity on God’s part – or some kind of “overflow” of divine goodness, as Neoplatonism would have it. Further, if God is absolutely invulnerable, needing nothing, then how could he be moved by prayer?

¹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (henceforth LPR), 3 vols. (1984, vol. 1, p. 84); *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* (henceforth VPR), 3 vols. (1983–1987, vol. 1, pp. 3–4).

² Hegel (1991, henceforth Geraets, p. 24). When Hegel’s numbered paragraphs are referred to, the abbreviation EL will be used. This is EL § 1.

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(He could not be, in fact.) Ultimately, this traditional conception of God is a development of ideas that can be traced all the way back to the Pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes (fl. 6th Cent. B.C.), but the major figure here is Aristotle.

The key to Hegel's new theology consists in his rejection of God's transcendence. Like Spinoza, Hegel argues that an infinite God cannot be distinct from creation, for such a distinction would limit God and cancel his infinity. However, Hegel is not driven as a result of this to simply identify God with nature, as Spinoza does. (As we will see much later, Hegel rejected the “monism” of Spinoza.) Instead, Hegel argues that God is, in effect, a “process” which unfolds itself in nature, but only reaches true realization or completion in human consciousness. Thus, Hegel's heresy does not consist solely in rejecting the transcendence of God: Hegel also argues that God “develops” over time, and through history. This puts Hegel's theology close to various mystical conceptions that have arisen in the different monotheist faiths – and simultaneously makes his relation to Christianity just as complex and problematic as that of the Christian mystics. The remainder of this essay will be devoted to exploring these ideas in greater detail. Nevertheless, it would be accurate to say that the “argument” for Hegel's theology consists in his entire philosophical system, and all the sometimes baffling twists and turns of the dialectic. Therefore, of necessity what follows is only a very brief and highly compressed account of Hegel's God.

Hegel's Developmental Conception of God

To fully understand how Hegel conceives of God we must begin with the Logic, the first major division of Hegel's philosophical system. Hegel's Logic is an extremely complex and difficult work, elaborated in two versions.³ However, we can say that it is essentially an attempt to articulate the formal structure of reality itself. Thus, the Logic can be understood as a “formal ontology” (though many Hegelians would object to this way of describing it). It is not a mere catalogue of concepts, however. Instead, the Logic is a systematic whole in which each idea is what it is in relation to all the others, and all are necessary moments (i.e., inseparable parts) of the whole itself.

In a famous passage of *The Science of Logic*, Hegel states that the Logic “is to be understood as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. This realm is truth as it is without veil and in its own absolute nature. It can therefore be said that this content is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite Spirit”⁴ What Hegel tells us, in short, is that the

³ When I am referring to the Logic as a division of the system (i.e., as a set of ideas) and not as a specific text, I capitalize but do not italicize it. Hegel elaborated his Logic in two versions. The first is a three-volume work published 1812–1816 and titled *The Science of Logic*. The second consists in the first division of Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* (1817). This is often referred to simply as the *Encyclopedia Logic*.

⁴ Hegel (1969, p. 50, 1992, pp. 33–34).

Logic gives us an account God “in himself.” This phrase is a variation on “in itself” (*an sich*), which Hegel often uses – and which is not to be confused with the similar, Kantian expression “thing in itself.” Hegel’s distinction between what is “in itself” and what is “for itself” is more or less identical to Aristotle’s distinction between potency (*dunamis*) and act (*energeia*). The “in itself” is what is merely potential, inchoate, and undeveloped. Thus, we can say that the Logic gives us an account of God in inchoate form. This is correct – so long as we keep in mind that the Logic does not describe a God that exists *temporally* prior to creation. The God described in the Logic – God as he is “in himself” – is *logically* prior to creation. This is because he is, in fact, the *idea of the world* itself. (Here, of course, Hegel is drawing on a rich tradition of philosophical, theological, and mystical ideas, and making God essentially the eternal *logos*; hence, *logic*.)

The Logic is divided into three major parts: The Doctrine of Being, Doctrine of Essence, and Doctrine of the Concept. Hegel refers to the first two divisions as “Objective Logic,” and the last as “Subjective Logic.” Still, though the categories of being and essence deal with “the Objective” they are also categories of thought, or concepts. In the Logic, in fact, the distinction between thought and being is transcended, and its concepts are simultaneously categories of thought *and* of reality. In the Doctrine of the Concept Hegel treats the nature of the concept *as such*. Thought reflects for the first time explicitly on thought itself, and all the earlier categories (of being and essence) are understood to have their significance in being comprehended by a self-aware thought. As a result, the Doctrine of the Concept is devoted to *concepts of concepts*, and culminates in what Hegel calls the Absolute Idea, a purely self-related category: the idea of idea, or concept of concept itself. In it, the distinction between subject and object has been overcome. Absolute Idea is also understood to “contain” all the preceding categories as, in effect, its definition.

Hegel describes Absolute Idea as “the Idea that thinks itself,”⁵ and he explicitly likens it to Aristotle’s concept of God: “This is the *noésis noéseós* [thought thinking itself] which was already called the highest form of the Idea by Aristotle.”⁶ The argument of the Logic establishes that Idea is the Absolute: the whole which encompasses all fundamental determinations within itself and is related to nothing else, only to itself. Furthermore, Hegel tries to demonstrate that everything is intelligible as a concretization of this Idea. Hegel believes that his Logic unveils the inner truth latent within the theology of Aristotle (and other philosophers), as well as the understanding of the ordinary person: God (or Idea) is a supreme being, everywhere yet nowhere (immanent and transcendent), from which all other things derive their being.

However, the Idea of the Logic is fundamentally limited: it still *merely idea*. As we have said, it is “God in himself,” or God implicit. As Idea it is real or objective, but only in that it is not a subjective creation of human consciousness. In the Philosophy of Nature, the second division of Hegel’s system, he argues that nature must be understood just as Idea concretely expressing or “externalizing” itself (and doing so without end). Hegel sees nature as a great chain of being, at the apex

⁵ Geraets, 303; *EL* § 236.

⁶ Geraets, 303; *EL* § 236, Addition (*Zusatz*).

of which is living things. The organism is a kind of physical approximation of Idea. It is a complex system of parts which can catalyze its own chemical and other processes without the constant intervention of external forces (i.e., it is self-related). Hegel states that “The organic being is totality as found in nature, an individuality which is for itself and which internally develops into its differences.”⁷ As a genuine whole, the elements of which can have no independent existence, organic being is a simulacrum of the internally-differentiated and self-determining Idea of the Logic.

Higher still than nature, however, is human Spirit (*Geist*). Spirit is capable of achieving consciousness of the fundamental categories of existence (revealed in the Logic), and of how they are expressed in nature, and in human nature. Human Spirit begins in nature (we are, after all, animals), but raises itself out of the merely natural through reflection on nature and on itself. The highest achievement of Spirit is self-consciousness, the supreme expression of which occurs in art, religion, and philosophy (what Hegel calls, collectively, Absolute Spirit). Spirit constitutes the true embodiment of Absolute Idea, which is, in reality, merely the *idea* of the overcoming of the subject-object distinction. In self-consciousness, this overcoming is made actual: our object is the subject, or, we can say, the subject becomes object. (Animal organisms were merely *self-related* – able, for example, to respond to threats to their survival – but not truly self-conscious.)

Now, if Absolute Idea is God *in himself*, merely inchoate, then Absolute Spirit is God *for himself*: fully realized or actualized. In short, it is only through human consciousness that God is truly born. God, for Hegel, is not really God if considered apart from creation (this is God as mere idea). God requires creation in order to enjoy full, concrete reality. In humanity, Idea truly comes to know itself through our philosophical reflection on the Logic. This is why Hegel says that in the Logic we merely have “God as he is in his eternal essence *before the creation of nature and a finite Spirit*.” Again, Hegel’s language here must be understood as figurative: he does not believe that *first* comes Idea, *then* nature, *then* Spirit. It is rather the case that Idea is eternally “embodying itself” as nature and Spirit.

Hegel objects to Christian theologians and clergy who claim that mankind cannot know God, or who brand the attempt to know God as impious. Not only is such knowledge possible, Hegel claims, it is our highest duty to obtain it. Knowing God is our highest duty because, for Hegel, God only fully comes into being in the community of worshippers. Hegel holds that “The concept of God is God’s idea, [namely,] to become and make himself objective to himself. This is contained in God as Spirit: God is essentially in his community and has a community; he is objective to himself, and is such truly only in self-consciousness [so that] God’s very own highest determination is self-consciousness.” Beforehand, God is “incomplete,” Hegel says.⁸

⁷ Hegel (1970, p. 27); Philosophy of Nature (*Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*) § 252, Addition.

⁸ LPR I, 186–187; VPR I, 96.

It is possible to express everything that has been said thus far without recourse to theological language. Many of Hegel's modern interpreters, some of whom adopt what is often called a "non-metaphysical" approach, prefer to do without talk of God. They would object to the account I have given above as sounding too "metaphysical" (and too "mystical"). Doing without all theological (and mystical) language one can simply say of the Hegelian system that the Logic constitutes a formal ontology which can be used to understand the rational order to existence. It culminates in Absolute Idea, the most adequate concrete exemplar of which is Absolute Spirit, or self-knowing humanity.

The trouble with such an account, however, is that Hegel himself employs theological language, and talks of God rather frequently in fact. Further, it is almost irresistible to employ "mystical" language in dealing with his system, since Hegel's account of the Absolute/God really does have a great deal in common with the ideas of the great mystics. (This is a subject I have covered extensively elsewhere.⁹) Hegel himself defined "mysticism" as an older term for "speculation," the very word he uses to describe his philosophy.¹⁰ Like Meister Eckhart, and many other mystics (East and West), Hegel rejects any firm distinction between the infinite and the finite, or God and the world. I alluded to Hegel's argument for this earlier: if the infinite stands opposed to (or distinguished from) the finite, then it is *limited* by the finite and cannot be genuinely infinite. Therefore, the "true infinite" for Hegel can only *contain* the finite. To put this in theological terms, God cannot be understood as entirely separate from the world – or vice versa. Instead, we must understand God as containing the world, in the sense that it is a moment or aspect of God's being.

Thus, Hegel's understanding of God has rightly been described as *panentheism*, which translates literally as all-in-God-ism: the belief that the world is within God. God is not reducible to nature, or to Spirit, for we have seen that God is also Idea, which transcends any finite being. However, nature and Spirit are, in addition to Idea, necessary moments in the being of God.

Spinoza

I referred already to Spinoza, in such a way as to suggest that Hegel's philosophy is quite different from his. Nevertheless, some readers may recognize that the argument given above regarding God's infinity is not original with Hegel: it comes right out of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Spinoza also argues that everything must exist within God, since the existence of anything outside of God would cancel his infinity. Thus, Spinoza's system can certainly also be described as panentheism. How, then, are Hegel and Spinoza really different?

⁹ See Magee (2001; revised paperback edition, 2008); and Magee (2008).

¹⁰ Geraets, 133; EL § 82, Addition.

Spinoza's philosophy was certainly important for Hegel, as well as his schoolmates Hölderlin and Schelling. Hölderlin inscribed the Greek "pantheist" motto, *hen kai pan* ("one and all" – i.e., the many is one), in Hegel's yearbook of 1791. The phrase *hen kai pan* was taken from *On the Teaching of Spinoza in Letters to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn* (1785), by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819). Jacobi reports Lessing as having said, "The orthodox concepts of the deity are no longer for me. *Hen kai pan*, I know no other." This book was mainly responsible for the Spinoza revival of the late eighteenth century, which exercised a great influence on many thinkers of the time. According to Hegel's biographer Karl Rosenkranz, Hegel, Schelling, and others at the Tübingen seminary, all read *On the Teaching of Spinoza*. Schelling in particular developed an enthusiasm for Spinoza which would last for a number of years.

Hegel's major criticisms of Spinoza are aimed at what he regards as Spinoza's monism: his claim that there is really only one substance (or being), and that everything is in this substance. On the surface, it might seem that Hegel and Spinoza agree here, but Hegel charges that Spinoza's God (or nature) is simply a "block universe" in which everything is actual at once, without any development. Hegel sees Spinoza's God/Nature as "static," while Hegel makes his God "dynamic": God unfolds himself in the world and in history (the development of human self-consciousness) through a constant process of determinate negation (dialectic). Further, in Spinoza's universe the human (what Hegel calls Spirit) is merely one finite being among others within God. Hegel, of course, claims that it is through Spirit that God is truly actualized. In the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel states that "God is certainly necessity or, as we can also say, he is the absolute matter [*Sache*], but at the same time he is the absolute *person*, too. This is the point that Spinoza never reached."¹¹ Spinoza's view is that God requires nature in order to be God. Hegel's claim is that God requires nature and Spirit, and achieves true embodiment when Spirit "returns to the source" in its understanding of the systematic structure of the Idea.

In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* of 1805, Hegel makes the following remarks about Spinoza, and strangely enough compares him unfavorably to the German mystic Jacob Boehme: "His [Spinoza's] philosophy is only fixed substance, not yet Spirit; in it we do not confront ourselves. God is not Spirit here because he is not the triune. Substance remains rigid and petrified, without Boehme's sources. The particular determinations in the form of thought-determinations are not Boehme's source-spirits which unfold in one another."¹² Hegel's claim here is that while Boehme gives a quasi-dialectical account of the attributes of God, Spinoza simply asserts that God is somehow differentiated into attributes, without giving a genuine account of that differentiation and how it unfolds.

¹¹ Geraets, 226; EL § 151, Addition.

¹² Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 3 vols. (1892, vol. 3, p. 288); not present in *Hegels Werke*, see *Sämtliche Werke* (1928, p. 377).

Philosophy and Religion

Hegel tells us that the content of both religion and philosophy is identical. Both concern themselves with God, though philosophy calls God “the Absolute.” Religion understands its subject matter in terms of images, metaphors and stories (what Hegel calls ‘picture thinking’), whereas philosophy understands God in purely conceptual, rational terms. (Nevertheless, Hegel continually slides back and forth between philosophical and theological language.)

Hegel holds that true philosophy is not antagonistic to religious belief. In fact, he argues that religion is in and of itself absolute truth. He states that “religion is precisely the true content but in the form of picture-thinking, and philosophy is not the first to offer the substantive truth. Humanity has not had to await philosophy in order to receive for the first time the consciousness or cognition of truth.”¹³ Also, in a certain way philosophy depends upon religion, because the philosopher first encounters the content of absolute truth in religion. Notoriously, Hegel claims that before the advent of Christianity philosophy could not have presented absolute truth in a fully adequate form. In a famous passage from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel remarks that “philosophy is theology, and [one’s] occupation with philosophy – or rather *in* philosophy – is of itself the service of God.”¹⁴

Still, because it is only philosophy that can understand the *meaning* of religious myth and dogma, it can also be maintained that philosophy stands on a higher level than religion. Philosophy is able to state the truth in a way religion never can, because of religion’s reliance upon picture-thinking. However, Hegel believes that human beings need to encounter the truth in “sensuous form” as well, not just through philosophy alone. Therefore, religion is intrinsically valuable and necessary. Religious belief and religious practice will never be displaced by philosophy, and will remain constants of human existence.

All religions approach the truth, but Hegel believes that some come closer to finding it than others do. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel presents a kind of “natural history” of religions past and present, which he revised a great deal over the years. This material is grouped by Hegel under the heading “Determinate Religion” (i.e., determinate forms taken by Absolute Spirit in the mode of religion). This section is followed by “Absolute Religion,” which refers to Christianity alone. Hegel states elsewhere that “God has revealed himself through the Christian religion; i.e., he has granted mankind the possibility of recognizing his nature, so that he is no longer an impenetrable mystery.”¹⁵

In essence, all religions are ways of relating humanity to the divine – but Hegel claims that in Christianity this essence of religion becomes the religion itself. In other words, in Christianity the relation of the human to the divine becomes the central

¹³ LPR I, 251; VPR I, 159.

¹⁴ LPR I, 84; VPR I, 4.

¹⁵ Hegel (1975, p. 40), (1966, p. 45).

feature of the religion. This occurs through the person of Jesus Christ, man become one with God. Hegel sees in Christianity a kind of allegory depicting the central tenets of his own philosophy. God, the eternal *logos* (Idea), creates an other, nature. He then creates humanity, whom he exalts above all else in nature. Men are creatures of nature, but they are capable of understanding creation itself, and of attempting to commune with its source through religious devotion. At the appropriate juncture in history, once human beings have become ready to receive the ultimate revelation, God appears among men as Jesus Christ. Finite and infinite are brought together in one individual. Philosophy is required, however, to disclose the true meaning of this revelation: that the *telos* of creation, and the actualization of the being of God, lies in Spirit. Philosophy (as philosophy of religion or theology) is required to explain that “the word [*logos*] made flesh” is Idea come to concrete embodiment. And philosophy is needed to make explicit the real message of Christianity: that what is true of Christ is true of everyone; that we are all Absolute Spirit.

In the “Revealed Religion” section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* and in other writings, Hegel presents his speculative understanding of Christianity and Christian dogmas. His treatment of the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the most famous of these. In truth, Hegel’s understanding of the Trinity is central to why he regards Christianity as the Absolute Religion. For Hegel, the Trinity is a kind of mythic representation of the three “sciences” of speculative philosophy: Logic, Philosophy of Nature, and Philosophy of Spirit. According to Christian teaching, the Father is the “godhead,” and the Son is Jesus Christ, God become flesh. The Holy Spirit dwells within the community of believers, uniting them and guiding them to true faith in God. However, the three “persons” of the Trinity are understood as mysteriously one, or consubstantial. This doctrine has been understood in many different ways, and has been the source of many schisms within Christianity.

Hegel’s speculative interpretation of the Trinity holds that the Father represents Idea “in-itself,” unmanifest, “prior to creation.” The Father or Idea must “freely release” himself/itself as an other. This moment of otherness, God “for-himself” (or Idea “for-itself”) is the Son, the second person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit, of course, represents Absolute Spirit (self-conscious humanity): God’s “other” come to consciousness of itself just as an expression of Idea (thus, Idea “in-and-for itself”). In Absolute Spirit, consequently, we “return to the Father.”

This account may suggest that Hegel claims a straightforward correspondence between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and Logic-Nature-Spirit – but matters are actually more complex than this. Of course, nature is certainly an “other” to Idea, and there are passages where Hegel does seem to equate nature with “the Son.” For instance, in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel states that “God reveals himself in two different ways: as nature and as Spirit. Both manifestations are temples of God which he fills, and in which he is present. God, as an abstraction, is not true God, but only as the living process of positing his other, the world, which comprehended in its divine form is his Son; and it is only in unity with his other, in

Spirit, that God is subject.”¹⁶ However, Hegel does not identify Christ with nature *simpliciter*, or understand him merely as a symbol for nature. Rather, Christ represents the transcendence of the dichotomy between man and God: Christ is God, yet also a man. Hegel holds that Christianity is the first religion to conceive of the idea of God realizing himself through humanity (though this is an implication of the Christian religion which must be brought out by philosophy). In Hegel’s philosophy, of course, Absolute Idea is only “actualized” via Absolute Spirit.

Hegel states in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* that “God [the Father] makes himself an object for himself [the Son]; then, in this object, God remains the undivided essence within this differentiation of himself within himself, and in this differentiation of himself loves himself, i.e., remains identical with himself – this is God as Spirit.”¹⁷ In other words, God/Idea embodies himself/itself as nature but pre-eminently as man, who recognizes that he is one with Idea, or is Idea’s concrete expression. We can therefore say that through man God comes to know himself (Idea knows itself), and that this constitutes the self-completion or perfection of God. Again, it is hard not to see this interpretation of Christian doctrine as somehow “mystical,” and Hegel does not really dispute this. At one point in the *Lectures*, in fact, he quotes the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1328): “The eye with which God sees me is the eye with which I see him; my eye and his eye are one and the same. In righteousness I am weighed in God and he in me. If God did not exist nor would I; if I did not exist nor would he.”¹⁸

Christianity comes close, in Hegel’s view, to realizing the truths of speculative philosophy. However, because it is religion and not philosophy of religion it cannot grasp the full import of its teachings.

Conclusion

Because Spirit is one of the moments of the being of God, and because it is only in Spirit that Idea as self-thinking thought is truly “embodied,” readers of Hegel often wonder if he has not really made man into God. This is precisely what was claimed by Feuerbach, who insisted that if Hegel had truly understood himself he would have realized that his philosophy leads necessarily to this conclusion.

However, Feuerbach misunderstood Hegel’s theology. As noted earlier, Hegel rejects any rigid distinction between God and the world. The world is understood as a necessary moment in the being of God, with God/Idea portrayed essentially as a “process,” rather than something fixed and complete. God (or the Idea) perpetually expresses itself as the universe. One moment in this process is its coming to

¹⁶ Hegel (1970, p. 13); *Philosophy of Nature* § 246, Addition.

¹⁷ LPR I, 126; VPR I, 43.

¹⁸ LPR I, 347–348; VPR I, 248. This is actually a “quilt quotation” made up of portions of several lines in Eckhart.

consciousness of itself through human Spirit. Just like everything else, we are an embodiment of Idea – but because we are self-knowing, Idea achieves consciousness of itself through us. Humanity is thus a necessary moment in the being of God, and the *consummating* moment – but it is still only one moment. God as Absolute Idea, “God in himself,” exists quite independently of finite human beings. Minus the consummating moment of Absolute Spirit, Idea would be incomplete – but Idea would still express itself in the form of nature.

Hegel’s account of God remains one of the strangest, most complex, and thought-provoking theologies ever developed. Despite its off-putting peculiarities it is also, once understood, one of the most intellectually satisfying. What is missing from most theologies is any coherent, plausible explanation of why God would create beings like ourselves in the first place – beings who seek to know God and the universe. (Sunday school explanations such as “God wanted someone to acknowledge and worship him” simply won’t do, as they imply that God is needy.) Hegel’s philosophy argues, in fact, that the purpose of existence is its achievement of self-consciousness through humanity – that through us, the world finally knows itself, and achieves a kind of closure. This achievement of the self-consciousness of existence *just is God*, for Hegel. This conception, whatever one chooses to make of it, possesses an undeniable grandeur, and an allure that is hard to resist.

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Peirce on God, Reality and Personality

Jeffrey L. Kasser

Peirce, Pragmatism and Cosmology

Peirce is sometimes credited with the first formulation of the verification principle of meaning. Though this attribution is more than a bit misleading, Peirce shares some tone as well as some substance with his logical positivist successors. In his well-known 1878 paper, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” he offers the tough-minded suggestion “that a few clear ideas are worth more than many confused ones” (EP1 127).¹ He goes on to pronounce the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation “senseless jargon” because one can “mean nothing by wine but what has certain effects, direct or indirect, upon our senses” (EP1 131). More generally, Peirce insists that “[o]ur idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects; and if we fancy that we have any other we deceive ourselves” (EP1 132). This Peirce is beloved, when he is beloved, of logicians and philosophers of science. He is sometimes presented as something of a twentieth-century analytic philosopher who was unfortunately born too soon to avail himself of the linguistic turn. So it is something of a mystery that the same philosopher puts forward such doctrines as that matter is merely hide-bound mind, and that the universe is animated by principles of growth, habit-taking, and evolutionary love. If the doctrine of transubstantiation is senseless jargon, what are we to make of the following proposal for “a Cosmogonic Philosophy” which

would suppose that in the beginning, – infinitely remote, – there was a chaos of unpersonalized feeling, which being without connection or regularity would properly be without existence. This feeling, sporting here and there in pure arbitrariness, would have started the

¹ I reference Peirce in the standard way, viz. by page number of *The Essential Peirce* (1992, 1998), by paragraph number of the *Collected Papers* (1935, 1938), and by manuscript number for unpublished manuscripts.

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germ of a generalizing tendency. Its other sportings would be evanescent, but this would have a growing virtue. Thus, the tendency to habit would be started; and from this with the other principles of evolution, all the regularities of the universe would be evolved. At any time, however, an element of pure chance survives and will remain until the world becomes an absolutely perfect, rational, and symmetrical system, in which mind is at last crystallised in the infinitely distant future. (EP1 297 [1891])?

This Peirce seems to be overflowing with ideas, not all of which seem terribly clear. This version of Peirce is beloved by those who reject empiricist scruples about meaning and who like their metaphysics old-school. This is the Peirce who parted company with his friend and fellow pragmatist William James over the pragmatic legitimacy of the notion of the Absolute. Peirce sided with Josiah Royce on this point, and insisted that Royce was at least as much of a pragmatist as James.

One cannot but sympathize with Thomas Goudge, whose 1950 book documented in detail the supposedly incompatible naturalist and transcendentalist strands in Peirce. But we have long since come to appreciate just how systematic a thinker Peirce was, and a hypothesis of persistent multiple philosophical personality disorder will not do justice to the data. We likewise understand that no simple developmental story will explain how Peirce's difficult and seemingly disparate doctrines emerged from a single thinker. While it is true that cosmology and philosophy of religion figure much more prominently in the second half of Peirce's career than the first, many apparently tender-minded strands of Peirce's thought go back to the 1860s, and many of his tough-minded pronouncements persist well into the twentieth century. Peirce the naturalist and Peirce the transcendentalist often appear prominently together in the same article. Consequently, scholars today emphasize the extent to which Peirce's philosophy of science permits and even requires a metaphysics. And we likewise emphasize the scientific virtues Peirce claimed for his metaphysics of absolute chance, continuity, and evolution. It is by no means easy to reconcile Peirce's demand for pragmatic meaningfulness with some of his cosmological claims, but resources for closing the gaps are plentiful, and such work represents much of the Kuhnian "normal science" of Peirce scholarship.

Peirce's writings about religion and God represent a special case of this general dynamic. The editors of Peirce's *Collected Papers* put forward the Goudge-like assertion that Peirce's writings on "religion or 'psychical metaphysics'" have only "rather tenuous connections with the rest of the system" and offer, "apart from scattered flashes of insight, views which have a sociological or biographical, rather than a fundamental systematic interest" (CP6, p. v). A more contemporary and more sophisticated take on these matters comes from the only book-length treatment of Peirce's philosophy of religion. Its author, Michael Raposa, suggests that "Peirce's religious ideas are less adequately conceived as constituting a part of his thought than as supplying an illuminating perspective on the whole of it" (Raposa 1989, p. 6). I will here have to settle for a very limited take on Peirce's thinking about God and religion, but I think that it is an illuminating one. Peirce's quasi-verificationism and his cosmological commitments come vividly together in his rejection of a nominalist approach to reality and his adoption of a scholastic realist alternative. Peirce's conception of reality is simultaneously pragmatic, realistic and idealistic, and I think

it is of independent interest to thinkers interested in modeling ultimate reality. I hope to use this strand of Peirce's thought as a way of providing a very brisk tour of his religious cosmology, one which bypasses as many of Peirce's gnarly neologisms as possible.

Nominalism and Realism

There is, unsurprisingly, scholarly controversy about when Peirce adopted which aspects of his self-styled extreme scholastic realism.² Following Peirce's dictum according to which it is easy to speak truly so long as one speaks vaguely, we can find formulations that are both accurate and adequate for present purposes. In 1871, which falls quite early in Peirce's career, he published a long review of Fraser's *The Works of George Berkeley*. This review lays out Peirce's distinctive take on the nominalism/realism controversy, and articulates a realism from which it is fair to say that he never retreated. Peirce's understanding of the issue between the two camps is reasonably orthodox:

The question ... is whether *man*, *horse* and other names of natural classes, correspond with anything which all men, or all horses, really have in common, independent of our thought, or whether these classes are constituted simply by a likeness in the way in which our minds are affected by individual objects which have in themselves no resemblance or relationship whatsoever. (EP1 88)

And this question rests on a conception of reality which is neutral between the two parties, viz. "The real is that which is not whatever we happen to think it, but is unaffected by what we may think of it" (*ibid*). This generic conception of reality, however, can be rendered more precise in either of two very different ways, and it is here that Peirce's interesting idiosyncrasies begin to emerge. For the nominalist, reality is independent of thought because it lies outside the mind. Real things produce sensations in us, and sensations produce thoughts in us. This, according to Peirce, is the more familiar understanding of reality, and it favors the nominalist answer to the question of universals. Two distinct individual substances can fall under the same term or thought, but what they have in common is internal to the mind, not "out there" in reality.

The realist, on the other hand, conceives of the real as the upshot of true belief rather than its cause. We approach the real, according to Peirce, not by reversing the causal path of sensation into the mind, but by pursuing thought to its inevitable conclusion.

Suppose two men, one deaf, the other blind. One hears a man declare he means to kill another, hears the report of the pistol, and hears the victim cry; the other sees the murder done. Their sensations are affected in the highest degree with their individual peculiarities. The first information that their senses will give them, their first inferences, will be more

² See the articles by Fisch and Boler for starters.

nearly alike, but still different; ...but their final conclusions, the thought the remotest from sense, will be identical and free from the one-sidedness of their idiosyncrasies. There is, then, to every question a true answer, a final conclusion, to which the opinion of every man is constantly gravitating.... This final opinion, then, is independent, not indeed of thought in general, but of all that is arbitrary and individual in thought; is quite independent of how you, or I, or any number of men think. Everything, therefore, which will be thought to exist in the final opinion is real, and nothing else. (EP1 89)

This construal of what it is to be real favors Scotus rather than Ockham, because “general conceptions enter into all judgments, and therefore into true opinions. Consequently, a thing in the general is as real as in the concrete. It is a real which only exists by virtue of an act of thought knowing it, but that thought is not an arbitrary or accidental one dependent on any idiosyncrasies, but one which will hold in the final opinion” (EP1 90). The medieval controversy about universals is not, of course, our main concern here, but Peirce’s diagnosis of it is. The nominalist affirms, and the realist denies, the centrality of the distinction between what is in the mind and what is outside of it. Reality, for the nominalist, is entirely independent of thoughts or concepts or theories. For Ockham, as John Boler puts it, “‘the worst error in philosophy’ is to confuse the properties of our representative system with the properties of real things” (Boler 2004, p. 68). For the Peircean realist, on the other hand, talk of the true conception of a thing and of the thing itself amount to two different ways of regarding the same thing.

Like most of his contemporaries, Peirce was writing in the shadow of Kant, and he thought that the realist approach to reality could avoid the crippling problems faced by Kant’s thing-in-itself. The nominalist, by insisting that the real is utterly independent of thought, makes real things the unknowable causes of our judgments. No matter how well we carry out the business of thought, we will never be able to bridge such a gulf between mind and world. But the quasi-verificationism of “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” to which I alluded above and for which Peirce is perhaps best known, will have no truck with an utterly unknowable reality. Just as it is nonsense to claim that we understand all of the possible effects of a force but do not understand the force itself, it is nonsense to take oneself to understand all of the possible effects of something’s being real, but to be cut off from the reality itself. And “the only effect which real things have is to cause belief” (EP1 137). Peirce thus committed himself, early in his career, to a version of idealism and a scholastic realism along with his quasi-verificationism.

This scholastic realism enables and requires Peirce to distinguish between reality and existence. Nominalists, Peirce writes later in his career:

recognize but one mode of being, the being of an individual thing or fact, the being which consists in the object’s crowding out a place for itself in the universe, so to speak, and reacting by brute force of fact, against all other things. I call that existence. (CP 1.21, 1903)

Existents are individual things, but existents do not, for Peirce, exhaust reality. Any true scientific law must, given Peirce’s scholastic realism, have as its object a reality, but a law is not an individual thing. The sense in which laws are real will occupy us in a moment. Peirce prefers to call individual things actual rather than real, and actuality is relatively straightforward. Actuality is a matter of insistence

and resistance. Laws and similar realities lack this palpable insistence. “A court may issue *injunctions* and *judgments* against me and I not care a snap of my finger for them. I may think them idle vapor. But when I feel the sheriff’s hand on my shoulder, I shall begin to have a sense of actuality” (CP 1.24, 1903). The reality of a law, on the other hand, *consists in* the tendency of future events to conform to it. Though I am not here quoting Peirce, both the word “consists” and the emphasis upon it are his. And, while his example might suggest otherwise, Peirce has scientific laws, not positive laws, primarily in mind here. The nominalist will say that a law has only the mode of being of some words. Peirce replies that, if the law governs future events, if it describes a tendency rather than a mere uniformity, then it is genuinely and importantly real, and no less real for being of the nature of words.³ This is part of what Peirce has in mind when he insists that reality is thought-like. The law is real because the sheriff does and will enforce it and because the citizens do and will obey it. But the law’s reality is not exhausted by particular instances of its enforcement and/or obedience to it. Laws govern possible as well as actual cases, and they have their being in this governance.

Peirce’s Conception of God

While Peirce’s conception of what reality amounts to is of interest quite apart from the content of his own opinions about the ultimately real, methodological and substantive issues can illuminate one another here. Peirce’s conception of God as some sort of ultimate reality certainly provides a crucial test case for his conception of reality, and I hope it also shows why this conception of reality might hold some value for non-Peirceans interested in thinking about ultimate reality. I will focus on only a few aspects of Peirce’s religious cosmology, chosen as much for what they illustrate about reality as for what they say about God.

First, God is not and cannot be actual for Peirce. God is not a thing among other things, an object standing in brute, inarticulate causal relationships to other things. Peirce is highly convinced that God is real, but not that God exists. What does this amount to? Peirce stresses that the word “God” is extremely vague, and that its use easily involves us in contradictions. “Every concept that is vague is liable to be self-contradictory in those respects in which it is vague,” and this is especially true of God-talk. Still, vague concepts are often fitted for everyday life and for certain kinds of reflection, and Peirce certainly thinks some characterizations of God are enormously better than others. For instance, he goes so far as to call his friend and benefactor William James a “pagan” because his finite god is merely one piece

³ See CP 1.26 (1903). I should note here that Peirce countenances an additional mode of being, viz. that of pure qualitative possibility. This category of being figures importantly in Peirce’s religious metaphysics, but I mostly avoid it here, simply because two modes of being are quite enough to keep us occupied.

of the universe.⁴ “Existence is reaction, and therefore no existent can be a *clear supreme*” (CP 8.262, [1905], emphasis in original). So God, as real, rises above existence.

For similar reasons, God cannot be finite. Even a mere law infinitely outruns its actual instances, and Peirce’s God involves much more than just lawfulness. Though he continued to remind his reader about the limitations of our language for discussing the divine nature, Peirce’s conception of God is in many respects unabashedly traditional, both in its transcendence and in its anthropomorphism.

I should fear to be misunderstood if I said I believed in the Absolute, but I am one of those who say, “we believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and *invisible*,” where the invisible things, I take it, are Love, Beauty, Truth, the Principle of Contradiction, Time, etc. Clearly I can have but the vaguest analogical notion of the Maker of such things, and Pragmatism, I am sure, does not require that all my beliefs should be definite. (MS 284, cited by Orange 1984, p. 72).

Peirce was prepared to affirm the omnipotence and omniscience of God, while simultaneously emphasizing the inadequacy of our linguistic resources. Such assertions are more true than false, but “we only wildly gabble about such things” (CP 6.509 [1905]). As the creator of all things, Peirce’s God transcends the universe. God is the author of all potentialities and all actualities. But God is not radically other than the universe either. As Raposa emphasizes, Peirce’s metaphysics draws on his distinctive mathematics of continuity. Peirce’s preferred models for God are topological. For Peirce God can be thought of as an all-encompassing continuum. Peirce’s continuum is mathematically denser even than Cantor’s; a Peircean continuum cannot be understood as an infinite collection of individuals. A Peircean continuum has a potentiality qualitatively more unlimited than that; a true continuum transcends all multitude. Individuals can be constructed out of such a continuum (more or less by indicating them), but the individuals are ontologically dependent on the continuum, not vice versa. God is the continuum of highest dimensionality, boundlessly containing other continua as well as limitless possible and actual individuals. Raposa rightly points out that this is a kind of panentheism, and the reader is directed to his book for a fuller discussion.⁵ My point of emphasis is that God’s reality is not here modeled on existence, on individual things that are encountered or that exert causal powers. God is transcendent but is not a transcendent object for Peirce.

This view can sound suspiciously (or impressively) like pantheism, to which we will turn shortly. At least in some moods, Peirce explicitly rejects pantheism, and his God is both personal and a creator. Peirce’s topological God is also an anthropomorphic deity. In the same letter in which he dubbed James a pagan, Peirce says that the Being of God amounts, not to existence but to creation.⁶ Much of what Peirce says about creation sounds and is pretty orthodox, though the more detailed statements his statements get the messier, more interesting and more problematic

⁴ See MS L224 (1905), cited by Orange (1984), p. 72.

⁵ See especially pp. 50–51.

⁶ MS L224, op. cit.

they become. God created the universe from nothing, though the nothing in question is perhaps better described as undifferentiated potentiality. The universe gradually emerges into actuality and ultimately into regularity, or concrete reasonableness, under the influence of divine love. Peirce's universe evolves, not via mechanical necessity, but via processes analogous to abduction, deduction and induction. Possibilities find their way into existence, are gradually comprehended or made explicit and eventually settle into regularities. For Peirce, God's thought and God's love are not existent objects but tendencies for things to go a certain way. Ideas (like God's plan) have, as such, vitality, if not force. Though they lack the sheriff's actual weapons, they have the power to get themselves thought. Peirce insists that, "ideas are not all mere creations of this or that mind, but on the contrary have a power of finding or creating their vehicles, and having found them, of conferring upon them the ability to transform the face of the earth" (EP2 123 [1902]).

What conception of the divine personality emerges from Peirce's mathematical-but-anthropomorphic account of God? We saw above that Peirce repudiated nominalism's attempt to impose a gulf between mind and world. Some thoughts have real things for their objects, and so these objects are isomorphic to thought. As Boler puts it, the real upshot of scholastic realism for Peirce "is an appeal to a *structure* in things that is analogous to the *structure* of thought" (Boler 2004, p. 70). So thought, for Peirce, is not to be identified merely with agitations in human and other animal brains. Consequently, ascribing a personality to God need be neither metaphorical nor anthropomorphic. A person, for Peirce, is of the nature of a sign or idea, though of course a very complex sign or idea. People exhibit characters, which are general tendencies roughly analogous to laws. This character manifests itself on particular occasions, but it cannot be exhausted by its manifestations. Persons are complex systems of habits. Death is simply the dissolution of enough of the habits so that the person no longer exists. Conversely, persons can literally grow in meaning as they take on new habits and take in new thoughts. God, then, is literally personal because God has reasonable and loving habits. God has and carries out purposes in the world. More generally, to be a person is to manifest a tendency to get oneself interpreted as a person, as the sort of thing that is or has meanings and purposes. A person is a kind of sign, and any sign stands for something. Persons stand for very special somethings.

Problems and Prospects

I have offered the merest gesture at the distinctively Peircean take on a more or less traditional conception of God. But this mere gesture is enough to show some pretty deep tensions within Peirce's religious cosmology. Thinkers like Charles Hartshorne have argued that doctrinal conservatism prevented Peirce from appreciating the religious implications of his own central insights. Hartshorne sees Peirce as a progenitor of process theology who was unable to accept his own insights.⁷

⁷ See Hartshorne (1941) and Hartshorne (1995).

Before turning to this fascinating problematic, we should note that Peirce could perhaps muster something along the lines of an effective *tu quoque* defense. He has, after all, consistently argued that contradictions are to be expected if usefully vague religious concepts are rendered with too much philosophical precision. But Peirce also argued that religion should make itself scientific and should repent of the dogmatism and defensiveness that he thought unfavorably distinguished theology from science. And in any case, if we've learned anything from the last 50 years of Peirce scholarship, it is that apparent tensions within his work should be explored, rather than just accepted. Having offered only the barest characterization of the main strands of Peirce's religious cosmology, I am in no position to catalog, much less resolve, all of the major issues that remain. All I can do here is describe and motivate a few key worries, all of which share a family resemblance. And then I will return to my main theme, Peirce's theory of reality, and provide a brief indication of how I think that a renewed emphasis on that aspect of his thought can help mitigate these tensions.

We can begin to examine some of these tensions by focusing on the notion of God as a creator. For Peirce, thought "is something that needs to work itself out in order to comprehend its own meaning ... [a]s a man upon his death-bed will review the achievements and struggles of his life as a work of art, though he did not look upon them so as he did them, ... so he may guess that that in the long process of creation God achieves his own being."⁸ This sounds like a much less traditional creation story than some of Peirce's other pronouncements about creation would indicate, though we've also seen strands of this position in the traditional-sounding statements quoted above. This is the God that Hartshorne sees as the appropriate outcome of Peirce's work; such a God is less transcendent and more immanent, and such a Peirce sounds closer to pantheism and process thought than the one discussed above. How can Peirce's God be infinite while also achieving its own being only through the process of creation? Is Peirce's God to be identified with Reason, or as he would prefer to put it, with the growth of concrete reasonableness? If God is a Peircean person, can God grow in depth and meaning as we can? Could such a view be reconciled with the traditional perfections Peirce seems willing to ascribe to the deity?

It is worth noting that Peirce's conception of reality is part of what seems to get him into trouble here. Peirce's anti-nominalism, as we saw above, makes existence, not reality, the mode of being of individuals. So in denying that God exists, Peirce seems to be denying that God is an individual of any sort. The more general and less individual God is, the more tempting it becomes to identify Him with Reason or with Nature. Orange suggests that:

the ideal and reasonable character of nature is just the philosopher's way of expressing the reality that the religious instinct calls "God." To talk of a deity is not to add an item to the universe; it is to describe the totality in an additional way, one especially fruitful for the conduct of life (p. 88).

⁸MS 313, cited by Orange (1984, p. 62).

And this, in turn, makes mischief for the idea that God is a person, that God is distinct from the universe and created it, etc. Raposa emphasizes that, in Peirce's metaphysics, no law or habit can cause things to exist. Generals create order, not objects. And so the traditional creator God cannot be straightforwardly identified with a Peircean general, i.e. a law or habit. Peirce sometimes writes as if his categories (for our purposes, these can be thought of as possibility, actuality and generality) apply to everything and are conditions of intelligible discourse about anything. But he sometimes writes as if God transcends these otherwise universal categories because he created them. So Peirce waffles between, on the one hand, thinking of God as *sui generis*, and, on the other, thinking of God as the exemplification of something like reasonableness.

Some of these apparent tensions are easier to resolve than others. There is much to be said about Peirce's conceptions of personhood and selfhood, but it is clear that they do not treat selves as individual things. You and I are, in the way that any sign is, general. And Peirce emphasizes our profound, objective, metaphysical similarity to one another. The evolutionary theories of his day made much of individuality, but for Peirce the individual self is a locus of ignorance and error and vanity. Insofar as you and I have true opinions, we are the same. It is only my limitations that mark me off as the finite existent that I am. A person is a sign that aims at something larger than herself. So a person for Peirce is better understood as a general than as a particular existent. And he sees this as a moral as well as a metaphysical insight. The evolutionary philosophies of Spencer and others took individuals as metaphysical primitives and glorified the nineteenth-century economic system that Peirce called the Gospel of Greed. For Peirce, God is not a possibility and is not an existent, but neither is he a general idea or tendency, though this category gets closer to God than the others. God simply and essentially is, for Peirce, but when we try to understand God, we do so by trying to enter into the divine mind, which we do by thinking about the general ideas that inhabit God's mind.

The nominalism/realism dispute also must be kept in mind when thinking about Peirce on creation. God may well be the Alpha and the Omega, but Peirce tended to stress the Omega aspect. For a relatively traditional theist like Josiah Royce, God-as-Creator stresses God as Alpha; the universe embodies or works out God's pre-existing plan.⁹ Peirce does not treat God-as-Creator along such nominalist lines. God is not the unknown and unknowable thing that gets other things started. God counts as the creator because ideas about love and reasonableness as active tendencies do and will tend to get themselves thought. Peirce's continuum model places God in direct, continuous contact with the creation while remaining distinct from it. God calls possibilities into existence and nurtures them along to their role in a reality that tends toward reasonableness. But it's a mistake to think of God or God's plan as if it's an individual existent making all this happen. God counts as the creator because that's how sense gets made of the universe, but the situation is somewhat akin to "best system" accounts of laws and causes in philosophy of science. The laws

⁹ See Orange (1984, p. 62).

of nature, on such an approach, count as such because of their distinctive and fundamental role in systematizing our knowledge. Likewise, for Peirce, God is the Alpha because God is the Omega, not the other way around. So to think of God as transcendent is not to posit a state of affairs in which God figures as a kind of thing in some sense outside the universe. It is instead to make the best sense creatures like us can of the deepest questions there are. We do not have to choose between seeing God as “just” concrete reasonableness and seeing God as some object above, beyond and outside everything else. It is of course hard to get clear about these matters, but Peirce offers us intriguing and challenging resources for doing so.¹⁰

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Karl Rahner on God

James J. Bacik

Karl Rahner (1904–1984) is generally considered one of the most influential theologians in the history of the Catholic Church, along with Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and Bonaventure. He refocused and reinterpreted important themes in traditional scholastic theology, creating in the process a new theological paradigm that took seriously developments in the modern world, including the secularization process, evolutionary theory and the turn to the subject in philosophy associated with Descartes and Kant. Rahner's understanding of God reflects a variety of influences: his experience as a Catholic believer and his training as a Jesuit priest; his studies with Martin Heidegger; his examination of the metaphysics of knowledge in Aquinas; his philosophy of religion; his Christian anthropology; and his reinterpretation of traditional Christian teaching on grace, revelation, salvation and Christ.

In developing his doctrine of God, Rahner did not accept a sharp distinction between philosophy and theology or reason and faith. He rejected both the Enlightenment ideal of reason as a detached neutral instrument and the popular notion of faith as a personal conviction immune from critical examination. For him, philosophy always contains a secret or implicit theological dimension, as long as it is true to its own inner dynamism and does not arbitrarily restrict its search for wisdom. Reason is unavoidably influenced by social conditions and cultural assumptions, as well as personal interest and bias. For Rahner, genuine faith is not opposed to reason, but is its greatest accomplishment and highest achievement. Reason is true to itself when it recognizes its limitations before the mystery of being, and faith is authentic when it accepts the mystery as caring and loving. Faith is not an irrational feeling or an arbitrary opinion; it is a conviction that must vindicate itself as genuine knowledge through a process of critical reflection. This intrinsic dialectical

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relationship between faith and reason, as Rahner saw it, is crucial to understanding his approach to the doctrine of God.

With this methodological principle in mind, we can examine some of the building blocks of Rahner's mature theology, rooted in his personal history. He was born on March 5, 1904, in Freiburg, Germany and raised as the middle child of seven in a family deeply steeped in the Catholic tradition. In that family setting, he developed a positive image of God that sustained him throughout his whole life. When asked as a renowned theologian why he was a Catholic Christian, he responded that he remained a Catholic because he was born one and had found nothing better to help him understand the great questions of life and to live more nobly and responsibly. At the center of the faith that he maintained throughout his life was the intuition that we human beings are positively oriented to God.¹

In 1922, Rahner, following his older brother Hugo, joined the Society of Jesus, beginning a lifelong relationship with the Jesuits that had a profound influence on his religious sensibilities. His prayerful engagement with the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius deepened his intuitive sense that the God who surpasses all our words and images can be found in all things, including the most mundane experiences. Rahner saw the *Spiritual Exercises* as a valuable instrument for achieving a greater openness to the mystery and discerning the divine will.

From 1924 to 1927, Rahner continued his Jesuit training by studying the traditional scholastic philosophy in Pullach near Munich. Not content with this approach, he also read substantial parts of the five volume work on metaphysics by the Belgian Jesuit, Joseph Maréchal, who introduced him to the transcendental approach to philosophy practiced by Immanuel Kant. (For an accessible summary of Marechal's thought, see *The Maréchal Reader* ed. by Joseph Onceel, New York, Herder and Herder 1970.) Maréchal accepted Kant's emphasis on the input of the knower in the knowing process, but placed this subjective factor in the context of the dynamism of the human spirit that actively searches for the truth that always exceeds its grasp. Rahner appropriated this fundamental notion that human beings have an unlimited drive for truth and later expanded his sense of the dynamism of the human spirit to include the unquenchable desire for a love that is satisfying and imperishable.

Even when immersed in philosophical study, Rahner's theological interests were never far from his mind as some of his early spiritual writings suggest. For example, in 1932, he published in French an article on the spiritual senses in Origen² and a year later addressed the same topic in the thought of Bonaventure, showing that we have the fundamental capacity to know something of the always mysterious God.³

In 1934, Rahner's Jesuit superiors sent him to Freiburg to do doctoral studies in preparation for assignment as a professor of philosophy. During this time, he was admitted to the famous seminar conducted by Martin Heidegger and, in fact, was given the important task of taking notes for the group. At times, Rahner played

¹ For the importance of Rahner's early faith development see [Apologetics](#), p. 48.

² For an English translation see [Origen](#) *Tl*, 16, pp. 81–103.

³ See [Middle Ages](#) *Tl*, 16, pp. 104–134.

down the influence of Heidegger on his theology, pointing out that Heidegger did not write about important theological topics like Christ and the church. Rahner's early philosophical works, however, are clearly influenced by his teacher, as is his general theological method and his treatment of particular theological issues, such as the meaning of death. In an article written in 1940, "*The Concept of Existential Philosophy in Heidegger*," Rahner highlights themes of special interest to him from Heidegger's *Being and Time*.⁴ He is taken with Heidegger's method of inquiring about being in its totality by analyzing the a priori conditions necessary for human existence in the world. This analysis uncovers general structures of human existence that Heidegger calls "existentials." Human beings find themselves thrown into the world subject to a restlessness unsatisfied by any particular reality. Human existence is temporal, a movement toward the ultimate boundary of death. We human beings have the root power of free self-disposal, of taking up an attitude toward our given situation in the world. Rahner recognized that Heidegger's own analysis moves toward a radical atheism, but he was also convinced that a more complete and deeper examination of human existence could be profoundly religious and open to a possible divine revelation.

Rahner's philosophical and theological works follow the Heideggerian methodology of searching for ultimate reality through an analysis of human existence in the world, especially the a priori conditions that make knowing and loving possible. In his early philosophical works, Rahner follows his teacher's method by analyzing human beings as capable of unrestricted questioning, and in his theological writings he often begins with human experiences that can be correlated with Christian doctrines. This methodology grounds Rahner's bold assertion that the experience of self is the experience of God. Furthermore, he makes use of Heidegger's existentials to describe human existence in the world: for example, that we are historical beings moving toward death. To Heidegger's list, he adds the supernatural existential, our fundamental God-given orientation to the holy mystery. Rahner's studies with Heidegger convinced him that the turn to the subject in modern philosophy could be used to disclose the spiritual dimension of human existence and to ground a theology open to the contemporary world.

In pursuing his doctorate in philosophy, Rahner wrote a dissertation on the metaphysics of knowing according to Aquinas. He explored in depth the Thomistic thesis that it is impossible for humans to know anything without an imaginative element that Aquinas called "turning to the phantasm."⁵ Rahner interpreted the treatment of knowing in Aquinas from the perspective of the transcendental philosophy he appropriated from Heidegger and from Kant through Maréchal. At the same time, he went to great lengths to show that his interpretation was faithful to Aquinas, who had already recognized a subjective element in human knowing. This effort did not satisfy Rahner's supervisor, Martin Honecker, who rejected the dissertation as too influenced by modern subjectivism. Despite this harsh judgment, Rahner

⁴ See [Heidegger](#), pp. 126–137.

⁵ For the thesis of Aquinas see his *Summa Theologiae I*, q 84, a.7.

published the work in 1937 under the title *Geist in Welt*. With Rahner's approval, this original work was later revised by his student and friend Johann Metz.⁶

In a lengthy review of *Spirit in the World*, the Baptist theologian Langdon Gilkey criticized it for failing to offer a phenomenological, linguistic and speculative analysis of knowing.⁷ Furthermore, he contended that Rahner failed to offer convincing arguments for his positions, and instead tried to prove his points by merely showing they were faithful to Aquinas. Although it is true that *Spirit in the World* has many sections claiming Thomistic authenticity, it also contains important elements of Rahner's own metaphysics of knowledge as well as his broader philosophical anthropology. Following Heidegger, he provides an insightful phenomenology of human questioning (pp. 57–65). Human beings necessarily question and cannot finally evade the question of being in its totality. The question about being has a transcendental dimension since it includes calling human existence itself into question. From the transcendental perspective, we appear as creatures open to the whole of reality, in contact with being itself, but unable to master it. We can question because we are already with being in its totality, but we continue to question because being as such eludes our total grasp. In asking about being as a whole, we are already in contact with the goal of our inquiry, while our continual questioning means we are finite creatures limited by the world of time and space. Thus we are in the presence of being not as disembodied souls, but only as bodily creatures dwelling on this earth.

Rahner uses the German word “*Vorgriff*” to describe the fundamental orientation of the dynamic human spirit to the goal of its striving (pp. 142–145). Despite the literal translation of the word as “pre-grasp,” Rahner is not suggesting that we can grasp or master being in its totality. *Vorgriff* is better understood as including a pre-apprehension or a co-apprehension of being. This suggests that being is co-known in every act of knowing some particular being. In analyzing knowing, we can ask about the nature of the *Vorgriff* and the scope or extent of its “whither” or the goal toward which it tends. Rahner argues that the whither cannot be a finite reality or a particular object, since it exceeds every effort to define or master it. The goal of human transcendence is, rather, the infinite that makes all knowing possible. The infinite goal cannot be directly grasped in itself, but is co-known in every apprehension of individual objects. Human knowing is possible only on the condition that the whither of the *Vorgriff* is open to the whole of all possible objects. The goal of our transcendence, as Rahner puts it, “is known insofar as knowledge, in the apprehension of its individual object, always experiences itself as already and always moving out beyond it, insofar as it knows the object in the horizon of its possible objects in such a way that the pre-apprehension reveals itself in the movement out towards the totality of the objects” (p. 145). We know individual things only within the horizon of being as a whole and in the process have an unthematic or implicit knowledge of being itself.

⁶For the English translation of the revised edition see *Spirit*.

⁷For Gilkey's review see “Rahner's Spirit in the World,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 7, 1970, pp. 138–144.

Rahner makes use of the Thomistic Latin term “esse” (being as the act or power of existence) to point to the whither of human transcendence that is more than all possible things and is the infinite power that makes all particular things actual. Only if *esse* is infinite can it serve as the condition of possibility for the existence of any particular thing (pp. 146–165). For Rahner, being as *esse* is the sum of all things known and knowable, but remains beyond all that human beings can know and comprehend. From this perspective, we see ourselves as spirit because our *Vorgriff* is oriented to a whither that is absolutely infinite. On the other hand, we are finite spirits because we cannot directly grasp the absolute as a possession, but can only co-know it indirectly as the horizon of our questing spirit. Rahner summarizes his main point: “So man knows of infinity only insofar as he experiences himself surpassing all of his knowledge in the pre-apprehension and is open to being in its totality” (p. 186).

For Rahner, being as *esse* or the act of existence cannot be merely a regulative ideal or an impersonal force or mere nothingness (pp. 169–173). He claims that *esse absolutum* must have “the intrinsic freedom and infinity to bestow reality upon finite realities” (p. 172). His treatment of human transcendence and the dynamism of the human spirit demands the existence of a whence and whither, a source and a goal, that actually exists. His phenomenology of human questioning and his metaphysics of knowing does point to being in its totality or to *ens commune*. Rahner, however, does not make an explicit argument for positing the existence of absolute being (*esse absolutum*) as the source and goal of human striving.

At the end of his long metaphysical study of knowing, Rahner describes human beings as spirit in the world, finite creatures with infinite longings, who are “in the world and on the way God” (p. 406). We are “the midpoint suspended between the world and God, between time and eternity” (p. 407). With these explicitly religious formulations, Rahner set the stage for his theological effort to develop a contemporary doctrine of God.

Rahner’s second major philosophical work *Hearers of the Word*⁸ repeats some of the major themes from *Spirit in the World*: the luminosity of being that reveals its intelligible structure and essential unity with knowledge; a metaphysical anthropology that emphasizes the dynamic drive of the human spirit for being as a whole; and the hidden aspect of being that always exceeds our grasp. Rahner expands these familiar themes with less explicit reference to Aquinas and with greater freedom in identifying absolute being with God. Rahner sees *Hearers* as a contribution to a philosophy of religion that prepares for a theology of revelation. He wants to demonstrate that human beings are fundamentally open to a possible revelation from God. To do this, he moves beyond the cognitive categories of *Spirit in the World* and analyzes human beings from the viewpoint of freedom and love.⁹ Through a free decision, we are called to accept our position in the world as finite creatures

⁸ This work was first published in German in 1941 as *Hörer des Wortes*. The following summary draws on Joseph Donceel’s excellent translation of Rahner’s original 1941 work found in [Rahner Reader](#). For the revised edition see [Hearers](#).

⁹ [Rahner Reader](#), pp. 46–48.

before an infinite Creator. Freedom is our root capacity to take up an attitude toward ourselves and our most important relationship to God. Freedom is not merely stringing together a series of good or bad decisions; it is, rather, the essential ability to determine ourselves in our totality as persons. Our task is to order properly our loves, to get our priorities straight, to direct our decisions to what is truly good, and to orient our will to God. For Rahner, metaphysical anthropology can arrive at the conclusion that human beings stand in free love before the God of a possible revelation. As free creatures, we are called to overcome the temptation to direct our desires and longings in destructive directions that will narrow the horizon of our openness to being as such. We must stay open to whatever content God wishes to communicate to us and to whatever method the holy mystery may employ to instruct us.

Rahner's philosophy of religion puts great emphasis on the concrete, bodily and historical dimension of human existence (*Ibid.*, pp. 48–59). We apprehend the material world through our senses, and our knowledge always contains an imaginative element. As finite beings, we are embodied spirits immersed in a world of time and space. Human beings can actualize themselves and determine their relationship to the absolute only through a succession of decisions over a period of time. Thus, a metaphysical anthropology, developed from a transcendental perspective, can arrive at the conclusion that human beings are essentially bodily, historical beings.

With this conclusion established on philosophical grounds and not simply as an empirical fact, Rahner goes on to argue that human beings, in order to be faithful to their nature as spirit in the world, must listen for a revelation of the true God that can only occur through human words uttered in historical experience (*Ibid.*, pp. 59–65). Human beings, structured by a spiritual dynamism and immersion in the material world, can only hear a potential word of God in concrete history and in no other way that bypasses the finite world. Rahner recognizes that God is free to speak a word to human beings in their history or to remain silent. A philosophy of religion rooted in his metaphysical anthropology can only show the possibility of divine revelation. It is the further task of theology to examine whether such a word has ever been spoken in human history.

Rahner's two early philosophical works have generated a great deal of commentary. Reacting to the criticisms, close colleagues of Rahner urged him to rework this material. Although Rahner did not do so himself, he did allow Johann Metz to make revisions to both *Spirit in the World* and *Hearers of the Word* and gave his approval to the results. For his part, Rahner moved from philosophy into the world of theology, devoting the rest of his life to teaching and writing in that field.

Questions remain about the relationship between Rahner's earlier philosophical works and his later theological writings. Some critics find deficiencies in his metaphysics of knowledge and contend that they undercut the validity of his whole theological enterprise. Other critics see flaws in his philosophical anthropology, but argue that his vast theological corpus stands as an independent achievement with its own inner logic and coherence. Friendly commentators tend to assess the philosophical works more positively, and look for organic connections between his transcendental philosophy and his innovative reinterpretation of traditional Christian teachings. For me, the key to relating his philosophy and theology is found

in his notion that faith is the highest achievement of reason. Rahner clearly did not think of philosophy as a neutral search for truth without presuppositions. His metaphysical anthropology and his philosophy of religion were not intended as an independent foundation for doing theology. In both his metaphysical and theological writings, Rahner gave expression to his faith conviction that we human beings are oriented to absolute mystery. The early philosophical books attempt to vindicate this conviction through a transcendental analysis of human knowing and loving, while the later theological writings explain and apply this faith stance in the light of Christian doctrine.

In his theological works, Rahner typically uses the word “mystery” to refer to the source and goal of the dynamism of the human spirit.¹⁰ He opted for this term because it calls for further reflection and carries a more inviting tone than the traditional language of being. Referring to the goal of human transcendence as mystery reminds us that it is not a particular being or object contained within our time-space coordinates. The goal must remain nameless, undefined and, in principle, not subject to limitation. We know mystery precisely in knowing ourselves as self-transcendent creatures with longings that always exceed our apprehension and grasp.

When Rahner examined our drive for a love that is totally fulfilling, he referred to the goal of this longing as the “holy mystery.” We know the gracious character of mystery through a transcendental reflection on the giving and receiving involved in loving personal relationships. Christian faith affirms that the holy mystery does not remain distant and uncaring, but draws near as a loving personal presence, most fully realized in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

Rahner’s most comprehensive theological work is *Foundations of Christian Faith*, designed to present Christian belief as a whole without attempting to explain every aspect of it or answer all objections to it.¹¹ The first two chapters of *Foundations* repeat many of the ideas from his philosophical writings, but place them in a more explicit theological context. After an introduction that explains his methodology and deals with epistemological problems, the first chapter presents an anthropology with Christian overtones (pp. 24–44). Human beings are persons who can have a loving relationship with God. We are finite creatures, responsible before the Creator for ourselves as a whole. Our transcendence is lived out in historical experience where our origin and ultimate goal remain hidden from us. In all our human striving, we remain dependent on the ineffable mystery that encompasses us.

In chapter two, we find Rahner’s developed doctrine of God (pp. 44–89). It is a reflection on our transcendental experience of encountering the absolute mystery which we call “God.” We only know what this word “God” means by reflecting on our fundamental orientation to mystery. In this reflection, anthropology and theology are united, forming a solid basis for his contention that the experience of self is the experience of God. He begins his reflection with a linguistic thought

¹⁰For one of his best treatments of this topic see “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology” *TI*, 4, pp. 36–73.

¹¹The following is a summary of the major themes found in *Foundations*.

experiment. What would happen to human beings if the word “God” disappeared from our vocabulary without a trace or an echo? We would then be unable to reflect on our lives as a whole and to seek the ultimate meaning of our existence. We would not realize that the deepest questions had faded from our consciousness, and, therefore, we would revert “to the level of clever animals” (p. 48). In fact, the word “God” does exist, kept alive by believers as well as by those who deny God’s existence. We ourselves do not create the word “God.” On the contrary, it comes to us as a gift in the history of language. Rahner finds some truth in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous admonition to remain silent about things that cannot be expressed clearly. For Rahner, God is “the final word before wordless and worshipful silence in the face of the ineffable mystery” (p. 51).

After showing how the word “God” functions by keeping open the great questions of identity and meaning, Rahner examines at length what kind of knowledge we have of God (pp. 51–71). He rejects as illegitimate the common practice of forming a concept of God and then asking if this being exists. He insists that we can only know anything about God by reflecting on our transcendental experience of mystery. For Rahner, there is no natural knowledge of God, as traditional theology sometimes claimed, but only a supernatural knowledge rooted in the graced character of our transcendental experience that is always mediated by concrete historical realities (pp. 55–57).

Assessing two of the common ways of understanding the relationship between the world and God, Rahner finds an element of truth in pantheism, since it is open to God as the primordial ground and the ultimate goal of transcendence. He is harsher in his criticism of a naive theism that portrays God as a supreme being who stands over against created reality. This kind of dualism, which shares some of the assumptions of popular atheism, is in danger of making God into a being among others and of misinterpreting the inner dynamism of the world (p. 63).

Rahner opts for a God who is distinct from the world as its creator and yet is intrinsically present as its divine energy. This God remains mysterious, indefinable, and ultimately beyond all measure. This position reflects Rahner’s linguistic point that the word “God” does not function like other words signifying individual objects or events within our temporal-spatial world. It points, rather, to the whence and whither of our longings that cannot be contained within our limited frame of reference.

In exploring what we can know about God, Rahner takes up the question of the validity and function of the traditional proofs for God’s existence. He denies that these proofs provide new previously unknown knowledge of God and that they can demonstrate the existence of a first cause or most perfect being that we call “God” (pp. 68–71). The proofs function, rather, as a secondary reflection on our primary transcendental knowledge of God. Each of the five traditional proofs found in Aquinas highlights some aspect of our experience that points to the holy mystery. Rahner suggests that individuals seeking to vindicate their faith should reflect on their most meaningful and revealing experiences: for example, the capacity for absolute questioning; overwhelming anxiety; the joy that passes all understanding; and the sense of an absolute moral obligation. (p. 70.) These experiences all reveal

a transcendental relationship to mystery. In them, we know ourselves as finite and we co-know God as our intrinsic dynamism and as the ultimate goal beyond our control. The proofs attempt to name the mystery co-apprehended in the deeper experiences of life. Rahner puts it this way: “the explicit proofs for God’s existence only make thematic this fundamental structure and its term” (p. 70).

Continuing his discussion of God, Rahner returns to an analysis of religious language, especially the traditional idea of analogy (pp. 71–75). He rejects the popular notion that analogical language stands midway between univocal and equivocal language. For him, analogy is rooted in our essential condition as human beings, who know particular things against a horizon that cannot be comprehended in categories drawn from this world. Not only is language necessarily analogical, but, more fundamentally, we exist analogically oriented to mystery that surpasses all the categories, symbols, and words derived from our worldly experiences.

Rahner detects an unavoidable tension in all efforts to speak about God. Our language always falls short, inadequate to the task of speaking about the holy mystery. Traditional scholastic theology made a similar point by insisting that our language about God is more unlike than like the holy mystery. Rahner applies his notion of analogy to the statement that God is a person. This does not mean that God is an individual center of consciousness, defined and limited by relationships to other beings, as is the case with humans. It does not mean that God cannot be reduced to an impersonal cosmic principle or an unconscious ground of being. God is a person in the sense that we can have a personal relationship to the holy mystery that includes worship and prayer (pp. 71–75).

In our temporal experience as infinite searchers with finite capabilities, we know ourselves as creatures (pp. 75–81). For Rahner, creation is not merely an event that occurred billions of years ago, but an ongoing process by which God sustains the world and all human beings in historic existence. We are totally and radically dependent on God who always remains free in relation to the finite world. Rahner claims that the more we realize and accept our dependence on God, the more we experience true freedom. In this regard, human beings face two types of temptation: either to shift our proper responsibility for ourselves onto God; or to act autonomously without recognizing or accepting our dependence on God. We achieve true freedom by resisting these two temptations and accepting our total dependence on the holy mystery that empowers us to act freely.

In the last section of his chapter on God, Rahner takes up the issue of finding God in the world (pp. 81–89). Religious traditions, including Christianity, speak about God in categorical terms: for example, intervening in history, working miracles, and inspiring sacred books. Rahner thinks that many people today who are comfortable relating to the ineffable mystery in general are put off by the concrete claims of religions that God has acted in specific ways in history. His fundamental response to this concern is that God is present to the world through a “mediated immediacy” (p. 83). This means that God’s presence in the world as its origin, goal and inner dynamism is always accomplished in and through particular finite realities. In scholastic terms, God acts in the world not as an external efficient cause, but as a type of formal or intrinsic cause. Religious claims of God’s specific

activity in human history are attempts to make explicit the transcendental presence of God in the whole world. Aquinas made the same point by insisting that God works through secondary causes. God causes the world and the chain of causality we observe in it; but God does not insert the divine presence as a link in that chain (p. 86). Religious claims about divine interventions in history “can only be understood as the historical concreteness of the transcendental self-communication of God, which is already intrinsic to the concrete world” (p. 87). To illustrate his point, Rahner asks how to interpret the origin of a good idea that comes suddenly to an individual and proves to be correct, valid and helpful. It is possible to trace the idea back to psychological factors, previous experiences, lingering memories and other finite causes. At the same time, believers, who freely accept their dependence on the holy mystery, can also legitimately claim that good ideas are inspired by God and say a prayer of gratitude for them. Rahner sees no reason why believers cannot extend this explanation to all the good things that happen in life, so that, as he puts it, they are seen as “an inspiration, a mighty deed, however small, of God’s providence” (p. 89).

A more complete exploration of Rahner’s doctrine of God would include his retrieval of the notion of uncreated grace from the Eastern Fathers of the Church and his reinterpretation of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, as well as his numerous scholarly articles, prayers, and homilies that fill out his understanding of the holy mystery. We have seen, however, some of the most fundamental elements in the development of his doctrine of God. Throughout his whole life, he carried the faith conviction that we human beings have a positive orientation to God. In an effort to explain and defend this belief, he made use of both philosophy and theology, convinced that faith is not opposed to reason, but is its highest achievement. His early philosophical works offered an initial vindication of his faith by demonstrating that being as a whole is co-known in every act of knowing and that human beings are open to a possible revelation from God in history. His theological corpus explains and applies the faith conviction that we are oriented to the holy mystery. Without answering all possible objections, Karl Rahner developed a new theological paradigm, rooted in an anthropology open to God’s self-communication made definitive in Christ, that has had a major influence on Catholic belief and practice, and on the larger world as well.

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Modeling God in One Hindu Context: The Supreme God in a Medieval South Indian Hymn

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India's Vedanta theological traditions, grounded in the ancient Indian Upanisads (c. ninth to third centuries BCE) form one of the foremost of Indian and Hindu systems of thought. While Vedanta is often thought of as a nondualist or monistic school, it also includes theistic traditions, which are not dualistic, but systems of distinction inside unity. These too are of great significance, among the most interesting theologies we find developed in the Indian context. Much research has been devoted to the Sanskrit literature of these Vedanta traditions, to medieval Vedanta theologians such as Ramanuja, Madhava, and Vallabha, with respect to their claims about the personal or suprapersonal nature of ultimate reality.¹

Relatively less attention has been paid to the conceptions of God developed in the pertinent vernacular traditions of Vedanta, yet there too we find much material for consideration. A primary candidate for deeper consideration is the Tamil language poetry of the sixth to ninth century Vaisnava saints known as the alvars,² devotees of the Hindu deity Narayana (Visnu) whose *avatara*s (descents) include Rama and Krsna. This poetry, eventually brought into fuller conversation with understandings of God developed in Sanskrit religious literature, offers a vivid and profound understanding of divine reality that is distinctive and original, modeling a new and more intense interrelationship of the human

¹ Attention has also been given to their counterparts in argument, e.g., the logicians who defended the existence and perfections of God on rational grounds, the Mimamsa liturgical theorists who were skeptical of the proofs of a God's existence and of the need for any idea of a supreme deity, and the Nondualist Vedanta theologians and Buddhist theoreticians who thought it unwise to posit the existence of a supreme Person even if (as in the former case) there is an a supreme absolute reality.

² Alvar: “[thoroughly] immersed [in God];” hereafter “saint,” and in the plural, “Tamil saints.”

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and divine.³ Of particular importance is the 1,102 verse *Tiruvaymoli* (“Holy Word of Mouth”) of Satakopan (ninth century). This carefully woven set of 100 songs is foremost in the corpus of Tamil sacred texts in praise of Narayana. Srivaisnava tradition holds that these works, particularly *Tiruvaymoli*, influenced Ramanuja (eleventh century) in the formation of his theistic Vedanta. In turn, *Tiruvaymoli* was commented on by Ramanuja’s students and their successors in a literature that drew upon both Sanskrit and Tamil vocabularies and sensitivities. This essay explores how God as ultimate reality is presented in just one key hymn in *Tiruvaymoli*, how the hymn was read by commentators in the tradition of Ramanuja, and how this literary and theological presentation of the divine reality provides us with a model of God that is interestingly similar to and different from those developed in Christian tradition.

Tiruvaymoli’s Understanding of the Highest Deity

Tiruvaymoli IV.10 is the tenth hymn of the fourth decade in *Tiruvaymoli*. It is a striking hymn that proclaims the highest and sole true deity, yet it is by no means the first or only hymn among the hundred to make strong claims about the identity of the supreme God. So a bit of background about the presentation of God earlier in *Tiruvaymoli* is in order.

From the first verses of *Tiruvaymoli*, it is clear that Satakopan is asserting the transcendent mystery of God:

Who possesses the highest, unsurpassable goodness? That one.
 Who cuts through confusion and graces the mind with goodness? That one.
 Who is the overlord of the immortals who never forget? That one.
 At His luminous feet that cut through our affliction, bow down and arise, my mind. (I.1.1)

From the start, Satakopan thus works with a strong sense of divine presence and power in and beyond the world, sharpened by a keen awareness of the inability of human words or thoughts to grasp this divine person. Yet as the second verse indicates, the divine mystery dwells in as well as beyond mind and experience:

There are minds that cut through impurity, then blossom and rise,
 but He is beyond even their experience, and beyond those things the senses experience.
 This one is the total goodness of experience, in future, present, or past.
 There is there is no one like this one, no one greater than Him in my life. (2)⁴

A little later, in Song I.3, we learn that this transcendent lord is also the incarnate Krsna. Satakopan highlights, as the core to the Krsna narrative, how he is the

³ There are available overviews of the Tamil saints’ and Vedanta conceptions of God. On the Tamil saints, see for example Kaylor (1981), Chari (1997), particularly chapter 3, “The Doctrine of God;” Carman (1994), chapters 4 and 5. On Ramanuja’s theology, see Kumarappa (1934) and Carman (1974). See also chapters 2 and 3 of Clooney (2001).

⁴ All translations are mine, though I am already indebted to Archana Venkatesan, with whom I am beginning to collaborate in a long-term project to complete a new translation of *Tiruvaymoli*.

rambunctious child who mischievously ate butter from the churn and was tied by his overly stressed mother to a grindstone, in hopes of controlling him:

Welcoming to those that love Him, for others He is puzzling and hard to find.
 The lady on the lotus delights in His feet that are so hard for us to attain.
 He stole the churned butter, and so at the waist was tightly bound by a rope
 —what!—to a grindstone: such distressing vulnerability! (I.3.1)

Tradition has it that Satakopan was so moved by this prospect—God as a bound, vulnerable child—that he lapsed into a trance for six months. The next verse, composed when he awoke, generalizes the insight:

He is accessible, His nature unchanged by many births.
 That radiant perfect goodness, He is liberation with neither beginning nor end,
 it is His nature to give clarity, He is the undying Lord of all, His grace shelters all:
 He is inside, He is outside. (2)

Later in the same song, we see for the first time in *Tiruvaymoli* the explicit assertion that this lord transcends other gods such Ayan (Brahma, the four-faced deity) and as the widely popular Hara (Siva):

Experiencing ever deeper the nature of His form—
 its depth, its vastness, its breadth—and His form beyond form,
 it is hard to know the nature of the Lord,
 in the midst of enjoying ever deeper experience, O living beings.
 Enjoying, experiencing, reciting, speaking of that one called Hari, Ayan, Hara,
 enjoying, experiencing, reciting, speaking: worship that one in your mind. (6)

One or many, His forms are hard to know,
 He is the unique and lovely Narayana also called the four-faced god and Hara.
 Place this one in your mind, reflect deeply, cut the two bonds,
 and for the rest of your days direct toward Him what is good, truly good. (7)

These verses mark a theme that becomes all the more clear in *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10: familiar deities such as Brahma and Siva are indeed real and have a role to play, but dependent on the one deity who is truly sovereign and powerful.⁵

But *Tiruvaymoli* I.3.6-7 is sufficiently elusive as to suggest that this lord cannot even be labeled even by the name Narayana (as supreme deity) or Hari (Krsna). If he is never simply Ayan (Brahma) or Hara (Siva), neither is he predictably and univocally Hari or Narayana. He is always more mysteriously “the one” who is to be adhered to after the “two bonds”—to other deities—are broken.

⁵ In a religious framework where rebirth is taken to be the norm, Brahma and Siva are understood as among the more important of transmigrating beings, but they are not qualitatively different from the humans and animals currently at lower levels in the cycle of rebirth. Such lesser deities are perhaps what might elsewhere be called “demi-gods,” or recognized as the loftier among the angels and demons that have occupied Christian cosmography. Yet in their inferiority, Brahma and Siva and similar deities fit the capacities and desires of humans at lesser stages of spiritual development. For in their various births, people worship deities in keeping with their understanding of spiritual reality, their expectations regarding what might be gained in transactions with deities. It is only people at more advanced levels of spiritual development who can appropriately and adequately worship Narayana.

Finally, I.9 turns our attention to the divine accessibility of the lord who is creator, present everywhere yet discovered within:

On my tongue, abiding, flourishing,
He Himself is the soul and body of every learned art.
Destroying and protecting, His four broad shoulders like blossoms,
He holds the war discus and conch, His body ascetic red,
his eyes are lotuses, and He is in my eye. (I.9.8)

Lotus eye, in my eye, by His eye I see, eyes open even in my impurities.
His is the form of all five senses.
He makes Lord Ayan rise up from the lotus, and so too Siva with a third eye in His forehead;
He creates pure divinities and worlds too, and He is on my brow. (9)

Although good poetry cannot be pinned down definitively in terms of one or another doctrine, these songs clearly indicate a deity who is supreme and transcendent, the cause of the world and all that is in it, while yet remaining elusive, resistant to any particular or exhaustive definition. He is a distant figure, mysterious and incomprehensible, yet as near and vulnerable as the child Krsna who in some way shares human experience.

The Proclamation of the First Lord in *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10

Tiruvaymoli IV.10 is therefore not a unique or first statement of divine supremacy. But it is distinctive for several reasons. Each of its verses mentions Tiru (holy) Kurukur, Satakopan's home town, and thus it may be of great personal import.⁶ It is a concerted theological statement in ten verses, announcing with particular force that the lord is Adi Piran, "the lord who is first, the origin." He is the creator of all things, including lesser gods who are useful for a world where people work out their karma. Though he can be known, he is not graspable by philosophy nor proven by arguments; yet he is available here and now, in Tiru Kurukur.

I now offer the whole song with some annotations of my own⁷:

When there was not one at all, not god, not world, not life, not anything,
then He made the four-faced Brahma, with Him the gods, with them the worlds, and life
itself, and
in Tiru Kurukur where jeweled mansions tower like mountains, there the primordial
Lord stands—and
although He stands there, you seek another deity. (1)

⁶Tiru Kurukur is still known today by its connection to Satakopan, as Alvartirunagari, the "alvar's holy town." No other full song is dedicated to Tiru Kurukur, but all 100 songs mention it in their 11th verses. But so too, in other songs, it is made clear that the lord dwells in other holy sites too.

⁷ My comments are informed by the insights of traditional commentaries.

The last line indicates the key problem: the lord is one, sovereign and nearby, yet people still worship other deities, and subsequent verses seem to address that wider audience. The case is pushed forward by the bold claim of verse 2, what amounts to a missionary mandate:

The deity you seek and worship, and you yourself—in the beginning He created you both,
this first Lord of endless rich praise, and the temple where He is pleased to dwell
is in lovely Tiru Kurukur with its palaces and mansions.

So sing, dance, praise, go there, people of many worlds. Then spread out. (2)

Much of the theology of the song appears in these first two verses. The original lord makes everything, including the deities; this has implications for the practice and self-understanding of the person worshiping such deities; and this lord dwells nearby, in a local temple, in Tiru Kurukur, the saint's hometown. The subsequent eight verses drive the point home from various angles.

People fail to worship this true God, turning instead to other deities; yet there is no real competition:

Deities that spread everywhere, and many worlds, He created both,
then suddenly swallowed, concealed, and emitted them again.
He spanned them, uprooted them. You see all this, yet still lack clarity.
The immortals bow their heads in worship in Tiru Kurukur where the highest one dwells.
Except as a part of Him, O people of many worlds, there is no deity: admit it. (3)

This verse stresses Narayana's intentional role in managing the world and its deities. The stark concluding words—"admit it"—emphasize his supremacy over his two main rivals, Brahma and Siva, who exist only within the scope of Narayana's overall plan:

The Siva you speak of, Brahma himself, and others too—of them all, He alone is Lord.
See clearly how easily the skull was removed (from Siva's hand).
Within the gleaming high walls of lovely Tiru Kurukur dwells the Lord,
yet about Him you logicians cavil with futile words. But why? (4)

The mythic allusion is to the image of Siva as the severe ascetic who wanders as a beggar, using a skull for a begging bowl, and to the myth that he cut off Brahma's fifth head, reducing him to a four-faced deity. The Vaisnava version is that it was really Narayana who saved Siva, since in fact Siva actually had Brahma's fifth skull stuck to his hand, and had been forced to wander unwillingly with it on his hand. No credit is to be given to Siva for his status as a wandering ascetic, nor for his diminishment of Brahma. Against this theological claim made in the first two lines, lines 3 and 4 again stress his immediacy in Tiru Kurukur—and the failure of those who try to define and delimit God by logic.

Verse 5 goes on to emphasize the inadequacy of any logic that tries to get clear what can be known and stated about God; reasoning about the divine is inadequate and may be miss the truth about Narayana:

You with your old Saiva texts, you Jainas, you Buddhists,
you all argue and you debate, but He is all your deities.
Abundant ripe grain waves like yak tails in Tiru Kurukur—
see the radiant Lord who dwells there. This is no lie; praise Him. (5)

The non-scriptural reasoning of the Jains and Buddhists all the more surely fails, and they cannot grasp that this lord exists within and as the figures they worship.⁸

Verse 6 recapitulates on a more philosophical plane the poet's conception of the world seen in light of a single true God:

That you might praise and cherish another deity, He renders it exterior to Himself,
and makes you sure about it:
if you all gained release, there would be no more world.
But in Tiru Kurukur paddy ripens and lotuses bloom in flooded fields.
You see there the marvel of His immense power. Know this deeply, run to Him. (6)

The first three lines are obscure, and the commentators do not clarify them entirely. Satakopan seems to be probing how and why this supreme lord allows other gods to exist, and likewise permits the entire world of religious existence and practices aligned with each of them. The general notion that the lord creates all deities is here nuanced: creation is described as his becoming external to himself, even in and as those deities; when devotees relate to them, they gradually gain some clarity regarding who they themselves are, eventually with insight into how they are related to the supreme deity.⁹

Verse 7 keeps up the pressure, as Satakopan pleads with his listeners to change their minds and imitate the better celestial beings (similar to angels in Christian tradition) who come down to worship the lord of Kurukur:

You run ceaselessly, get born in many births,
for other deities you sing and dance, you bow down—
see how many ways you worship.
But the dwellers in the sky gather and give praise in Tiru Kurukur
where dwells the primordial form, quick-darting bird on His banner.¹⁰
Take refuge with Him. (7)

Verse 8 alludes to another myth, again redirecting to Narayana what had been intended earlier as praise of Siva, "the naked lord." By popular tradition, Siva saved

⁸ The insistence that this lord is "all your deities" is odd, given that the Jains and Buddhists are not normally thought of worshipping deities. Perhaps the author does not know clearly, or simply ignores, teachings key to Buddhist and Jain thought. Or, the idea is that all arguments are reduced to arguments about God and the gods; yet no matter how expansive and universal God is, reason alone cannot indicate successfully that there is a God, or what God's identity might be.

⁹ This is necessary, the commentators suggest, since beings must work out their good and bad karma in this world, even as they forego their old worship and turn to the lord. The "world" may then suggest the "world of karma and its effects," which cannot be dissolved or ignored as if unimportant. If this is the meaning of the second line ("if you all gained release, there would be no more world"), then it might best be interpreted in English as, "only after you all gain release, will there be no more world." Yet there is thus a tension in the verse: in the two lines it is stated that the world and its gods—put forth externally by the lord—exist so that this economy of gradual salvation can move forward, while the last lines urge the listener to step beyond divinities and their worship, going directly to the lord right now. Recognition and conversion of life and loyalty go together.

¹⁰ Garuda is the eagle Narayana rides down to earth; Satakopan's mention of him may indicate the speed with which the lord responds to those needing help.

the sage Markandeya from death; here, in the Vaisnava version, it is Narayana who enabled Siva to save Markandeya.¹¹

That day when the sage Markandeya took refuge by seeing that naked lord
and in that way survived, all that was Narayana's grace.

Broad screwspine with blossoms white as cranes hedge Tiru Kurukur
where the great primordial Lord dwells. And still you proclaim other deities? (8)

Unlike other gods, he is truly effective in accomplishing the salvation he intends;
his grace is abundant and, as always, his temple is near.

Verse 9 focuses again on the limits of knowledge:

It is difficult by means of the acclaimed six systems and others like them
to measure or even to see this primordial Lord
who abides in lovely Tiru Kurukur surrounded by lush cool fields.
Take this knowledge to heart, if you want to live. (9)

Once again, we are reminded that the lord is inaccessible to rational scrutiny,¹² and unsurprisingly we encounter an inevitable exhortation to opt for the sure, quick path of devotion. The lord who is unknowable by reason alone is easily accessible there, in that lovely temple amidst the fields:

Every god, every world, and all else exists through Him as His faultless form,
and all of it is how He abides.
Fields of ripe grain and sugarcane flourish in Tiru Kurukur
where He dwells disguised as that young dwarf, that tall pot-dancer. Serve Him. (10)

The first two lines are a particularly succinct statement of the theology of this hymn: everything is the form (*murti*) of God, even as his visible adornment. The two additional references in the fourth line are also interesting. This deity is rarely named in the hymn, except as "first" or "primordial" lord, and just once as "Narayana" and thus as not Siva and not Brahma. But here his identity is specified first as Narayana as the dwarf who by three steps takes possession of the entire universe, and as Krsna, the pot dancer.

Both references seem to suggest that the supreme, primordial lord is nearby and accessible. As a dwarf, Visnu came in a deceptively small stature, but then claimed the entire world as he grew to a cosmic size and crossed earth, sky, and heaven in three steps. As the attractive figure of Krsna engaged in the pot-dance, Krsna charmed those who danced with him.¹³

¹¹ The commentators recount the story of the interaction with Siva of another alvar, Tirumalisai Piran, who by this account is so deeply devout that he has eyes even in his foot, eyes blazing forth with fire more powerful than Siva's third eye. See Govindacharya 1982, pp 97–100.

¹² Such reflection is signaled here probably by the six systems of Hindu philosophical and theological reflection, or by a grouping of six heterodox systems, including Buddhism and Jainism.

¹³ The commentators do not explain the dance itself, but comment only it is so lovely a dance that those who hear about it experience the same pleasure as those who danced it; both the dancers and those who remember the dance dwell as it were in the same moment of time. See also Hardy 1983, p. 180 and n. 206.

We may also appropriately reemphasize here how the saint mentions in each verse his own native place, Tiru Kurukur; it is proclaimed over and over as the place where the lord dwells as the first, primordial lord, as the nearby and transitional space where God and devotee meet, and where the devotee, while still in this world, travels from infatuation with the world, as not-God and a substitute for God, to an understanding of the world as radiant with divine presence.

In *Tiruvaymoli* (as in other Tamil texts of the same genre), it is standard that the final verse of a hymn reminds us of the author, the composition, the deity praised, and the fruits of the particular hymn at hand:

The Lord reigns with His discus,
and united with Him is the master from splendid Tiru Kurukur,
lord Satakopan whose chest is adorned with fresh fragrant garlands of makil flowers;
with deep feeling he sang these thousand verses, and those skilled in these ten
have within their grasp the great city Vaikunta, whence they never return. (11)

The lord with his war discus, the saint with his garland, are united; out of that union comes *Tiruvaymoli*, so potent that even the preceding ten verses suffice for salvation, crossing over from this earthly home, Tiru Kurukur, to Vaikunta, the Lord's heavenly city.

Theological Insights in the Commentaries

Though I have already been drawing on the commentaries, I wish now to highlight a bit more clearly the tradition's reading of *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10. The great medieval commentators read devoutly and brought enormous religious and intellectual acuity to bear on every word of the hymn, linking it to the theology of the tradition's leading intellectual, Ramanuja (who, as mentioned above, was probably himself influenced by *Tiruvaymoli*). Here we will note some key features highlighted in their introductions to the song.

I begin with the theologically rich narrative offered by Tiru Kurukkai Piran Pillan (twelfth century), the first commentator whose teaching has come down to us in settled form. Pillan begins by locating the song in the spiritual journey of the saint, emphasizing Satakopan's desire to leave this world, but also the sense of mission that enables him to endure continuing to live here:

In previous songs, the saint had begged the Lord, "Death is better than living among people who are not Vaisnavas, so end my life quickly." But when the Lord did not give that grace, [the saint still] considered living among them something to be avoided. But then he decided, "We can get along with them if we get them to become Vaisnavas." So he expounds the Lord's nature as Lord of all, easily accessible to all, etc., and graciously addresses them saying, "Take refuge with him." He has seen the Lord, and by the excess of delight arising due to union that arises after uniting with him, and by compassion toward those selves that had lost the Lord, he graciously asks them, "Take refuge with our Lord."

Pillan then states the preceding account formally and abstractly, in terms of authorities and the list of claims made about the lord. First—in a list too long to repeat here—he collects "statements from all the Upanisads, supported by all the

traditional and epic statements,” such as indicate that the lord known here is indeed the lord of authoritative tradition. Then Pillan offers a short creedal statement:

The saint portrays the Lord as engaging by His divine play in the creation, protection, and destruction of a full set of countless beings beginning with the four-faced god [Brahma] and Pasupati [Siva]; as having entirely dependent on Himself all selves beginning with Brahma, Rudra [Siva], etc.; as the foundation of all the worlds; as what is to be known from all the Vedas and their accessory texts; as worthy of worship by all gods and all seers; as receiving the obeisance of all deities; as the controller of all and pervading all.

He concludes by emphasizing how Satakopan presses his listeners with urgent questions:

The Lord is also easily accessible to all—and yet you want to take refuge with a deity other than this Narayana? Does another divinity even exist?

What is striking in this relatively succinct prediction of the content of *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10 is the convergence of the saint’s decision to remain in this world, among unbelievers, and his determination to act vigorously—by his poetic word—to win over worldly people. His song is the fruit of his experience, and a determined effort to give purpose to his own life by the mission to make the lord known to others.

Nanjiyar (1182–1287), a student of Pillan, offers a longer introduction that I can only sample here. It highlights more directly the power of the saint’s poetry:

The saint sees how worldly existence lacks substance,¹⁴ and how it is necessary with the Lord’s help to save all people by destroying their bonds of worldly existence. For this sake he makes an effort. Although people lack the desire (for liberation), he himself has already been uplifted, having begged and gained what he desired from the Lord. So now he undertakes to perfect those in this world whom even the Lord has given up on, unable to perfect them by His qualities.

A teacher can accomplish what is otherwise either rarely or poorly known. His persuasive role is also simply informative: everyone depends on the lord, not on the economics of good and bad karma; the lord is beyond this world and its constraints:

From his own abundant compassion the saint expounds the primary importance of knowing the Lord’s transcendence. He shows them that their true state of being is to depend on an other [that is, on the Lord], instead of thinking of themselves merely in the web of sorrows and joys.

For this to be possible, there must be a proper and strong understanding of God as one who is free and able to arrange the world such that in it others may be free:

That other [on whom all depend] must be one who is dependent only on Himself and independent of karma [and other constraints,] and who is does not experience sorrows and joys or other ordinary worldly activities. So we must ask: “Who is the one whom we are to accept as maker? What qualities does He have? What are His names?”¹⁵

¹⁴ That is, it is dried out, empty of essence and savor.

¹⁵ Since ordinary experience does not specify who this God is, for the sake of reliable instruction, the sources of right knowledge must be identified. Pillan adds: “When a desire to know such things is thus born, and when it comes to teaching these things, at that time perception and the other senses cannot be authoritative means of knowledge for something beyond the senses. So the instructive scriptures alone are authoritative regarding this topic. Heterodox traditions are not authoritative regarding what needs to be known, since they are subject to deception and other faults, and are at best merely the product of human intelligence. By contrast the Veda, which is the

But for the proper knowledge to be gained, scripture must be read properly. For this purpose, by Nanjiyar's reading, Satakopan includes certain more argumentative points in his song:

The saint states this truth (about the Lord and how to know Him) in sentences referring to what is true regarding reality, to meditation (on meaning), and the attainment (of the goal). Then, to insure the fruitfulness of his explanation of scriptural statements regarding the cause such as express what is true, he refutes the idea that lordship belongs to Brahma, Rudra [or other deities].

On that basis, he offers a creedal summary:

In accord with the rule that the scriptures properly construed have a single true referent,¹⁶ the saint teaches the meaning of such scriptures: the Lord, the husband of Sri, cause of the world, controller of the world and its protector, banisher of all misfortunes, self of all beings, greater than all, and Lord of Brahma, Rudra, and other deities. He asserts that "the husband of Sri alone is the Lord," and that "he is exceedingly accessible."¹⁷ In keeping with the purport of scripture, he teaches the Lord's transcendence and accessibility, so as to insure that people incline toward the Lord.

Nanjiyar suggests that the various scriptures and deities are generated for different kinds of people, and geared to the three constituents of reality.¹⁸ Operative here is the fact of divine providence, the view that deities exist for the sake of people who still must live in the world. Most people will be satisfied with such deities. But for those who seek him, the lord takes residence at Tiru Kurukur, nearby and accessible.

Nanjiyar too thus understands the hymn as a teaching moment, about the world as it is, and about the right path that might better be taken. The lord leaves it to Satakopan to instruct living beings and win them over. But the communication of ideas is by itself ineffective. People must first see what is true worship of the true lord, and thereafter cultivate a desire for that lord, and for this, a song as beautiful as *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10 is the means.¹⁹

proper locus for the fourteen meditative acts of knowledge, is authoritative." According to Purusottama Naidu in his modern Tamil rendering (1973, p. 382, n. 4), the fourteen sciences (*vidyas*) are the four Vedas, the six subsidiary sciences (recitation, grammar, ritual rubrics, etymology, astrology, meter), and four supporting disciplines (logic, ritual analysis, the epic narratives, and texts instructive regarding dharma).

¹⁶ That is, the *gati-samanya* ("sameness of referent") rule, by which scripture passages are to be construed in a way that highlights their coherence; *Vedanta Sutras* I.1.11.

¹⁷ The presence of the Goddess Sri makes accessibility sure and permanent.

¹⁸ The three strands or *gunas*: what is true and light (*sattva*), what is passionate (*rajas*), and what is dark and inertial (*tamas*).

¹⁹ I note here one more contribution from the commentarial tradition. Several generations later and in poetic form both elegant and theologically incisive, in his *Vedanta Desika*, *Dramidopanisad Tatparyaratnatrayali* and *Dramidopanisad Saram* with the *Sararatnaprabhavali* and *Sararthasaram* of Uttamur Virarachavachariar. Madras: Ubaya Vedanta Granthamala, 1983 summarized the meaning of the song in a Sanskrit verse of his own, distilling each verse's key point: "because he endures even at the end of the age (1); because he is the creator of the entire host of deities (2); because he brings about the protection and so forth of all people (3); because he supports Siva and Brahma (4); because he is the self of all deities (5); because he distributes fruits in accord with their various deeds (6); because he bears the eagle Garuda on his standard (7); because he

Theological Reflection

I hope to have shown in the preceding pages that while this study of a single hymn of eleven verses of course does not yield a complete understanding of the Srivaisnava understanding of God, nevertheless attention to it illustrates how God as the highest yet efficaciously accessible Reality has been understood in one important ancient and still flourishing Hindu tradition. While the case is specific, many of the points explored here are widely recognized in other Hindu theistic traditions. Indeed, many of the points raised in the song and commentaries should seem familiar to theologians in *any* theistic tradition: there is a supreme deity portrayed primarily as the source and maker of all things (living beings and deities included); human society as a religious and cultural phenomenon is also ordered in accord with the divine will, even the aspects of human experience that seem contrary to worship of this deity. This God is characterized in *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10 with reference to Vaisnava mythology, but his primary name is “the First lord”—first, primal, original, source—a lord who dwells everywhere and is not merely a sectarian deity. Although this God cannot be properly known by argument and logic, neither is he merely wrapped in mystery, for he is present in the world in small and lovely ways—in myth as the dwarf and the pot-dancer, but now and always as accessible in temples such as that in Tiru Kurukur. That the lord is present in the Tiru Kurukur temple makes it clear that this monotheism allows for, even insists on, real presence in the world in particular places. This narrows the possibilities also, since that particular temple is privileged. Yet even in *Tiruvaymoli* this same lord also dwells in other temples, and so there is no radical exclusion of alternatives, even if this is a strategy of hierarchization that ranks deities and the capacities of their devotees.

Some points are unexpected if our expectations regarding monotheism derive primarily from the Christian tradition. It is by his self-manifestation that this God is creator; the created world is a kind of externalization of God, as is the pantheon of gods. Such gods have a place in the economy of salvation; engaging them can be efficacious, and even necessary as human beings work out their karma and ascend toward salvation. Srivaisnava Hinduism thus proposes an inclusive monotheism, a model of ultimate reality that is interestingly analogous to those developed from Biblical and Qur’anic roots, in Christian and Islamic theologies.²⁰

None of this is argued with purely philosophical rigor, neither in the song nor in the commentaries we have briefly considered. Even if one can philosophize from

protected the sage Markandeya (8); *because* he is beyond the grasp of words (9); *because* he is without flaw (10)—for all these reasons, this conqueror of enemies calls him lord, lofty over all the immortals.” Desika thus sees a concerted argument operative in the song, each verse adding to the emerging conclusion: “for all these reasons, this conqueror of enemies [Satakōpan] calls him lord, lofty over all the immortals.” Yet Desika’s choice of the key element of each verse is in keeping with what we read in the song. What is left unstated, of course, is the dramatic scenario, the alvar’s urgent appeal to worldly people to change their thinking on their priorities in worship.

²⁰One point that does not arise in *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10 is the following: while this God is male, he is eternally accompanied by the goddess Sri Lakshmi.

and on the basis of *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10, the song itself does not include the argumentation one would need to make a convincing account of its teachings. Since the commentators generally work within the bounds of their tradition and presume an audience of believers, neither do they take on the task of justifying to outsiders the song's strong position. Rather, in Satakopan's act of poetry/song, and in the narrative Pillan and Nanjiyar build around that composition, the goal is persuasion on aesthetic grounds, the pleasing verse and heartfelt appeal that brings the listener to reconsider his or her commitments and make a new choice about how to worship. Even the lord's own good qualities do not suffice, Pillan says; it is the poet's words that make a difference.

Of course, since this deity is not "God in general," and so the question of particularity arises for us as well as for the tradition itself: who is this God? what is his name? This is a very particular deity, who resides in the Tiru Kurukur temple, has the Goddess Sri as his eternal consort, is known from scriptures such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Visnu Purana* and *Tiruvaymoli*. As Narayana (IV.10.7, 8), he is not "God in general." But the fact that he is Narayana does not necessarily identify him as a (merely) sectarian deity, since the attributes the Srivaisnava tradition associates with "Narayana" are mostly attributes that might be expected in any maximally perfect deity, irrespective of the tradition involved.²¹ It may be that God thus named is in some ways universal, while in others less accessible.

The song and its interpretation are indeed also sectarian and argumentative. *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10, particularly in the context of earlier songs in *Tiruvaymoli* such as those I have briefly noted, offers a flexible yet comprehensive explanation of reality. The transcendent and the immanent are operative, and the imagery is that of an active ultimate principle, deeply engaged in the particularities of the world. It takes into account other views counting them lesser but not entirely denying their validity. But there is no denying also that like many or most views of ultimate reality, this Srivaisnava view can be seen as deeply condescending; it is obviously offensive toward Saivas in particular, since Siva is explained away, remaining only in a diminished form.

Up to this point, I may be thought simply to have been describing a Hindu deity as understood in a particular Hindu text and context. But by introducing the Hindu materials in detail and with a theological eye, I have also been bringing clarity to where we are at the beginning of a comparative reflection on "God" and "Ultimate Reality." I have done so with sensitivity to the materials I have been reading, but also with deference toward my own Catholic tradition—what makes sense to me, to us. So my reading has been Christian and theological all along. My initial goal has been modest, for I have hoped simply to have moved us away from overly generic views of divine and ultimate realities, that we might put aside underdetermined and ill-informed notions of what a Hindu monotheism might look like. But once we have studied a particular Hindu theology as expounded in layers of song and commentary, then the door is opened to a deeper than usual theological learning among

²¹ On "Narayana" as both a sectarian name and universalizable name of God, see Clooney (2008), pp. 44–51.

religions, and in this case across the Hindu-Christian boundary. At this point, a comparative theology becomes more specific and stronger, a real engagement with an alternate presentation of a monotheistic faith and a vision of ultimate reality.

Pondering a hymn like *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10 helps clarify what is and isn't at stake when we venture to compare properly our notion of God with that of another highly developed theistic tradition. Neither a Christian or a Hindu tradition is uniquely theological. Neither is simply informing us of some ideas about God, that others more expertly interpret. Neither is merely theoretical, since both intend to point out the best way to salvation. In both, the confession of a supreme deity is both a matter of truth and the fruit of potent composition and vulnerable listening. If we wish to move beyond these preliminary and general points and move to a comparison, for instance with the Christian understanding of God, we can proceed in two ways.

First, we can pick up on the poetic starting point that here we have traced with respect to *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10, by a cross reading with another song indicative of praise of God and a theology of God as supreme. Here is an example, Psalm 97:

- ¹The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!
- ²Clouds and thick darkness are all around Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.
- ³Fire goes before Him, and consumes His adversaries on every side.
- ⁴His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles.
- ⁵The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth.
- ⁶The heavens proclaim His righteousness; and all the peoples behold His glory.
- ⁷All worshippers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; all gods bow down before Him.
- ⁸Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O God.
- ⁹For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.
- ¹⁰The Lord loves those who hate evil; He guards the lives of His faithful; He rescues them from the hand of the wicked.
- ¹¹Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.
- ¹²Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to His holy name!²²

The task here would then be to engage in a close reading of this Psalm, as we did with *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10, and tease out its portrayal of God, its judgment on the world and its gods in light of this sovereign God, and its plea to those listening that they should adhere to this God. We could thereafter, on that foundation, read across Psalm 97 and *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10, and reflect imaginatively on the presentations given in both songs. From there, we could then struggle toward differentiated representations of God in each tradition and the two read together.

Adhering to the model employed in this paper, we could then undertake further analysis by turning to traditional commentaries, such as that of Augustine or any leading traditional commentator on the Psalms, to begin reading the text in light of tradition. But the approach is clear: attend to the primary texts; draw on their imaginative resources to comprehend both the theology and rhetoric of a portrayal of the supreme deity, ultimate reality; with an eye toward the kinds of comparisons possible with specific other theological cultures, in this case by attending to

²²New Revised Standard Version.

premodern commentaries on Psalm 97. But this is a long-term project, beyond this essay.

Second, and consequently, in this context we can move more quickly to several summary comparative theological insights that must suffice for now. To say how the theology found in *Tiruvaymoli*—in its images, appeals, implied tenets, as a text of tradition—might be compared with a Christian sense of God is at first rather easy. Many similarities are evident, while the differences are in part literary and cultural, simply to be noticed, respected, and appreciated. There are also more substantive theological differences, and these are to be dealt with carefully, in detail. We need to recognize that such differences in understandings of God cannot easily be banished. Yet even the most stubborn differences need not entirely thwart a theological exchange.

Here are several issues generated out of *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10 that call for comparative study, to which are added some indications of how a Christian theological response might develop:

1. *What is the relation of God to the world God creates?* *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10—and its commentarial tradition—sees the world as a divine manifestation, God’s self-externalization, such that nature and society, humans and divinities, are all God “outside God’s self.”

Toward a Christian response: There is considerable merit to Satakopan’s imaginative affirmation of the complexity of a world to be understood only within the reality of God, and little reason to reject his views outright. There may be some concern over *Tiruvaymoli*’s implicit panentheism, but it is best primarily appreciated as escaping the double dangers of an over-identification of God and creation, and an overly accentuated difference between God and world.

2. *Where is God to be found?* According to *Tiruvaymoli*, God is Narayana, the ultimate reality also operates in the world, active in protecting and aiding those who seek God; though transcendent, Narayana is present in particular temples, such as Tiru Kurukur.

Toward a Christian response: A Christian can easily affirm as plausible this admission that God is indeed present and active in the world, especially accessible in holy places and by worship. The possibility of positive knowledge of God is defended, marked by a certain reticence regarding myth as true, yet living on only as remembered, in situations where there is a need to remember God’s deeds of old. “Today” God’s work is primarily in hearts and minds, individual and communal. God’s current presence is both less public and more intimate. That the repertoire of places, memories, deeds, and names is entirely different from those of the Bible may be problematic at a primal faith level—which names and places count?—but theologically, the Srivaisnava location of God as ultimate reality is akin to mainstream Christian approaches. We can push this key issue further:

3. *What is the status of gods other than “our God,” and how is their existence to be valued?* *Tiruvaymoli* sees other deities as real and active in the world, but within

and dependent upon God's plan for the world. Given the limited state of human consciousness and human freedom with respect to material reality, desire, and limited goals, deities aid people at their current capacity; hence the divine permission that they should function in the world.

Toward a Christian response: This Srivaisnava view can be recognized as not absolutely exclusive, since the gods exist, function, have a purpose. Nor is it particularly generous, since it is basically a supersessionist or hierarchical inclusive view, as the other gods and religions seen as lesser, preliminary versions of right belief and worship.

4. *Who then is God?* As we have seen, much said about Narayana could be said about God and God's nature in other traditions too. Yet Narayana is also, in IV.10, a God with a more specific identity, remembered in accord with certain Indian myths, worshipped in certain temples and not in others, etc. This is God with a particular history and particular name.

Toward a Christian response: It is first of all good that God can thus be defined in so particular a way. A completely sectarian understanding of God, with no shared features, would close the door to interreligious learning, it is also the case that denying to God any specific features—history, deeds, rites, revealed words—would diminish both Christianity and Hinduism. But still, the difference arising here would then occur at a very basic level: God, with God's perfections, is nonetheless also this particular God. God is Narayana worshipped in Tiru Kurukur—or, God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who also is God. Though conceptually these supreme deities share many of the same perfections, names matter and divide them. But the remaining difference—which name of God is final?—seems unlikely to be negotiated theologically or on rational grounds. Insofar as Christian and Srivaisnava models of God are indeed similar and similarly mature, it becomes nearly impossible for a well-informed theologian to expect to win by posing arguments neatly in favor of one tradition and against the other. These models of God stand next to one another, and the scholarly prospects for ruling out the one in favor of the other are dim.

5. *Which composer of words speaks successfully in God's name?* What cannot be resolved by logic may be resolved by aesthetic and spiritual insights. Satakopan is generally reticent about his authority, and the commentators seem right in insisting that he speaks authoritatively because he has encountered God, and thus come to see the world differently. On that basis, as Pillan says, his speech may be more persuasive than the lord's demonstration of the divine perfections. It is from this perspective that the Srivaisnava tradition has seen *Tiruvaymoli* as indeed revelatory, the divine Word in human words. Satakopan could speak forcefully in favor of his beliefs due to the depth of his experience of his Lord, and the overflow of that experience into his lovely compositions.

Toward a Christian response: It makes sense to agree that an intellectual and reasoned clearing of the theological ground with respect to ultimate reality is at

best preparatory to other and more passionate modes of composition, expressive of spiritual exchange. The ultimate reality of God is best known in particular and privileged words that continue to inspire over time. That is, revelation and inspiration are possible and important. This is so, even if related questions remain: If God speaks through particular individuals, which are thus inspired? Which texts by which authors tell us authoritatively about God present in our world? But again, nothing is gained by imagining competition between the Gospel and *Tiruvaymoli*; close reading will not serve as a basis for deciding which text is more inspired, which message more true. Neither is it satisfying to say that since both the Gospel and *Tiruvaymoli* speak of God's ultimate reality, we should simply read and enjoy both. Truth is at stake; how we understand God and how we worship is at stake. At this point—where both enjoyment and truth matter—the way forward may lie beyond theology, in a realm that nonetheless has been cleared by the kind of comparative theological reflection suggested here; once the models of God are clearer, the true choices too are clearer.

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Part VII

Ground, Start and End

of Being Theologies

Introduction to Ground, Start and End of Being Theologies

Jeanine Diller

The title of this section suggests for consideration two new types of theistic models which, given their focus on a particular aspect of God's relationship to being, group naturally with the venerable model of ground of being theology. I call the first '*start of being theology*', to cover views such as deism that identify God as the efficient cause of the universe, and the second '*end of being theology*', for views such as those here by John Bishop and John Bacon that identify God as the final cause of the universe or humanity, respectively. Notice that start of being theology is distinct from those ground of being theologies that deny God is the efficient cause of the universe, e.g., as Tillich seems to when he argues against a God who "brings the universe into being at a certain moment" and who more generally is "a cause alongside other causes" (1957, 6).

At first, it might seem pedantic to introduce start and end of being theologies into the array of theistic model types. After all, their central claims that God is the source and purpose of the universe (respectively) are already affirmed by most proponents of the theistic models displayed in this volume. But start and end of being theologies are distinctive because they take these widely-affirmed claims as *definitive* of God, all by themselves. That is, while many views take it to be true or perhaps even necessary that God is the start or end of the universe, start and end of being theologies take these properties, *per se* and respectively, to be fundamental to what God is – in their purest forms, to be necessary *and* sufficient *de dicto* for being God. This makes these theologies remarkably conceptually spare, allowing them to take as accidental, or abandon altogether, many standard theological commitments and the problems that come with them. The question that haunts these views, though, is at what cost: how little can a model contain and still really be about God?

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Ground of Being Theologies

Christopher Demuth Rodkey's article "Paul Tillich's Pantheon of Theisms: An Invitation to Think Theonomously" provides both an excellent literature review and sensible reading of Tillich's ground of being theology, though Rodkey does not use this term for Tillich's view here. Rodkey begins by collecting from across Tillich's corpus his "pantheon of theisms," viz.: (1) The God-above-God, (2) Ultimate Concern, (3) The Ground and Structure of Being, (4) The Abyss and Depth of Being, and (5) The Power of Being. Rodkey decides that, though various commentators have read Tillich as either a panentheist, deist, or pantheist, it is best to see him as an "ecstatic naturalist," where the Power of Being delivers the naturalism (since this Power is "the power in every thing that has power") and the Depth of Being delivers the ecstasy (persons experience the Power of Being ecstatically, as holy). This is an apt interpretation since it tracks Tillich's method of correlative theology in *Systematic Theology I and II*: ecstasy is a "state of mind" which is "an exact correlate" to the "state of reality" of the power of being which animates and transcends the finite world (see e.g., 13).

Ironically, even after producing this pantheon of theisms, Rodkey indicates that Tillich types himself an atheist, specifically a Christian theological atheist, who says with Nietzsche that the God of "theological theism" is dead, and against Nietzsche that, for the love of God, it should be replaced by the God-above-God who is not a thing among other things. Moreover, Tillich urges that this movement of denial and replacement of theisms should happen not just once, but always, in a *semper negativa* of "continuous self-negation" in order to "stay relevant to the current situation." This is an invitation to a dynamic "theonomous" kind of thinking about God in which we are always adding and tossing and adding new theisms in and out of our pantheon – opening the possibility that Tillich might have replaced ground of being theology one day had the cultural context demanded it.

In the face of Tillich's pantheon of theisms and the difficulty of his language, one can see why G.E. Moore would exclaim (as Rodkey tells us): "I am sorry to say that there is not a single sentence that Professor Tillich has uttered that I was able to understand – not a single sentence!" Given Rodkey's perspicuous reading of ecstatic naturalism, this reaction is too strong; Tillich has a comprehensible view here, of God as the power or energy that animates the world which, when truly encountered, provokes ecstatic response. Still, this view is slim enough, and temporary enough given thenomous thinking, that it is not obvious how someone might work up a concern about this God, much less a lasting, ultimate concern. Tillich will have to hypothesize that the ecstasy provoked is, for believers, very strong – strong enough to produce ultimate concern despite these conceptual difficulties.

Jordan Paper's "The Theology of the Chinese Jews: An Understanding of God that is Simultaneously Jewish, 'Confucian' and Daoist" offers a fresh perspective on what ground of being theology looks like in an entirely different cultural context. Paper explores the syncretic doctrine of God that arose gradually among Jews from Persia who, originally driven to the coasts of China by trade a thousand years ago, eventually moved inland to Kaifeng and established a community there that lasted

over 800 years and featured one of the longest continuously functioning synagogues in the world. Just as other Jews assimilated to a variety of global cultures during occupation, exile and the Diaspora, so the Kaifeng Jews assimilated to the Chinese culture around them.

Paper reluctantly types the Kaifeng Jews' resulting doctrine of God as a kind of ground of being theology, in light of its use in Western discussions of Zen Buddhism and Tillich's probable knowledge of these. Though the conceptual connections between the two views are left largely unexplained, one can see the harmonies, especially in the Kaifeng Jews' use, on stelae in the synagogue, of 'Dao' or 'Tian' to refer to God. Dao and YHWH are similar: both are singular, and both have a primordial existence before any differentiation takes place, at the time of creation in the Hebrew Bible, or when Sky and Earth break forth in Chinese cosmogony. The one key difference, on the face, is that Dao is non-anthropomorphic while YHWH is, at least in the Torah, anthropomorphic. But the Kaifeng Jews made sense of this tension in the same way Saadia and Maimonides did in their encounter with Greek thought: they came to interpret the Torah symbolically and metaphorically. In the end, the syncretic YHWH/Dao created an identification of God with (a) existence itself, and more specifically (b) the way it flows – not far perhaps from Tillich's ideas of God as (a') being itself, and more specifically (b') the power of being.

In addition to showing how ground of being theology might be embodied in Chinese Judaism, Paper's essay offers other fascinating details of the Kaifeng Jews' religious practice. For instance, in Chinese religion, "the central religious ritual is the offering of food and wine to the departed members of the family" as well as to other non-ancestral deities. The Jews creatively understood the patriarchs to be their ancestors, and so were able to participate in this major form of Chinese religious life. They drew the line, however, at the non-ancestral and non-cosmic deities: "the term for non-cosmic, non-nature deities, *shen*, is not used even once" on the synagogues' stelae, for instance. There is much more of interest – the silences in the stelae about the Exodus, about the covenant, about theodicy – so read thoroughly.

Start of Being Theology

As indicated above, start of being theology identifies God as the start of the universe – where the "start" is conceived as either chronologically or ontologically prior to the universe, or both. The only paper in this section that discusses a pure start of being theology is Kurt Anders Richardson's "Deistic Distance: The Shift in Early Modern Theology from Divine Immanence to Divine Design," which describes the historical development of deism, a "hard" form of start of being theology on which God is both the start of a universe and then leaves it to run on its own, which develops alongside a more general "soft" start of being theology that affirms just the first conjunct, that God started the universe.

Richardson shows that the development of deism turns on a key factor: whether natural objects are thought to be able to endure on their own once created. This belief was not yet in place in the middle of the thirteenth century, when Bonaventure

still took God to sustain the universe as both “continuous cause” and knower. But a generation later, Duns Scotus took the continued existence of natural things to “not require a model of radical immanence”, a theme which was then picked up and experimentally bolstered by early modern science, which “took seriously the actual material and energy-based relations and movements of the physical world on their own terms;” according to Richardson.

Theologically, the idea that natural things could endure without God meant that God could, in principle, be “at a distance” from the world, as Richardson says. This possibility engendered three new theological stances: (1) physico-theism, which affirmed God and denied that God was at a distance, (2) deism, which affirmed God but accepted that God was at a distance, and (3) atheism, which rejected God altogether. The consummate physico-theist John Ray, writing a few years after the release of *Newton's Principia* in 1687 and relying on “encyclopedic details” from the science of his day, displayed how grand is the “Fabrick of Heaven and Earth” and then deployed this finding in a teleological argument for the existence of what Richardson delightfully calls “the omni-competent Designer.” This designer, proven or not, is conceived mechanistically, as setting the initial conditions to permit the universe to run on its own. Though this sounds a lot like deism, Richardson underscores rightly that it is not since Ray still takes God to remain active in the universe, in particular by sustaining the laws of nature if not the objects, and by giving revelation. So, in physico-theism, we have start of being theology in its soft form – God causes the universe, and stays active in it.

Though atheists denied both of the physico-theists’ conjuncts – no God caused the universe, no God is active in it – the deists took a middle way, keeping the first conjunct and denying the second. Their insistence on God’s creating the universe mechanistically was crucial for arriving at the standard formula for deism: “God at a distance with a universe running on its own.” Richardson explicates deism through one of its great exponents, Anthony Collins, who was driven to the idea of complete determinism not only by science but also by personal piety, since he thought it provided a satisfying explanation of divine foreknowledge. Collins’ example left me thinking that, among the three parties, the deists best embodied faith seeking understanding in the Enlightenment context. Still, as Elizabeth Anderson says, one wonders how much faith it takes to believe in deism, since if the *a posteriori* arguments for the existence of a God support anything, they support deism. Moreover, it is unclear whether there is much in deism to have faith in: there is “nothing to show that the deity in question cares about human beings or has any moral significance” (218).

End of Being Theology

In the last section of his engaging paper “How a Modest Fideism May Constrain Theistic Commitments: Exploring an Alternative to Classical Theism,” John Bishop offers a new alternative to classical theism which specifically denies that God is a

first cause and instead identifies God as, solely, a final cause of the universe. His view is the purest end of being theology in this section. He is driven to it by a criterion he develops in section I – that it should be morally permissible to leap to the God one adopts – and his finding in Section II that, on this criterion, a Kantian cannot rightly leap to a classical God, because this God's response to evil, at least as pictured in the standard greater goods defense, is morally impermissible. In Part III, Bishop develops a notion of God toward which a Kantian, and really anyone else, *could* morally leap. He takes as foundational that God is necessarily worthy of worship, and thinks this function is secured by God's being the greatest thing we can conceive – greatest not only ontologically but also ethically. Bishop secures *ethical* greatness by taking seriously the idea in I John that God is Love, and concludes that the greatest thing we can conceive is not a supremely ethical person but rather a supremely ethical community which, concretely, is “Love active in the world.” Moreover, still in the interests of ethical greatness and schooled by the lesson of section II, Bishop makes the self-described “bold move” of denying that God is creator to keep God from being “ultimately responsible” for evil. Though at first God's not being a creator seems a huge obstacle to God's *ontological* greatness, Bishop assures us that it is not, with two arguments: (1) God as Divine Love can still be “the ground of our hope” if we can only affirm that “nothing conceivably exceeds it in its active power to bring good from evil” and that Love as active, concretely, in human history, and (2) being a creator is ontologically overrated; being the *point* of the universe is at least as ontologically supreme. And God *is* the point of the universe, for Bishop: “the Universe exists so that the supreme good (which is the existence of dynamic interpersonal love) should come to exist and ultimately be victorious”.

If his arguments stick, Divine Love as the end of being meets Bishop's criteria for Godhood: God as Love is both ethically and ontologically the greatest conceivable thing, and thus worthy of worship. But I wonder: can Divine Love, or an end of being more generally, fill the pragmatic role for God to which theists within the world's religious traditions are accustomed, and to which Bishop himself alludes when he says he wants his notion to be “religiously adequate.” Can one pray to a relationship? Can one worship it? If not, is it right to call it ‘God’?

Start and End of Being Theologies

In contrast to the deists, who offer a pure start of being theology, and Bishop, who offers a pure end of being theology, John Bacon, John Davenport and Nicholas Maxwell offer conjoined start *and* end of being theologies in their papers here. Bacon begins his lively paper “The God Insight: Vengeance or Destiny?” with an end of being theology, in which he identifies God, not as the universe's end as in Bishop, but rather as humanity's end – glossing God variously as “our ultimate intelligible destiny,” the “ultimate purpose of human striving, rational and irrational, emotional and otherwise,” and the “final cause of earthly striving for improvement,”

He argues for the existence of such an end with an inference to the best explanation (IBE) which he calls “the argument from meaningfulness.” It begins, as IBEs do, with an explanandum: “the remarkable fact, which seems so central to the worthwhileness of the human journey” that “some lives, or stretches of lives, are meaningful and some are not.” He establishes this fact, surprisingly and effectively, by reminding us of fictional lives that are meaningless (Eliot’s Casaubon) and meaningful (Dickens’ Dorritt), along with real lives that become filled with meaning (Saul turned Paul of Tarsus). He considers two competing explanations of this fact: (1) that meaning is created by fulfilling strong desires and (2) that there must be an “overarching *ur-telos*, for the sake of which the meaningful life is lived.” He compellingly denies the former, favors the latter, and, apparently assuming these are all the options, concludes that there is a final cause. He also (unfortunately without a nod to their many critiques) assents to Aristotle’s and then Aquinas’ first cause arguments, and so concludes that there is a first cause. He combines these two findings to arrive at his start and end of being theology: “<Creator, Good> just is God, postulated out of scientific method, not proven.”

Bacon’s start of being theology, like the physico-theists and Davenport’s, is soft: God creates the world and stays active in it, in Bacon’s case, to give it meaning. Bacon’s end of being theology and his argument from meaningfulness for it are traditionally grounded and philosophically promising, though the argument here is as yet too lean (e.g., he still needs to knock out alternative explanations for meaning in life, such as the existentialists’ that we each create our own). Most of the rest of Bacon’s paper reads like a systematic theology of his view, following out its consequences for revelation, prayer, faith, miracles, hermeneutics and more. There is much here that is interesting in its own right, such as his thoughts on the logic of the Trinity or his idea that “praying is something we do sincerely to ourselves.” These many pages also constitute an argument for how bare Bacon thinks a start and end of being theology is, in the end: it does not deliver much of the body of belief and practice contained in the world’s major living religions. I wonder, however, if a start and end of being theology is stronger than Bacon thinks. The history of work on a first cause is strewn with entailment arguments designed to show that a first cause would in addition have to be, e.g., incorporeal, simple, perfect, the highest good, necessary, eternal, unchangeable, etc. (see e.g., Aquinas 1–26 and Clarke). Entailment arguments from the notion of final cause are fewer, but Bacon himself offers one near the close: a final cause must be good; otherwise, how could it be the object of our strivings? Though it would take further work to show these entailments are valid (regarding Bacon’s, Satan could say “evil is my good,” for instance), they still suggest how strong a claim it *might* be to say that there is a first and final cause of the universe. To me, anyway, this would be headline news.

In “A New Existential Model of God: A Synthesis of Themes from Kierkegaard, Buber, Levinas and Open Theism,” John Davenport offers his own start and end of being theology, inspired by the many thinkers in his subtitle. His New Existential Model of God (NEM) combines seven aspects of God: God as (1) Creator, (2) Perfect Agapic Love (which he freshly explicates in terms of generosity, where x is

generous iff x values not x as anterior from x), (3) the Source of Eschatological Possibilities, (4) processively perfect, (5) in a “higher time (H-time),” an asymmetric, A-series-like order in the divine being, (6) having limited knowledge of future contingents, including subjunctive conditionals of freedom, and (7) in light of 6, taking risks in the act of creation. Davenport takes (3) and (4) to be the “two fundamental points that distinguish broadly existential conceptions of the divine” such as his, but it is (1), (2) and (3) from which he argues for (4)–(7): he argues that 4 is implied by 1, 2 and 3; that 5 is required by 4; that 6 is a direct result of 2, assuming 4 and 5; and 7 is a direct result of 6, though the argument here is not explicit. All these conceptual connections confirm what Davenport says about the several elements of NEM “mutually reinforcing” into a “coherent rival to the Anselmian picture.” As importantly, it means (1)–(3) function as the axioms of NEM. Thus, though NEM could be construed as a kind of panentheism or process or open theism since it incorporates elements of all these views as aspects of its own, it is (1)–(3) – God’s being a creator, lover, and fulfiller of eschatological promises – that are at the heart of the view, making it most saliently a start and end of being theology.

Davenport offers a different species of both start and end of being theology than we have seen in the deists, Bishop and Bacon. His start of being theology deepens the core claim that (1) God is the “ultimate genesis or source of reality” with two further claims: (2) that God creates alterity, meaning free wills that “originate a kind of independence...that can will goods that transcend its own flourishing, or even turn away from its maker’s purposes for it,” and (3) that God is, in virtue of being the source of reality, also its “absolute Owner or rightful Appropriator,” like the Wyrd in northern European mythologies which is thought to temporarily lend us wealth, friends, and kin, but to which all this is due back in the end. As Davenport notes, pan-appropriation is interestingly paradoxical when applied in an alterogenetic context, since, though the creator has the right to persons, it gives back this right to make them free (and perhaps they give it back again in the process of redemption).

In taking God to be “an eschatological promise fulfiller,” Davenport develops a novel species of end of being theology, too, and gives it real pride of place as “the heart of the new existential model” and “the distinguishing mark of the divine.” Interestingly, in contrast to Bishop and Bacon who say that God *itself* is the end of being as either the point of the universe or humanity, respectively, Davenport takes God to be the being who guarantees that there is *some* end of being or other, whether this end is Himself, union with Himself or something else altogether. In his words: “God is the being who makes eschatological promises and brings them to fruition.” The example eschatological promises Davenport names – e.g., “the promise of salvation for individuals and possibly the perfection of the whole created order” – indicate that the scope of the *telos* in question might be both humanity, like Bacon’s, *and* the universe more generally, like Bishop’s. I hope Davenport develops the view further so we can know more.

Nicholas Maxwell’s “Taking the Nature of God Seriously” reads first as a cautionary tale about whether to combine start with end of being theology, and

then as a clarion call to do so. Like Bishop, he starts with an argument that the classical God is immoral for his participation in the creation of suffering, and then finds himself where Bishop did, hunting for another conception of God to “put in its place.” He considers and drops several candidates in quick succession (an evil God? but what of joy; a love-and-hate God? but what of the majesty of the universe, etc.) until he reaches a two-fold claim about classical theism. First, what classical theism gets *right* is that there are two parts to the divine: one which he calls the “God-of-cosmic-power” which “is in some sense responsible for everything that occurs,” and the other which he calls the “God-of-cosmic-value” which is what “is of supreme value.” Second, what classical theism gets *wrong* is to “fuse” these two parts into the one traditional God, since, with an implied nod to the problem of evil, this makes God “a monster.”

To avoid this, Maxwell recommends that we “cut God in half,” and, as importantly, that we understand the halves naturalistically. So the God-of-cosmic-power is what “corresponds physically to the true unified theory of everything that physicists seek to discover,” and is thus impersonal, an It which is able to “be forgiven” for the suffering it unwittingly creates (interestingly, it is also a God whose nature physicists already know, cf. Stephen Weinberg’s paper in the Naturalistic Models section of this volume). And the God-of-cosmic-value is “what is best in us... the potentially or actually aware and loving self within us,” which fights the suffering as best as it can. Once we cut God in half in this way, we are “at once confronted”, says Maxwell, with the problem of putting the “two halves of the bisected God back together again.” At first, this problem seems contrived and the solution unwise, since Maxwell was the one to create the problem a few paragraphs earlier by asking us to separate the halves, and to caution against the solution he is proposing of fusing them back together. But the fact that the two sides of God are now naturalized, so that one half is the physical world and the other the human desire to make it better, makes Maxwell’s next thought follow: putting these Gods back together becomes the problem of discovering “how what is of value [the-God-of-cosmic-value] can exist and best flourish in the physical universe [the God-of-cosmic-power].” Maxwell sees this as the fundamental problem of human existence, and, in light of its nature, takes our fundamental problem to be a religious one. He calls us to solve the problem by incorporating value into the physical world in religion, academic inquiry, education, politics, and our personal lives, and even closes with a roadmap for how reframing the main problem of human existence in this way could revolutionize both scientific and social methodology.

Maxwell anticipates the question that immediately arises for his naturalistic theology, just as it did for Bishop’s: is the long process of humans bringing value into the physical world really God? Maxwell’s arguments that it is are well-intentioned but in the end merely pragmatic, leaving untouched the question of true conceptual continuity. The other harmonies with Bishop’s thoughts are striking: they both see classical theism as a moral failure; they both think this failure requires a bold change to what Maxwell calls the God-of-Cosmic-Power; they both turn to sheerly naturalistic theologies as they cope with these findings. Still, when Bishop drops creatorhood from God, he takes himself to be cutting non-God from God, not cutting God

in half. In other words, for Bishop, the God-of-cosmic-power is not God, but the universe, and he is counting on the God he has left, the God-of-cosmic-value, to be far more powerful than Maxwell lets on. Maxwell's view also relates to those of Bacon and Davenport: if we can take Maxwell's God-of-Cosmic-Power as that which is posited in a start of being theology, and his God-of-Cosmic-Value as that which is posited in an end of being theology, Maxwell ultimately wants both a start and end of being theology, just like Bacon and Davenport. But Maxwell thinks that the start and end combine not by conceptual conjunction as they do in Davenport's synthesized view and certainly not by mere concatenation as in Bacon's set of <Creator, Good>, but rather by long, hard action in the real world. He may even be implying that the mere conceptual joining of start and end of being theology that we see in Bacon, Davenport and classical theism is dangerous: it makes us think the incorporating of value into the universe is done, and thus lulls us into inaction about the very thing that requires our action most.

Still, in the end, Maxwell's call to us all to make "value...exist and flourish in the physical universe" is really the same call, the same vision, that Bishop, Bacon, Davenport and even Tillich issue, under different descriptions. Bishop sees divine love coming to exist and growing in the universe; Bacon sees us all striving for "our ultimate intelligible destiny" which, in the example of Little Dorritt at least, involves a fight from love against suffering; Davenport thinks it is God's job to fulfill promises to perfect "the whole created order;" and Tillich envisions a working of the holy into the natural order by our ecstatic embrace of the power of being that infuses it. So – with the notable exception of deism which takes God to be inactive in the world in any way, including in incorporating value into it – the ground, start and end of being theologians we see in this section take God to be transforming the world for the better.

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Paul Tillich's Pantheon of Theisms: An Invitation to Think Theonomously

Christopher Demuth Rodkey

I

For Tillich, *Deus est esse ipsum*, God is being itself, and nothing else may be ontologically stated without being symbolic. Yet, for the religious practitioner, who—to use Tillich's language—*lives* in a world of religious symbols, what is to be said or believed about God? Tillich's system of thought does leave the Christian with the notion that God is the answer to the 'big questions' (Sabin 1944, 70). The problem is that *esse-ipsum* as the *prius* or *ultima substantia* of theonomous thinking is not what most Christians have in mind when they refer to *God* (Otto 1980, 306). To go even further, Martin Gardner (1994, 187) observed in his satirical novel *The Flight of Peter Fromm* that *esse-ipsum*, as an idea, was *designed* by Tillich to be "safe from all conceivable attack," a *safety* at the price of a Christianity "so thin and bloodless that no ordinary man, woman or child can find it interesting." This perceived safety is indicative of a "gerrymandering of language," as some critics have argued, so that *esse-ipsum* by default becomes, as Owen Thomas (1977, 159) charged, "unavoidable."

Langdon Gilkey (1990, 103) draws a distinction between the clause *Deus est esse ipsum* and "God is being-itself" in Tillich. The earlier clause, the Latin version of the second clause, is classified as an ontological statement which is unapproachable; and Tillich admits that "God is being-itself" is a *religious* statement, allowing being-itself (*esse-ipsum*) to be equated with the Christian symbolic language for God. Radical theologian Robert Scharlemann asks:

If God is being-itself, is being-itself God? This thematic question concerning the "is" between "God" and "being-itself" is not explicitly discussed by Tillich. But the question is pertinent to Tillich's correlation of God and being. If we can say "God *is* being" but not

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“Being is God,” what can we say of being-itself in relation to God? Can we say, “Being defines God”? Is there a *deificare* in being-itself just as there is the *esse* in God? In other words, is *being* which identifies God as God, also the eternal activity of God? Is being that which God *does*? If it is, then the word *being* not only names what or who God is but also names the activity of God as God. This is to say, in other words, that what is *named* by the three words “God is Being” is one and the same referent. That would be the integration, if not the formulation, of statements such as “Deus est” and “Deus est esse ipsum.” (Scharlemann 2004, 7–8)

The question of God’s *operare*—the nature of God’s *activity*—is inherently related to the grammatical puzzle of *Deus est esse-ipsum*. If the subject and predicate nominative cannot be interchanged, as if they were appositives of one another, if *est* is no longer a special kind of intransitivity which links equivocal terms, *est* might be rendered *transitive*. God *perpetuates* being. Gilkey (1990, 58ff.) suggests that *Deus est esse ipsum* is too oversimplified to be adequate for Tillich’s complex system. Yet Sharlemann’s observation reveals some of the problems with the ways in which Tillich *describes* “God.” Let us observe a few examples.

*The God-Above-God:*¹ For Tillich, if there is any God, God must be beyond any understanding of “God” which can be conceived. The juxtaposition of the “above” language is that the more “above” the God-above-God is, the more *transcendent*, the more participatory—and perhaps even *immanent*—the God-above-God has the potential to be (Choi 2000, 68). Charles Winquist (2003, 232) observed that within Tillich’s thought the more *ultimate* the God-above-God is, the more *intimate* God may be conceived. The language of the God-above-God also indicates Tillich’s strong indication of the divine as “unconditioned” and “unconditional.” The use of the term *unconditioned* is for Tillich a linguistic ontic device to indicate the use of ontological language over other kinds of religious language. It indicates that the “concept of God” always differs from, and is epistemologically preceded by, *esse-ipsum* (32).

*Ultimate Concern:*² Because God is the ontological answer to the ontological question, God is “what concerns us ultimately” (Loomer 1956, 152). The question of personal ultimate concern, however, is an existential question regarding for what or whom one lives life. If what concerns someone ultimately is anything but the ontological answer—God—one has replaced the answer with another being or symbol. The absoluteness of the non-ontological answer to the theological

¹ See Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (1955) 82; *The Courage to Be* (1980) 15, 182, 186–190.

² For example, Tillich, *Courage to Be* (1980) 47, 82; *The Future of Religions* (1966a) 87; *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society* (1988) 158–160, 166–167; *Dynamics of Faith* (1957a), 1ff.; *ST* 1.10, 12–14, 21, 24–25, 28, 36, 42, 50, 53, 110–11, 115, 118, 120–121, 124, 127, 131, 146, 148, 156, 211, 214–216, 218, 220–223, 230, 273; *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (1957b), 9, 14, 26, 30, 87, 116; and *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (1963) 102, 125, 130, 154, 223, 283, 287, 289, 293, 349, 422.

question then is *demonic*, since it “is that which has the power to threaten or save [one’s] being” (Ryu 1984, 105). Russell McCutcheon (2001, 207), however, has criticized the term *ultimate concern* as a “widely repeated yet still empty claim” that reduces religion to a “personal value judgment.” Martin Marty (2000, 11) writes, in Tillich’s defense, that “Tillich’s notion of ultimate concern allows us to consider ‘religious’ any belief systems that take up the meaning and purpose of human existence,” so that the “intermingling of religion” with all aspects of life, when “understood as ultimate concern...is therefore inescapable.” Tillich would agree that one’s ultimate concern is not only *a* personal value judgment, but it is *the only* value judgment that may have ultimate meaning to the individual’s existential location and condition.

*The Ground and Structure of Being:*³ When our being is theonomous we are grounded in being; the *ground of being* represents all other beings’ participation in *esse-ipsum* (Tillich 1966a, 37; Choi 2000, 5). As the ground of existence, *esse-ipsum* “is beyond essence and existence” (Ryu 1984, 116). Beyond this, though, Tillich writes: “God as being-itself is the ground of the ontological structure of being without being subject to this structure himself. He *is* the structure; that is, he has the power of determining the structure of everything that has being” (Tillich 1951, 238). God is not only the *ground of being*, but the *structure* of the same being of which he is the *ground*, since God cannot be subject to the structure of being. And further, God has *power* over the same structure that is equivocated with God; as the structure of being, God is the *end* of philosophy, as well as that which gives the structure meaning. God is the ontological question, the ontological answer, and the *prius* of ontology itself (Otto 1980, 306). Just as “God-above-God” signifies *transcendence* it does so by virtue of a juxtaposition of *immanence* (Thatamanil 2006, 139).

*The Abyss and Depth of Being:*⁴ In *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* Tillich (1955, 82) writes of the lack of the ontological use of *is* in the Bible:

Most people, including the biblical writers, take the word in its popular sense: something “*is*” if it can be found in the whole of potential experience. That which can be encountered within the whole of reality is real. Even the more sophisticated discussions about the existence or nonexistence of God often have this popular tinge. But, if God can be found within the whole of reality, then the whole of reality is the basic and dominant concept. God, then, is subject to the structure of reality.... The God who *is* a being is transcended by the God who is *Being* itself, the ground and abyss of every being.

³ For example, see Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (1951) 20–23, 26, 168–169, 205; *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (1957b) 7, 9, 10, 87, 126, 161, 167, 174; 3.99, 142, 190, 283–285, 290, 293–294.

⁴ For example, see Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1 (1951) 79, 110, 113, 119, 156, 158–159, 164, 174, 216, 226; *Shaking of the Foundations* (1948), 52ff.

Although the use of “abyss” seems equivocal here, he elsewhere uses the notion of *abyss* to point to, in my own terminology, the *ground-grounding-ground of being*; a concept broadly rooted in Jacob Boheme’s notion of *ungurd*; Schelling’s *first potency*; Berdyave’s *meonic freedom*; Rudolph Otto’s *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinosum*; and Oskar Pfister’s *ideal-realismus* (Ryu 1984, 118; Irwin 1974, 239; Ferré 1966, 11). For Boheme, for example, the abyssmal notion of God is a term to remind us we cannot say “that God’s Essence is a distinct thing, possessing a particular place or abode” that God is not a being among other beings, but “the abyss of nature and of creation is God himself” (Ferré 1966, 11). Kee Chung Ryu (1984, 120–21) suggests that the terms *ground* and *abyss* provide “a safeguard for the inscrutable mystery of God.” *The depth of being* has a similar meaning for Tillich, again juxtaposing the image of the God-beyond-God (Tillich 1948, 57).

*The Power of Being:*⁵ Theonomous thinking leads to accept the implication of *esse-ipsum*, and we then recognize the power of being within ourselves (Gilkey 1990, 102). Referring to the language of *The Courage to Be*, Donald Dreisbach (1993) explains the power of being as “an awareness of one’s own being and vitality, of one’s ability to seek and even establish meaning,” adding that “this being or vitality is something of a gift and surprise” presented “neither symbolically nor as an object of conceptual thought.” The power of being is the religious experience of *esse-ipsum* that is not a call to adherence to doctrine or literalisms, but rather a call to *becoming*, to *self-transcend* (Tavard 1964, 86). In the human person, the power of being gains its existential power because of the looming reality of death, of non-being (Hammond 1965, 98). The power of being presupposes all other descriptions of God, without human thinking there is no *prius* of theonomous thinking (Vaught 2005, 8). “Even a God would disappear,” Tillich (1951, 164) wrote, “if he were not being-itself.”

At bottom for Tillich, God is *mystery* (Thatamanil 2004, 28). “God can reveal Himself,” Tillich once preached in a sermon (1948, 89), “only by remaining veiled.” The experiences of non-being and of the *absence* of God in human life are also a mystery (Ryu 1984, 121; Gudmarsdotti 2007, 208). The language and concepts for God are not always consistent because they are dialectical, and for Tillich an absurd life should reflect an absurd theological conception of the divine. A significant problem remains of how does “God” remain the *prius* of thought and *esse-ipsum* simultaneously, not to mention being at the same time the structure, ground, abyss, and

⁵ For example, see Tillich, *Courage to Be* (1980) 88–89, 159–160, 172–173; *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (1951) 137, 2, 6, 8; 2, 10, 11, 12, 20, 125; *Theology of Culture* (1964), 25–26; *Political Expectation* (1967b), 163.

power of *being* (Thomas 1977, 159)? Furthermore, does such a understanding of *esse-ipsum* have any meaning left?

II

Randall Otto (1980, 303) suggests that Tillich “has been described as a theist, a deist, a pantheist, a panentheist, a metaphysician, a mystic, an atheist, and a humanist.” Though Tillich famously declared himself an atheist, he had to break and redefine the term *atheism* to describe himself in that way. The same could be said of the term *theism*: in some aspects, Tillich is a theist, and in others he is not. The negative theology and Christian mystical tradition is highly influential on Tillich’s work; and Tillich also has some theological use for the “occult” mystical tradition (Tillich 1962, 166ff). Tillich described himself as a thinker who wished to combine humanism and Protestant theology in a co-authored, rarely cited text called *To Live as Men* (1965, 13). Between the dialectic of atheism and theism, a case could be made that Tillich was a dualist, pantheist, a panentheist, and an ecstatic naturalist (D. Foster 2007, 23). We will investigate these claims.

Dualism: Tillich’s Platonic intellectual move of *esse-ipsum* creates a dualism (Lovejoy 1936, 315ff). William Rowe (1968, 82–83) summarized Tillich’s statements about God in the following way:

1. God transcends the world.
2. Every finite thing participates in the world.
3. God cannot have a beginning and an end.
4. Non-being is literally nothing except in relation to God.
5. God precedes non-being in ontological validity.
6. God is his own beginning and end, the initial power of everything that is.

How is it, then, Rowe asks, “that to say, ‘There *is* a God’ is to be held as having no meaning, if ‘every finite being depends on God for its existence?’” Rowe concludes that Tillich may really have *two Gods* in his system. Just as Plato had Socrates forward the notion of the good beyond all, “exceeding in dignity of power,” in Book VI *The Republic* (Plato 1991, 509b) Glaucon responds to Socrates, recognizing the dualistic nature of the “good,” swearing, “Apollo, what a demonic excess!” The excess here is that we may speak separately of (1) a “God” of which the faithful *might* speak, which is the ground, power, fountain, structure, and abyss of being; and (2) *esse-ipsum* as a separate entity.

Following this, *Esse-ipsum* is the “excess,” as Tillich distinguishes between the first and second Gods within the phrase *God-above-God*. The second “god,” -*God*, is easily lowered to a being among other beings, but -*God* may still be rendered to be a genuinely symbol which points toward the *God-above-*.

I include the second hyphen in the phrase “God-above-” (*esse-ipsum*) to indicate that to speak of *esse-ipsum* as “God” requires acknowledgement of symbolic language and the lower *-God*. *God-above-* requires *-God*: the two terms are “nominally deduced dialectically” from each other (Lovejoy 1936, 82). Tillich would have resisted this interpretation of himself, though the post-Christian move made in his final lecture—“The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian”—seems to silently acknowledge this problem and drop *both* the *-God* and the *God-above-* for a post-Christian move to *Geist* or *Spirit* (Zeitlow 1961, 8). Owen Thomas (2005, 5) criticizes Tillich for his dualism, writing, “[a]s one standing in the Neo-Platonist tradition,” Tillich should have known better.

Panentheism: The most common interpretation of Tillich’s understanding of God is that he is a panentheist. Tillich’s most popular writings suggest this fairly clearly; in the final pages of the third volume of his *Systematic Theology* (1963, 420–21) he describes divinity as an “eschatological pan-en-theism.” In a sermon Tillich (1948, 9) preached that God “is the foundation on which all foundations are laid; and this foundation cannot be shaken,” and “[o]n the boundaries of the finite the infinite becomes visible; in the light of the Eternal the transitoriness of the temporal appears.” Tillich here recognizes the God-above-God, or *esse-ipsum*, as not only *that which nothing greater can be conceived*, but beyond *conception*: beyond “the totality of beings”; beyond the death of nature.

Tillich’s panentheism is not so straightforward as to spatially and temporally *include* and *transcend* immanence but suggests a transcendence that is *contingent upon* immanence. Tillich (1951, 206) writes that “[t]he presence within finitude of an element which transcends it is experience both theoretically and practically” and that “potential infinity is present in actual finitude.” In this sense, panentheism is a metaphor for the dialectic of the *perception* of human finitude and the *potential* for self-transcendence in the immanence of the present (Schonenberg 1976, 2.274). Panentheism for Tillich is less an actual description of God than another symbol which describes the existential condition.

Deism: Although a minority view on Tillich, process theologians John Cobb and David Griffin have criticized Tillich for being a deist, that God does not in the present time have a participatory relationship with the world. Cobb and Griffin (1976, 51) write that Tillich’s “being itself” is “not ‘a being’ interacting with others” and that Tillich’s conception of the divine “involves a denial that God is a causal influence on the world, even though much of Tillich’s language illegitimately gives the impression that creative influence is exerted by God.” In other words, from their perspective Tillich’s God does not presently perpetuate being in the world. Furthermore, they argue, Tillich “held that participation and individuality are polar, so that the more we participate with others in community the more we can become individuals, and

the more we become individuals, the more richly we participate in community.” Solipsistic understandings of humanity are then “illusory” (82). The claim that Tillich is a deist, then, is not about the alien transcendence so often implied in the term but rather that the *existential meaning* of Tillich’s God has little to do with any sense of *esse-ipsum* as the perpetuation force of being; instead, participation with the divine is more about a *perceived interpretation* that leads to theonomous thinking and living (Grigg 2006, 16).

Pantheism: A minority view of Tillich is that he is a pantheist separate from an *ecstatic naturalism*. A pantheist view of Tillich is a misreading of his work. The similarity of *esse-ipsum* to Baruch Spinoza’s notion of *substance*, for example—along with Tillich’s affinity for Spinoza—is often reduced by some in the same way Friedrich Schleiermacher criticized Spinoza and his pantheistic “Spinozism” (O’Connor 2004, 423). One reason for this position is because of Tillich’s consistent rejection of what he calls, as early as 1939, “exclusive monotheism,” that is, “God as the Lord of time controlling the universal history of mankind, acting in history and through history” (Tillich 1967b, 27). Playing on the assumption that what is not a *classical theism* must be a *pantheism*, some critics made the assumption that Tillich *must* be a pantheist, since he was definitely not a classical theist (K. Foster 1964, 100). A close reading of Tillich, however, does suggest a *kind* of pantheism at work, partially because there is a sense of recognizing that if “God” exists outside of nature—if there is a spatial or temporal transcendence—that transcendence is related to the reality of the parameters of nature itself (Tillich 1951, 233; Ferré 1966, 11).

Ecstatic Naturalism: The term “ecstatic naturalism” can mean a number of different things, but here I employ the term in the way in which Tillichian interpreters have, namely, that it is a kind of pantheism which allows for transcendence. Robert Corrington (1994, 18) defines it “as that moment within naturalism when it recognizes its self-transcending character” characterized by a “transition from preformal potencies to the realms of signification in the world.” Tillich himself alludes to this idea only somewhat directly once, in a rather unknown book review (1940, 71–72), coining the term “neo-naturalism,” but he adds that “I do not think that the question of the name is very important.” In the *Systematic Theology* (1951, 233) a new kind of naturalism arises from a recognition of the inadequacy and misuse of the term *pantheism*: that divinity should never be *equated* with nature. Further, God “is not the totality of natural objects,” either, but instead “the creative power and unity of nature, the absolute substance which is present in everything.” *Pantheism* in this sense, Tillich claims “is as necessary for a Christian doctrine of God as the mystical element of the divine presence” (234).

Tillich’s sense of “panentheism” is a different kind of panentheism than the popular usage of the term; to use the term in any other way is a “myth” or “absurdity”

(Tillich 1957b, 6). As an *ecstatic naturalism*, the primary idea is *power of Being*. “Being itself,” Tillich (1964, 25–26) wrote, “is a power of Being but not the most powerful being; it is neither *ens realissimum* nor *ens singularissimum*”: a power of being, not *the* power of being. *Esse-ipsum*, as *the* power of being, “is the power in every thing that has power, be it a universal or an individual, a thing or an experience.” The power of being is the power of self-transcendence for humans or the potential power of things or experiences to transition from the not-yet-holy to becoming religious symbols (Irwin 1974, 252). An ecstatic naturalism, as Nels Ferré (1957, 231–32, 1966, 11) has interpreted Tillich, denies “a world beyond this world” and points toward the possibility for the experience of the holy *transcending* into the *immanence* of this world; there is limit to nature.

Tillich’s ecstatic naturalism is also closely related to Tillich’s idea of the *depth* of being. The depth of being is described by Thomas Altizer (1958, 10) as “the ultimate ground of the being which we now are.” Jacob Taubes (1954, 21) explains the depth of being as indicative of what he calls “Dionysiac theology,” that is, “an ‘ecstatic naturalism’ that interprets all supernaturalistic symbols in immanent terms.” Ideas or terms which suggest *transcendence* dialectically relate, clash, and *theonomize* with immanent terms (Altizer 1958, 10; Herberg 1974, 5). In the process of theonomy, at the *edge* of language—approaching the *prius* of thinking—symbolic religious language implodes, self-subverts, negates and resurfaces. *Transcendence* and *immanence* have, as much as they can, taken on new meanings for Tillich, and he has in turn re-rooted the terminology into that which is ‘unconditional’ as symbolic language. The ideas have come into new meaning, which demonstrates the advantage of considering Tillich as an ecstatic naturalist.

III

At bottom, this complex pantheon of theisms within Tillich’s thought is indicative of a radical religious thinker attempting to preach the Christian Gospel to a new, secularized and secularizing audience. Following Tillich’s death, Carl Braaten argued that Tillich should be considered a “radical theologian” who “searched into the depths of the tradition to find positive answers to the questions of modern man” (Braaten 1967, xxxiii). Tillich’s later writings came under scrutiny by some authors for being “insufficiently radical” (Dewart 1966, 39). Even though Tillich famously told Thomas Altizer that “der real Tillich is der Radical Tillich” (Grigg 2006, 142; Foster 2007, 23), Altizer wrote in a review essay (1963, 62) on Tillich that Tillich had missed the opportunity to “become a new Luther” had he extended “his principle of justification by doubt to a theological affirmation of the death of God.”

Tillich’s writings demonstrate a profound respect for Friedrich Nietzsche that was well ahead of his time for his American audience, who had not yet entirely recovered Nietzsche from NAZI revisionist philosophy. For Tillich, Nietzsche was, along with Karl Marx, one of “[t]he greatest anti-Christians in recent history,” who

showed his “Christian roots with every word” (Tillich 1996, 32). As an “atheist,” Nietzsche points toward the ‘problem’ of God—“the poor idea of God”—better than “many faithful Christians” could (Tillich 1948, 42). To speak of the “death of God,” in a literal sense, Tillich (1967a, 201). Instead, Tillich suggests that Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God places an exigency upon the immanence of “life,” father than upon the God of tradition (207). In this sense, the death of God “is felt both as a loss and a liberation” (1980, 142).

Beyond this, Nietzsche’s attack on the Christian God for Tillich was an attack upon what he called “theological theism.” Theological theism, according to Tillich, is a conception of the divine which is based upon theological arguments, “dependent upon the religious substance which it conceptualizes” (184). This kind of theism leads to an acknowledgement that the most religious conceptions of God are easily argued away, often with the exact same arguments used to argue for God’s existence. As such, Tillich suggest that the idea of the God-above-God separates which Gods can be killed—and should be—in favor of a higher conception of God that is no longer demonic or idolatrous (15). The God-above-God, as the ontological foundation of beings and things, is not a thing among other things (Grigg 2006, 143). This onto-epistemological shift “is the deepest root of atheism,” Tillich (1980, 185) wrote, “[i]t is an atheism which is justified as the reaction against theological theism and its disturbing implications.”

In this sense of the term *atheism*—that is, a denial of theological theism—Tillich is an atheist, and perhaps more specifically, a *Christian* atheist. Although some of Tillich’s works pass off atheism as a kind of theological theism (that is, a theological *atheism*), atheism is often employed by Tillich as a philosophical *tool* in some of his later writings. Tillich wrote:

The atheistic terminology of mysticism is striking. It leads beyond God to the Unconditioned, transcending any fixation of the divine as an object. But we have the same feeling of the inadequacy of all limiting names for God in a non-mystical religion. Genuine religion without an element of atheism cannot be imagined. It is not by chance that not only Socrates, but also the Jews and early Christians were persecuted as atheists. For those who adhered to the powers, they were atheists. (Tillich 1964, 25)

Tillich here refers to the atheistic language of the mystical tradition who offered a *via negativa* toward God in their writings. When Meister Eckhart prays “that God rid me of God,” Tillich (1966b, 65) wrote, this is an atheism that “is a correct response to the ‘objectively’ existing God of literalistic thought.” At the same time, for Tillich any theological thinking that resists literalistic thinking about God is, as an atheism, connected to this mystical tradition; and, as Tillich was quoted above, *genuine religion without an element of atheism cannot be imagined*. If Christianity is to be genuine or authentic one must reject literalistic thinking, but one must also epistemologically acknowledge that doubt is essential to faith, which is a primary argument throughout Tillich’s thought. Furthermore, the “atheism” of Socrates or the early Christians is one defined by power relationships; those with power define their own literalistic conceptions of deity as absolute and all others as atheistic. This sense of *atheism* is a political definition that is expressed theologically—by *theological theisms*.

Tillich writes in his first volume of the Systematic Theology (1951, 27) that atheism is “anti-Christian on Christian terms.” If the term *Christian* refers to a literalistic religion, then the atheist who rejects this Christianity is, as it happens, doing so for genuinely Christian reasons. “Nietzsche,” Tillich wrote, “acknowledged this when he said that he had the blood of his greatest enemies—the priests-within himself.” This points to “the paradox of Christian humanism,” namely, that anti-Christian thinking is, “within the Western world, the substance of what is Christian” (Tillich 1996, 32). To this end, *anti-Christian or Christian atheist thinking is necessary for an authentic expression of Christian faith*. Christianity only stays relevant to the current situation by virtue of its ability to have “continuous self-negation.” Without this *semper negativa*, Tillich writes, “Christianity is not true Christianity,” because Christianity that is not perpetually negating is irrelevant (52).

Tillich, then, famously declared that “God does not exist” in his *Systematic Theology*. Although Tillich denied ‘God’ to affirm God as *being-itself* “beyond essence and existence,” one must *deny* God to affirm a *kind* of Godhead: “[t]o argue that God exists is to deny him” (Tillich 1951, 205). Tillich’s claim that “God does not exist” is to be understood, Edgar Towne (2003, 26) observes, “both literally *and* symbolically”: it is to say that God is not a being, but *being-itself*, which has no being beyond the *power of* and *fountain of* being. Towne observes, “[t]his is the epitome of postmodern irony!”

Tillich was regularly criticized throughout his career for using philosophical and theological language for God that is obscure and intentionally misleading. A legendary example of this point surrounds an occasion when Tillich was invited to present a paper at the prestigious New York Philosophy Club. After Tillich delivered the paper—on the ontology of the “ground of being”—the esteemed philosophers in the audience took turns responding. Finally, when G. E. Moore (who famously coined “Moore’s paradox”) spoke, he replied to Tillich, “I am sorry to say that there is not a single sentence that Professor Tillich has uttered that I was able to understand—not a single sentence!” (Coburn 1996, 3) The problem with understanding Tillich is that the difficulty of his own language is both *indicative* and a *consequent* of an implied belief in the inadequacy of language within his theological system. Tillich himself even proposed a “thirty-year moratorium” on the use of theological language (Tillich 1966b, 65).

Deus est esse ipsum is an example of what Tillich (1968, 162) calls “theonomous” thinking—thinking which is neither autonomous nor heteronomous. This kind of thinking requires the “courage” to “affirm the power of being,” he suggests, “whether we know it or not” (Tillich 1980, 181). This courage transgresses against nominalism; it points us toward the edge of language and toward courageous reflection where traditional constructions are theonomously transcended. This new thinking blurs the line between what is “theological” and “philosophical”; it requires us to traverse into what Gabriel Vahanian (2006) calls “a new religious paradigm.”

Theonomous thinking engages the *depth* of both reason and being of philosophy, theology, humanism, existentialism, and religious experience (Tillich 1951, 238–239). Such thinking, Jeffrey Robbins (2003, xvii) suggests, “reveal[s] the depth dimensions

of a culture"; and as such, Tillich's thought walks the tightrope between theism and atheism (Schneider 1992, 422). If *esse-ipsum* is "the ground of both dynamics and form," Thatamanil (2006, 108) writes, "then it will not do to conceive of God solely on static terms." For Tillich, God is experienced by us through self-reflection and through participation in religious symbols, which leads us to begin to dynamically think theonomously.

But in this new kind of thinking, philosophical and theological language is re-appropriated, redefined, and even dismembered. Even if Tillich's "God" might be best as an ecstatic naturalism, the radical, theonomous *thinking* required to make sense of this divinity is prioritized over the specific details of this "God." Tillich's theology invites us into a radical theology for the reader to enter; acceptance does not seem to be important, only that we walk with Tillich and begin to think God anew in a context that is contemporary and relevant to the situation. To do otherwise—to unconditionally accept or unequivocally reject—is to reduce oneself into a theological theism, even if the rejection is theologically atheistic.

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The Theology of the Chinese Jews: An Understanding of God That Is Simultaneously Jewish, “Confucian” and Daoist

Jordan Paper

Introduction: The Kaifeng Jewish Community

Around a thousand years ago, Jewish merchants, originally from Persia (which includes modern Iraq) and residing in one of the Chinese seaport Jewish communities, were invited by the government, for reasons that are unclear, to the then capital of Kaifeng. By a century later, with government support, they built a synagogue of Chinese architecture. Twice rebuilt following floods, it became one of the largest in the world.

Over the centuries, the Kaifeng Jews assimilated to Chinese culture, with many becoming learned in the Chinese classics, as well as Talmud-Torah. Through the seaport synagogues, they remained in contact with Judaism in Baghdad and elsewhere. The assimilation followed the normal Judaic pattern when expanding to new areas. For example, Ashkenazi Jews originally moved from Germany to eastern Europe around the same time. Their language is Yiddish, a Germanic language, their appearance became generally Slavic, and their clothes, cuisine, and so forth, reflects pre-modern northeastern European and Baltic preferences.

By the seventeenth century, members of the Kaifeng synagogue community passed the highest of the Civil Service examinations and achieved important government positions. At that time, they came into contact with Jesuit missionaries, who recorded their religious practices and understandings, the design and furnishings of the synagogue, the inscriptions in Chinese on large stelae, and the calligraphy on the many Chinese-style placards which decorated the synagogue in both

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Hebrew and Chinese. It is this data that provides us with information about the community and an entrée into their theological understanding.¹

A half century earlier, the government, after a period of massive, costly maritime expeditions, ended sea trade and, and in response to pirate attacks, moved the population away from the coastal areas. This brought to an end the port synagogue communities and the Kaifeng community's means for contact with Judaism elsewhere. In the early nineteenth century, the Yellow River, "China's Sorrow," again flooded, destroying Kaifeng and the synagogue. In the mid-nineteenth century, after the death of the last rabbi, a massive civil insurrection against the foreign Manchu dynasty ravaged Kaifeng and dispersed the population. The Judaism of the Kaifeng Jews had come to a functional end, but the Kaifeng synagogue community had lasted as long as the oldest continuously functioning synagogue in Europe.²

Background I: Chinese Religion and the Literati Understanding of Essential Reality

To understand the Chinese cultural and intellectual milieu into which these Persian Jews found themselves, we must become acquainted with normative Chinese religion, the basis of China's social and political structure.³ Chinese religion, whose essential aspects continues unchanged for at least the last several thousand years, focuses on family and clan. People do not primarily perceive themselves as individuals, as in Christian cultures with an emphasis on individual salvation, but as integral members of both the nuclear family and a larger clan. The central religious ritual is the offering of food and wine to the departed members of the family. As long as the family continues then so does the individual, who on death joins the numinous clan ancestors, the focus of the ritual offerings. The religious imperative is to have sons to continue the patrilineal line. By a thousand years ago, most deities, who are supplemental to the ancestors, came to be understood as dead humans who benefit living humans outside of family ties and are also offered food and drink, and, due to Indian Buddhist influence, incense.

The state is perceived as the family write large; the emperor and empress being the father and mother of all people, and offerings to the imperial clan ancestors are state rituals. Provincial governors and local magistrates are surrogates for the emperor in making offerings to local deities. As foreign religions, such as Buddhism, or those that developed within China, such as the Daoist churches stimulated by Buddhism, came to the fore, they were subsumed under the religion of family or familism. Thus, in normative Chinese religion, the primary role of Daoist priests is to serve at funerals and of Buddhist monks and nuns to chant masses for the family dead.

¹ All of this material, both in Chinese and English translation (retranslated by the author), will be found in White (1966).

² For a history of the Kaifeng Jews, see Leslie (1972).

³ For a comprehensive and analytical background to Chinese religion, see Paper (1995).

For well over the last thousand years, with roots going back another fifteen hundred years, elite status derived from passing a series of examinations based on a small, fixed body of texts, the “Classics.” Passing the civil service examinations made one eligible for appointment to high government offices, the only path to both wealth and prestige. Those who passed the first of these examinations were officially recognized as being in a class above ordinary people.

All intellectual and later artistic endeavors arose from this socio-political class: the scholar-officials or literati. Since the inception of the first successful Chinese empire 2,200 years ago, literati ideology, the ideology of government officials, was in a constant process of synthesis, bringing together most the diverse streams of Chinese thought. This ever evolving ideology is called *ruijia* (commonly mistranslated as “Confucianism”).

Chinese thought in comparison with the thought found in Indo-European language speaking cultures is highly pragmatic; abstractions are avoided, not being readily expressed in the language. For example, in literary Chinese one can write of something being beautiful or of a statement being true, but there is no way to express “truth” or “beauty” in the abstract. In part, this is due to the nature of written Chinese which remained logographic and which contemporary neurological research has shown to lead to different parts of the brain being used in thinking than in traditions with alphabetic or syllabic writing systems.

Hence, although a school of logic developed in China at the same time it was developing in Greece, it was eventually deemed useless, since formal logic is more theoretical than practical. Similarly, formal grammar never developed in pre-modern China, as it is based on the concept of formal logic.

The extant early text on logic, the *Kongsun longzi*, dating to about 2,500 years ago, has two famous statements that are explicated in terms of logic. One is “White horse is not horse,” seemingly meaning the nonsensical statement, “A white horse is not a horse,” but actually a statement of set theory: {white horse} ≠ {horse}. The second is “There is nothing that cannot be pointed to [literally: ‘fingered’] and yet that which is pointed to is not the pointing [lit.: a finger is not a finger].”

The earliest text of Daoist thought, the early strata of the *Zuangzi* which later deeply influenced *ruijia* thought and thus Chinese Jewish theology, was written a century later. The second chapter of this text satirizes formal logic. In the midst of this spoof, the above statements of the logicians are parodied:

To use a finger to demonstrate that a finger is not a finger is not as good as using a non-finger to demonstrate that a finger is not a finger. To use a horse to demonstrate that a horse is not a horse is not as good as using a non-horse to demonstrate that a horse is not a horse. Sky and Earth are one finger; the myriad things are one horse.⁴

The last sentence of the above quotation in itself is not parody, but an explicit summation of Chinese metaphysics using the terms of these logical propositions, and it is this statement that needs to be explicated in order to understand the Chinese

⁴ All translations from the Chinese are the author’s own.

terminology utilized by the Kaifeng Jews to express their theological understanding. This metaphysic is not a matter of abstraction arising from deductive logic, such logic not surviving in Chinese philosophy, but derives from inductive logic, reasoning based on experience, particularly the null, void or mystic experience (*wu sang wo* “losing one’s self”)⁵.

Although Chinese culture is polytheistic, as in other polytheistic traditions, there is an understanding of unity at the basis of everything; that is, within polytheism, monism is also found.⁶ All of the statements on cosmogony to be found in a number of early Chinese texts have variations on the same theme, which can be summed up as follows:

From Nothingness (*wu*) there arises a Somethingness (*you*), which is nameless, so we arbitrarily name it the Dao. The Dao, which is a oneness, divides into two. From the standpoint of energy, the two are Yin and Yang, and from the standpoint of matter are Sky and Earth (*tiandi*). In conjoining, the two produce the myriad things. Thus, Sky and Earth are the parents of all, which receive their life-force (*qi*) from the interplay of Yin and Yang.

This cosmogony is not a matter of linear time; it has neither beginning nor end. As the only constant is understood to be change, everything is in constant flux: creation is continuous and ongoing. This is called *ziran* (literally: “self thusly”), which can be translated as “nature” but also means “spontaneous creation.” Everything continuously produces itself.

The primary term for Union/Unity/Oneness/Singularity/etc. is the Dao. But others terms include Taiyi (The Great Singularity – which came to be worshiped in the popular mind as a deity), Taiji (Great Ultimate – used primarily in charts and diagrams of reality), and Datung (Great Unity – which took on political meaning). A connected concept which will be relevant in the following discussion is the placing of humans into a vertical triplet: “Sky, humans and Earth;” that is, people literally exist between their equal cosmic parents, Sky and Earth, which together also represent oneness, being the initial splitting of the singular Dao.

Background II: Early Medieval Jewish Theology

The Kaifeng Jews probably left Persia from the port of Basra sometime in the tenth century. The most important Jewish thinker in that area at the time was Saadia Gaon (Saadia ben Joseph). He was born in Egypt in 882 and died in Baghdad in 942, where he had been the chief rabbi of one of the two rabbinic academies there. He is thought to have created the first *siddur* (daily prayer book) and wrote a number of treatises, including a major one on theology, *Kitah al-'Amanat wal l'tikadat* (*The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*). This influential book was written in Arabic and reflected the classical Greek learning of Arab scholars, and it explicitly countered

⁵ For a fuller discussion of the mystic experience, see Paper (2004).

⁶ This relationship is analyzed in Paper (2005): 121–25.

Christian theology. It can be assumed that the Jews who arrived in China from Southwest Asia were aware of his thinking.

Similar to Chinese cosmogony with regard to creation beginning with nothingness (*creatio ex nihilo*), Saadia writes, “I say that our Lord, exalted be He, made it known to us that all things were created and that He had created them out of nothing” (Rosenblatt 1948: 40). And all that is created is created out of the something that comes from the nothing (50). Because God is singular, it cannot be understood literally that humans are created in the image of God, for God being incorporeal has no image; rather, humans are “created” in the spiritual essence of God. Thus, there is a fundamental accord in these regards, although the working out differs, between the theology these Jews brought with them and the cosmogony of the educated Chinese they encountered.

Nonetheless, there are differences. For one, spontaneity of creation, as well as an on-going creation, is specifically denied by Saadia, who writes of “the untenability of the hypothesis that a thing could create itself...” (47–48). Another difference is that Saadia considered humans to be the “intended purpose of creation,” and they have “been shown preference by Him above all His creatures.” Thus, for Saadia, humans are above nature (181).

The Kaifeng Jews’ Understanding of God

Chinese Terms Chosen to Represent Hebrew Terms for God

Several large stelae that were on the synagogue grounds and numerous plaques that decorated the Kaifeng synagogue in the Chinese fashion provide an insight into their theology. The few plaques in Hebrew are typical of those to be found in synagogues anywhere in the world, but the plaques in literary Chinese are unique within Judaism. Two terms – Dao and Tian in the compound *tiandi* (Sky-Earth) or alone standing for the compound – are most commonly used to refer to God. They are not direct translations of the Hebrew names to be found in the Torah but terms common to early Chinese texts as discussed above. According to the Jesuits, these terms were not simply for decorative purposes on the calligraphic plaques as they were also used by the Chinese Jews when discussing their theology with the Jesuits in the Chinese language.

Examples of this literary use of “Dao” include, “Dao is external to both somethingness and nothingness,” “Dao existed prior to form [*tiandi*] and energy [*yinyang*]” and “In understanding the Dao to be the controller of Sky, Earth and humans, we do not conceive of name or appearance.” These theological statements which are also versions of Chinese metaphysical statements are countered in one inscription which partially reverses the relationship between Dao and Sky from a Jewish perspective: “The Dao has its origin in Sky; the fifty-three weekly portions [of the Torah] records the principles of the creation of Sky, the creation of Earth and the creation of humans.”

The Chinese Jews found no serious contradiction between the Torah and the understandings expressed in Chinese. The essential prayer utterance, the Sh’mah

(“Listen Israel: YHVH is our God; YHVH is singular” [Deut. 6:14]), could be understood as reiterating the essential oneness of the cosmos without being in contradiction to the Jewish theology they brought to China. YHVH being singular is equivalent to the Dao. As God, the Dao is at the beginning of all that exists. It is the state of primordial existence before differentiation takes place. Spontaneously arising out of nothingness, the Dao differentiates into Sky and Earth. In Judaism, God creates the sky and the earth from nothingness; hence, the Chinese read in this regard does take “In the beginning” (Genesis) in a direction but moderately different from the Jewish theology brought by the Jews to Kaifeng.

The major difference lies in utter non-anthropomorphism. The Dao does not create, for the Dao simply is. It is the self-division of the Dao itself that brings forth Sky and Earth, and it is Sky and Earth, as a male–female equal generative couple that spontaneously creates. And this creation is not at the beginning of time; it is ever ongoing. As Dao, God is not the primal cause of existence as expressed by Saadia, influenced by Greek philosophy revived in the Islamic universities; God is existence in and of itself.

Another Chinese understanding of Sky also accords with the Jewish understanding of YHVH. As in many cultures, in China the motion of the stars and planets are considered one of the prime indicators of the pattern of change, of the way the cosmos is naturally unfolding. Since it behooves humans to act in accordance with the way the cosmos is flowing, it is best to model one’s actions, to make one’s choices, as Sky indicates. Thus, Sky in this sense parallels an important aspect of the Jewish notion of deity. But in this understanding, God does not cause events to occur, God but indicates how events will occur. As Tian, God does not will natural events; they happen. Human affairs are not caused by God; they are the responsibility of humans, or in medieval Jewish theology, the result of “free will.”

A third notion of Sky also brings together Chinese and Jewish theology. For the early Chinese, going back at least several thousand years, Sky, with its multiple meanings, was also understood as the locus of the power of the conjoined ancestral spirits, particularly for the ruling clan. Although not exactly a parallel concept, understanding God as the God of the Patriarchs, as the numinous power at the foundation of the macro-clan of the Jews, as they understood themselves in the Chinese clan-oriented context, accords with the Chinese understanding of Sky as a power above. And so the Chinese Jews also took this sense of Sky to mean God.

A point to be made with regard to the names for God in the Chinese language inscriptions is that the term for non-cosmic, non-nature deities, *shen*, is not used even once. The Chinese literati themselves made a point of avoiding the numerous deities of importance to the rest of the population, save for the numinous ancestors and the cosmic deities (which they perceived as a single deity or arising from one deity as above). Going further, the Chinese Jews avoided normative Chinese non-family, non-clan religious practices. Near the beginning of the stele dating to 1489, we find the statement, “They [Patriarchs] made no images, did not fawn upon deities (*shen*) and ghosts (*guei*: non-family dead), and gave no credence to ecstatic functionaries [popular practices relating to shamanism and mediumism].”

Even though the Chinese Jews refrained from many supplementary Chinese religious practices, they did engage in the basic practices of reverencing – not

worshiping – the family and clan dead, as well as the Patriarchs, which is acceptable within traditional Jewish practices. Thus, they remained fully Chinese in religion and culture as well as fully Jewish. From a Chinese standpoint, their adherence to God with Chinese names that referenced the cosmic deities and to the founders of Judaism substituted for the subsidiary popular practices, as Buddhist practices did for Chinese lay Buddhists. Chinese Buddhists also had a set of sacred texts, the Tripitaka, and a sacred language, Sanskrit.

Cosmogony and Time

With regard to the Chinese concept of *ziran*, in the 1489 stele, creation is presented as completely natural: “The four seasons follow their course and the myriad creatures are birthed...Living things [literally: that which is born] give birth to themselves; that which is transformed, transforms itself....” Although the complete term *ziran* is not used, its meaning is clearly present with the use of *zi* (self) alone. According to the inscription, it is this basic understanding that came to Abraham as he meditated on Tian (God), and upon realizing this profound “mystery” (*xuan*), founded Judaism.

In a plaque inscription from two centuries later, we find this understanding continued in a parallel couplet: “The eternal Lord (*zhu*, a translation from the Hebrew) produces life unceasingly / The creating-transforming Tian (God) transforms the transformations unendingly.” Here we have combined the Chinese understanding of continuing self-creation, self-transformation, with a creating God. But it is a continuous ever-ongoing creation-transformation, rather than a one-time event at the beginning of time.

The Relationship of Humans and the Divine

Humans are not God, but as created from the differentiating singular Dao, humans are of the essence of God, a concept at the heart of Hellenistic Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism. As with the theology of Saadia Gaon, humans are not actually created in the image of God, for both God and the Dao have neither form nor substance and are utterly non-anthropomorphic, but in the reality of God. Humans are a manifestation of primordial existence, of existential potentiality.

But different from Saadia’s theology, humans are no different from everything else that is created from the differentiation of the Dao. Humans do not have a divine mandate to rule nature. Rather, as but one manifestation of nature, they are a part of nature. Humans were given agriculture by a mythic sage emperor (culture-hero), just as they were taught to build dikes to control rampaging rivers when the snows melt or the monsoon rains arrive, and as they were given writing to enable civilization. But humans are to utilize nature wisely, carefully following the seasons and not squandering what nature provides, or through their own negligence they will

suffer famine. Such understanding has been a part of Chinese philosophy at least since the time of Mengzi (Mencius, fourth century BCE).

As the Dao differentiates into male Sky and female Earth, as well as female Yin and male Yang, so that the myriad creatures can be birthed, so too humans (the Chinese term meaning “humans,” *ren*, has neither gender nor number) are divided into males and females. As male Sky and female Earth, and female Yin and male Yang, are not only equal but their equality is essential to creation, so too humans as males and females are equally essential to the continued creation of humans.

Basic to the Jewish understanding of being human is the particular relationship between God and Jews. The Covenant is central to normative Jewish theology. In the Torah, the Covenant made with Abraham, reinforced during the Exodus, and symbolized by male circumcision, provided the entire context for Jewish self-understanding, at least for European Judaism. In the Tanach, Jewish history is presented as one of repeated trials and tribulations due to how well the Jewish people accorded with the terms of this contract with God, as interpreted by the Prophets. But what would this mean in a benign socio-cultural context?

In the 1489 inscription there is no mention of a covenant. The ancestral teacher Abraham meditating on Sky came to understand the nature of life within the concept of *ziran*. Awakening to an understanding of this profound mystery, he sought the True Teaching (Judaism) and to assist ethereal Sky. With a unified heart/mind (*xin*), Abraham served and worshiped God, establishing the foundation of the religion which has come down to the present.

In the Torah, God introduces himself not only as the god of the forefathers but the one who had taken the Chosen People out of the land of Egypt. In the Pesach (Passover) Seder (ritual meal), much is made of the plagues God set upon the Egyptians to encourage them to give the Chosen People their freedom. In Europe, there perhaps developed even greater emphasis, as the equivalent was also wished for their Christian tormentors. But in the Chinese inscriptions, we find no mention of the Exodus, of the conquest of Canaan, of the destruction of the first temple and the Babylonian captivity. Is this because living in China, which has no history of religious persecution per se, let alone anti-Judaism, and not suffering for being Jews for many generations, there was no feeling of bitterness about either their situation or their neighbors? In China, the Jews prospered, not for short periods of time but for many centuries, save for suffering exactly as did the non-Jews around them at times of natural disasters or political anarchy.

Instead, the inscription of 1489 follows the giving of the Torah to Moses and its transmission through Ezra with a discussion of Jewish religious practices. These are laid out under the categories of purity, truth, ritual and worship. Both specifically Jewish practices and the practices unique to the Chinese Jews are described.

Hence, the special relationship between God and the Jews seems to have moved from a covenant basis to one of God being the special and sole deity for the descendants of the Patriarchs. Adherence to God is not so much a matter of contract as of filial piety. Interestingly, Saadia Gaon in his large theological treatise mentions covenant but once, and that in the context of Jeremiah rather than the Torah [167]. Perhaps covenant became theologically more important in the West with the

beginning of the Crusades in the eleventh century – the first Crusade ended up by mainly killing Jews in Europe – and the continuing horrors for the Jews. Thus, the lack of emphasis on Covenant *per se* may have already been a part of the understanding of God that the Jews of Kaifeng brought with them from Persia.

God and Human Behavior

According to the inscriptions, through the generations, the True Teaching reached Moses. As Abraham, Moses was an exceptional person, in whom benevolence (*ren* – a different logograph from “humans”) and righteousness (*yi*) – the primary *rujia* virtues – and *dao* and *de* – the primary Daoist (*daojia*) values – were perfected. Moses sought the Scriptures on Sinai, fasting and meditating for 40 days and nights. His spiritual endeavors reached Sky’s heart/mind (metaphorically) and thus the True Scriptures (the Torah) originated. The good persons described in the Tanach bring forth a good heart/mind in people, and the wicked persons described warn us of having a dissolute volition.

The Chinese understanding of morality is far different from the more recent traditional Jewish one which emphasizes *mitzva* [doing good and carrying out the commandments] which are rewarded and sins which are punished. From the *rujia* perspective, especially from around the time the Jewish community arose in Kaifeng, humans are understood as being innately good, the viewpoint of the *Mengzi* which was added to the Classics, although a corrupt society can turn people from acting in a good way. Good behavior means acting for the benefit of social groups, beginning with family and ending with the state. Morality is based on inferiors modeling themselves on superiors. If superiors are good, then so will those under them. Hence, the goodness of Abraham and Moses, and all the other good persons described in the Bible, are paradigms for others to emulate. One is good not from fear of punishment, but because being good is being true to one’s nature; which is essentially divine, while being wicked, which in the Chinese context means acting selfishly, is being perverse to human nature. We inherently seek to be good, for which we need models to understand proper behavior. In that being good is being true to nature, it is godly.

Thus the forefathers – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – are the ancestors of the Jews to be ritually respected out of filial piety, the core Chinese ethical value, and other transmitters of Judaism, such as Moses and Ezra, are also to be ritually respected as founders of Judaism. In the latter aspect, their treatment is similar to that of Kongzi (Confucius), Mengzi (Mencius), etc., in the *rujia* tradition.

Theodicy a Non-issue

Not focusing on Covenant but understanding YHWH as existence in and of itself rather than the cause of all that happens to the Jews, meant that the nemesis of Judaism in Europe, theodicy, was not a concern. Theodicy is the quandary resulting from understanding God to be omniscient and omnipotent in juxtaposition to terrible

things happening to oneself, one's family and one's people, as well as the world as a whole. Theodicy is found throughout the Tanach – one only needs to read Job – but it became of even greater concern in Europe. Following centuries of massacres, expulsions and pogroms, the Holocaust, when understood as God's punishment, led many Jews to become agnostics if not atheists and others to retreat into a self-imposed withdrawal from the societies and cultures around them in order to avoid the possibility of further angering God.

For the Chinese Jews, little if anything that negatively happened could be understood as a specific punishment for the Chosen People not conforming to the will of God. God is worshiped not out of fear of God but of entirely out of love. This is because YHWH is perceived as the special deity of the Chinese Jews, just as Chinese Buddhists have the Buddha (who in Chinese Buddhism functions as a deity) and the Daoists have the Jade Emperor at the top of their respective pantheons. YHWH had been the God of the Jews since the time of their forefathers in the distant past, and the traditions should not only be maintained out of filial duty to one's ancestors, but because it is beautiful to do so.

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deut. 6. 5)

Thus God is loved for a number of reasons. As YHVH, God is loved for being the essence of existence, and existence for the Jews in China on the whole was very good. God is also loved as the patron deity of the Jews. As Sky, God is loved in being the sum total of all the prior spirits of the Jews who existed in the past, of the chain of being from Abraham to the present as exemplified in the tradition, as well as for the tradition in and of itself. God is loved as the pattern of events, of all that happens. But God being non-anthropomorphic, what happens is understood as unwilling and not involving human emotions such as jealousy and anger, or human actions such as punishment. (In Western texts, the Chinese concept of the "Mandate of Heaven [Sky]" tends to be interpreted from a Judeo-Christian standpoint as the "Will of Heaven," rather than the Chinese meaning of "Sky Pattern.")

God and Torah

For Saadia Gaon as discussed above, as well as for Maimonides a century later, and for the Chinese Jews, God is not simply non-anthropomorphic, God is formless and equivalent to nothingness. This understanding of God is equally found in Christian and Islamic mysticism, and continues in Jewish mysticism. With the emergence of the Kabalistic tradition in the thirteenth century, the term for the ultimate, for God as an undifferentiated unity, as the Nothingness with which one merges in the mystic experience, is '*Eyn Sof*, the Infinite.'

Thus, the question might arise as to how for the Chinese Jews this accorded with their reverence and love for the Torah, replete with frequent depictions of a highly anthropomorphic God. A simple answer would be that they dealt with it no different than Saadia Gaon and Maimonides, as well as Jewish mystics throughout the ages:

they did not see it as a problem. In part, this is because God is not the functional center of Judaism; it is the Torah. Even today in North America, for the many Jews who are agnostic if not atheistic due to the Holocaust, the Torah itself remains sacred.

For the Chinese Jews, the Torah was sacred, not because it was the word of God, since God has no mouth from which to speak, but because it has been the very heart of Judaism since it began. It is the text which is sacred, as is the Classics for the *rujia* tradition, the Tripitaka for the Buddhist tradition, and the Canon for the Daoist tradition. All of these texts are sacred, because of their central historical significance. They are also sacred simply because they are written, which in itself is sacred, even more so in China than in traditional Judaism, as writing in China is the primary means for communication with the numinous. They are further sacred in the Jewish and Chinese Buddhist traditions, because the rituals focus on them. All of these texts are understood to require interpretation and have extensive commentaries. Hence, the anthropomorphism of the Torah would have been perceived as symbolic, as metaphor, etc., and not to be understood literally.

In summary, for the Chinese Jews, God is the formless numinous power which continuously gives rise to life and to which life is beholden for its very existence. God is loved beyond one's mother and father, because God is the ultimate parent, not only for each individual, but for the Jewish people, a macro-clan, as a whole.⁷

Comparison with Western Philosophical Categories Regarding Divinity

In the above discussion, Western philosophical categories have not been used. This is because these categories have arisen from Western modes of thinking. To apply them to other modes of thinking requires forcing non-Western understandings into a Western mold. It often leads to skewed understandings and could be perceived as a form of intellectual colonialism. This use of Western concepts as essential categories has been the major problem in comparative philosophy, religion and theology, as it often blinds those who rely on them from perceiving the actual understandings of diverse cultures. For example, there are a half dozen or so different types of beneficial numinous in normative Chinese religion (see Paper 2005). How does it assist understanding to force these diverse concepts into a single, usually irrelevant, mold? Similarly, Judaism, unlike Christianity, is not a creedal religion, and does not require adherence to a particular understanding of divinity. Save for the relatively small number of ultra-Orthodox, one could assume that there are as many theological understandings as there are Jews. How does one pigeonhole millions of understandings?

⁷ A more complete exposition of the above as well as corollary material and discussion will be found in Paper (2012).

Nonetheless, given the anthology of which this article is a part, the following will be a discussion of the difficulties in applying these common categories to the theology of the Chinese Jews. In this theology, different Chinese terms were used for divinity varying according to usage. Tian (Sky) was used in nuanced specific contexts, while Dao was used in a more general sense, referring to the ground of being. Other terms are used with less frequency, particularly as direct translations from the Hebrew. While we know how the Jews of the Kaifeng synagogue community discussed God in literary expressions and writings, we do not know how any individual actually understood God. Hence, our knowledge of the Chinese Jewish understanding of God is hypothetical rather than actual.

Monism

For an understanding to have a monistic aspect is not necessarily the same as the understanding falling under the rubric of monism. In the *Zhuangzi*, the single entity arising from Nothingness is in one place called the “Uncarved Block.” This singularity, usually termed the Dao, divides into two – Sky and Earth – and the two continuously produce the myriad things. But the myriad things are as real as the Uncarved Block. The myriad things are not a singularity when they are the myriad things, just as individual stars are not the singularity that precedes the “big bang” in that now somewhat outdated astrophysical model.

Certainly for Jews, God and humans are not a single entity. Even as the individual sparks of life merge into union in the mystical tradition, they are not conceived of as a single entity. For the Chinese Jews, while life arises from or has existence due to the ground of being or God (Dao), individual lives are not one with the ground of being. My life is due to my parents, but I am not one with my parents.

Theistic Dualism

In the biblical account and in traditional popular Jewish theology, God and the created are two different entities. But in Chinese Jewish theology, as in the theistic mystical traditions everywhere, God does not create humans as differentiated from God. Rather, God is the underlying potential for life. God is not a thing or a being. Accordingly, one cannot speak of two entities – God and humans – no more than one can speak of myself and the potentiality for my life being two disparate things.

Pantheism

For the Chinese Jews, God being the potential for life is not life itself. God is the ground from which all things arise but is not within things. God is not an animating force, as is

qi, nor the pattern of the universe (*tianming*) in itself. Indeed, in my comparative theology research, I have yet to come across a culture which is actually pantheistic.

Panentheism

Panentheism is a relatively recent term in Western Christian culture, no more than a couple of centuries old. The term has many meanings depending on the philosopher utilizing it, but the theological understanding of the Chinese Jews seems not to fit any of the more common ones. They did not speak of God's viable presence in the world, save in the understanding of *ziran*, that everything is being continually created of itself, and that at the very basis of this creation is the potential for creation, which is God. It is not that "God is in all things," the literal meaning of panentheism, but that God is the basis of all things. Certainly, the Chinese Jews did not understand that God has an active presence in the world, anymore than did Saadia Gaon. Being non-anthropomorphic, indeed being indescribable, no attribute, including activity, can be ascribed to God.

Ground of Being

In this exposition of the theology of the Chinese Jews, God, when termed Dao, is described as the "ground of being." This is a modern expression found in Christian theology, for example, in the writings of Paul Tillich: "...everything that is in the world we encounter rests on the ultimate ground of being." (1964:59) and "...he is ultimate reality, being itself, ground of being, power of being..." (61) The term is often used in Western discussions of Zen Buddhism, and Tillich was certainly familiar with the books on that subject that became popular beginning in the 1950s. Zen is the Japanese pronunciation of Chinese Chan Buddhism, which is related to the Mādhyamika school of Mahayāna Buddhism but is even more closely tied to the thought of the *Zhuangzi*. Thus, for Tillich and the Chinese Jews, there is a shared impetus for that understanding of God. "Ground of Being" is a far more suitable concept, arising out of Western understandings of Chan and Daoist thought, for categorizing the theology of the Chinese Jews, than any of the Greek language derived philosophical categories.

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Deistic Distance: The Shift in Early Modern Theology from Divine Immanence to Divine Design

Kurt Anders Richardson

By the late seventeenth century in key intellectual centers of Europe, particularly Holland and England, fairly radical shifts in understanding the Christian faith already had emerged. Not only had a fundamental reorientation in ecclesiology taken place under the political changes wrought in seventeenth century, but also in theology proper with the rise of the scientific method. The God who was once thought to govern the physical universe by the direct employment of his omnipotence, omniscience and above all, his omnipresence, is now more and more seen as having engineered the universe to run according to his design and its created autonomy. Coinciding causation models: “primary” and “secondary” causes were coming to be regarded as non-sensical, not because of a mass departure from belief in God, but because natural philosophy and natural theology were coalescing in their estimation of natural laws and their God. The regnant model had God, whereby his infallible knowledge and supervenience of every ‘secondary cause’ in the universe by its ‘ultimate cause’ began to be replaced by a model that took seriously the actual material and energy-based relations and movements of the physical world on their own terms. This led to a vision of God whose creative and governing powers were now quite indirect giving rise to a mechanistic model of infinite knowledge which God enjoyed at a kind of ‘potentiality,’ ‘probability,’ ‘logic’ for an ‘empirical’ albeit infallible distance. God as the omni-competent Designer and Enactor is at the same time empirically so as well. According to this model, the divinely engineered, lawful world could run ‘on its own’ as it were, because it did so according to the will of its Designer.

The religious implications of this new model were quite massive. Retaining a soteriological/eschatological category within the conceptuality of universality and religion, a broad spectrum of theologians often called ‘deists’ reinterpreted the

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narratives of Christian scripture in ways so as to achieve a kind of cultural distillate of transcendent knowledge often titled ‘natural religion’ which could be summarized and expounded in forms of ‘natural theology.’ Although fairly unreconstructed traditionalist would yet abound – right into the twentieth century and beyond – a wide spectrum of theological expressions had developed both to advance this model of nature’s God – since virtually all of the natural philosophers, experimentalists and theoretical engineers were highly religious, but also to accommodate the tradition to this model. From the seventeenth century onward, the more distant but generous Creator, found expression in the rising phenomenon known broadly as ‘theism’ (personalist monotheism) as much as the newly constructive ‘deism’. This paper will be concerned with the latter; with its precursors and with its constructive contributions in view of theism as it rejected the latter’s views by contributing a new religion of the one, distant and yet, by their own lights, most universal God. In Deism, God is the Designer and if Platonically conceived, the transmission of ideal forms is based upon a sense of geometric transmission of drawings and calculations to the mechanistic functioning of the world. Malebranche will be the last, with occasionalism to suggest that God is the cause of every motion in the universe. Of course, even in this, the analogy of mind and cognition as over against action and motion put God at a distance from the nexus of cause and effect. With the rise of the scientific method and its world changing successes, a new array of logical strategies and arguments for and against this knowledge emerged. Divine distance is thus not a new category but was posited for different reasons and always resisted by Christian theologians on the basis of the creation narratives of scriptural revelation.

Historical Antecedents to Divine Distance

In classical Christian theology which reached its heights of refinement between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the metaphysical attributions of God’s transcendence – omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence – were all linked with the biblical models of God’s immanence, whose infinite personal involvement in nature and history governed and guided all of their affairs. Let us consider the Medieval program in modelling God’s relation to the world. It should be noted that even though a great many philosophical theologians distinguished the tangential presence of the being of God (even the indwelling of God) in relation to nature, many disallowed this, but asserted something like the immediate causative presence of divine energies (as in Hugh of St Victor and Maximus Confessor). The classic problem of the connection between the ultimate Being of absolute perfections and all relative, mutable and waning beings through an appeal to the creation narratives allowed for the two models of omnipresence and omni-causation: (1) being and energy; (2) energy. This is of course a modification of the classic Neo-Platonic model of intermediary beings and the multiplicity of beings based upon the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the biblical narrative of creation by divine fiat – and therefore of direct divine governance. This direct governance was understood to be exercised

by continuous omnipresence, either through the exercise of causative and stabilizing energies or those energies and the divine being or substance itself. There was one model which was vociferously rejected and that is pantheism, the identity of God's being with the totality of being, inclusive of all beings – to be distinguished from monism and its modern materialist expression. Monism, where all reality is ultimately a single substance, whether God or other likely eternal matter, seems to have enticed few if any Christian philosophers. For our purposes here, divine immanence was a necessary dimension of divine omnipresence with the only distinctions and differences resting upon whether the authority of the biblical narrative necessitated a direct relation of uncreated and created being; otherwise, God's power, coupled with God's wisdom was the sole and sufficient originating and sustaining cause of created beings. How did the medieval philosophical theologians conceive of this divine immanence in nature?

Bonaventure (ca. 1221–1274) broached no independence of philosophy from the mystical path; every aspect of its reflective powers were to serve the spiritual life in intellectual and moral terms. According to medieval divisions of learning, philosophy was concerned with nature, but this included the human soul and as such, reasons for the existence of the natural world. Everything in it could be known philosophically, could be linked to the heavenly realm and to the divine Redeemer as known through revelation and theology in a proper account of the soul. Bonaventure, a realist, was a critic of Aristotle whom he claimed had ignored the knowledge of the intermediary soul and embraced the horrendous doctrine of the eternity of the world, failed to grasp the eternal ideas of God as linked with the world and knowable in the human soul, the former could not recognize the *imago dei* in the human, divine providence and divine governance of the world. Plato and Plotinus, as Augustine had indirectly indicated much earlier, had through their contemplation of the Supreme Being intuitions and imperfect connection with this One and simply lacked the grace of faith in Christ which alone could perfect this knowledge of God and the world. Highly esteemed as far as they could go, their limitation could be found in their ignorance of original sin, its noetic effects, and its remedy in the Christologically shaped path of redemption. This faith protects from and corrects all epistemological errors and sets the individual on a path that unites heaven and earth, natural philosophy and supernatural theology.

Bonaventure made three assertions for *sola ratione* knowledge of the temporality of the world (against Thomas Aquinas who believed it could only be known by revelation) based upon (1) the daily addition of temporal duration, (2) the impossibility of a present in an infinite series of events and (3) the impossibility of eternal humanity due to a necessity of an infinite number of souls. All things are held in existence by the direct grace of God and, without the divine presence ruling over every particular in radical contingency, a total lapse into nothingness (based upon what he called 'vertibility') would instantly occur. Thomas on the other hand would teach the integrity of sentient beings based upon their natural indestructibility.

For Bonaventure, all existence participates in God's existence as visible light and is merely a manifestation of the unapproachable invisible light of God (1 Ti 6:16). Indeed, the inherent intelligibility and knowability of cosmic things is their

participation in this light that suffuses and illuminates, indeed, originates them. God's knowing of them is the most fundamental characteristic of his governing them and, in turn, the human soul and all spiritual beings participate and contribute to the divine knowing and participatory relation that at once purposes their ordered existence. Ultimately, unlike Thomas, who held that this relation made secondary causes possible in the effecting of new forms, Bonaventure saw much greater limitation for the sake of divine glory. Bonaventure denies the thing-ness or 'that-ness' (quiddity) of anything, even a creative agent in any sense – whether of substance or appearance ('accidence'). He considers that human offspring are perfected or given a disposition by the process of giving birth, but the parents in no way create a child. He completely rejects secondary causation by human being.

Along with Thomas, Bonaventure asserts that God is the practitioner of wisdom upon which all human wisdom is based. His favorite analogies are of the ruler, the general and the architect. Beginning with divine causation of all things, God as the first and continuous cause creates and immanently sustains the conditions for the particularity and harmony of all things. In this, Bonaventure is unlike Thomas, who is affected greatly by the *locus classicus* of Exodus 3:14, the God who is the "I am that I am," so that one realizes that God's being and essence, in the absolute perfection of his non-composite simplicity, are the same. As such, God is '*actus purus*' and as such, can be the only ground of the origination of all that is not God through the necessity of *creatio ex nihilo* since the world's existence is temporally conditioned. In both Bonaventure and Thomas, since the Triune Being of God is the eternal communion within this being, the creation is a temporal extension of the eternal acts of causative and cognitive immanence.

From Bonaventure's model, God does not exist in time even though God relates to temporality. And yet, instead of creating distance between the eternal and the temporal, the infinite God stands in immediate relation to all things and all times as if they and their discrete actions are totally contingent upon God in every way. Everything that has come into being is in radical dependence and their secondary independence continues in existence even in the particular thing that has complete existence since God ever provides continuance through his conserving influence. This is the radical immanency of the divine being to all created beings and as such is the infinitely resourceful artist, architect, ruler and commander whose gaze is ever vigilant and engaged with them in their accomplishment of his design. Bonaventure, like Augustine almost a millennium before him, held that the knowledge of the world is a function of cognitive participation in the eternal light of God refracted in a spectral perfection. As the human contemplates the works of God in the work, cognitive perceptions of the eternal ideas imbedded in all things and transcendent in the mind of God are accessible because of the immanent presence of God. This participation in the mind of God is achieved most supremely in acts of the intellect over against acts of the will. Divine love engenders human love, the extension of the self 'beyond itself' to the other.

Passing reference will be made here to John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308) because he, like Bonaventure, stands in counterpoise to Thomas. In Scotus' case, however, he truly influences the early science-based notions of God's more distant relation to

the world. Rejecting all *a priori* notions of God, Scotus' *a posteriori* reasoning from experience and reason for him implied the radical necessity of some being producing the beings of the cosmos. God is the necessary primary efficient cause of causes and existents. Indeed, God in his infinite being becomes necessary for infinity itself. God's governance, founded upon his attributes of immensity, omnipresence, justice, mercy, and providence are distinct within God, contradicting Thomas' account of divine simplicity. If they were not thus, God would be unknowable. God creates distance between himself and the world by creating robust causal relations which do not require a model of radical immanence. God is no longer seen as creatively involved in every new form and event in the cosmos. Things are created with their own potency and motive forces. God is no longer artist constantly touching and retouching the canvas of the divine work, but the engineer who designs and infusions of force are containing within once for all created continuities of non-divine existence.

Enlightenment Theism: John Ray

With Enlightenment science a radical shift takes place which was anticipated by the likes of Bonaventure and Scotus. Of immense importance would be the practical effect of the geological sciences upon the popular imagination. What did it mean that the landscape in various North American places was replete with fossils – was it a region of radical degradation? Or was it a place rich in natural resources because the earlier presence of abundant life had enriched it? But once the land of human habitation itself had become geometrically analyzed and measured, God had to become one who was and is the original scientist who creates his cosmos rather than merely observes it and shapes it technologically. The geometricity of things corresponded with the spatiality of experience and therefore the primary context of revelation and encounter with God. Aristotle, for all his empiricism, had established a closed cosmos, but the reasoning of the new science demanded an open one; not one of utterly random events but of dynamic unpredictable ones based upon real spontaneity that the medievals intuited but could not incorporate fundamentally within their systems. Thus, when Copernicus asserted against all disputants the heliocentric universe, every systematic paradigm was rendered obsolete. It was only the diversification of human study and the multiplication of its participants that rendered church discipline of human affairs in the West impossible. Nothing could avert it, not even the Inquisition – in those regions where it could be instituted.

What changes from the medieval to the modern conception of divine governance is threefold: (1) change in argumentation from causality to design with an analogical shift of emphasis from artistry to engineering, a ‘mechanization’ of conceptuality; (2) a change in how God's knowledge of the world is conceived, rather than through the radical contingency, God as designer knows the operations of the world as an observer of a completed, self-perpetuating mechanism according to his purpose but represents a shift in divine ‘experience’; (3) divine immanence and transcendence

has changed in terms of divine distance or self-same substance with the cosmos itself (if we connect with Spinoza's panentheism). Although the Deists will interpret the engineering and mechanization as the model of nature differently with respect to revelation and the essence of God, it is helpful to first cite an orthodox theologian – physico-theology – whose fascination and apologetics for divine creation works just as well with divine distance.

Among the theists, one of the great contributions was John Ray's *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1691).¹ True to the insightful Alasdair MacIntyre's characterization of English scientific knowledge as 'encyclopaedic',² Ray proceeds to engulf the reader of his widest ranging reflections upon all the nodal points of his Royal Society colleagues' discoveries and their meanings in true physico- theological fashion. Emphasizing God's skill in producing the 'contrivance' of creation, full as it is down to the tiniest detail, every organism perfectly adapted and provisioned in the well-functioning universe. For Ray, it is the sheer abundance of zoological variety and detail that enamours him. While divine artistry is still in the vocabulary, it is God the engineer that is in view:

There is no greater; at least no more palpable and convincing Argument of the Existence of a Deity, than the admirable Art and Wisdom that discovers itself in the Make and Constitution, the Order and Disposition, the Ends and Uses of all the Parts and Members of this stately Fabrick of Heaven and Earth: For if in the Works of Art, as for Example, a curious Edifice or Machine, Counsel, Design, and Direction to an End appearing in the whole Frame, and in all the several pieces of it, do necessarily infer the Being and Operation of some intelligent Architect or Engineer, why shall not also in the Works of Nature, that (grandeur and Magnificence, that excellent Contrivance for Beauty, Order, Use, &c. which is observable in them, wherein they do as much transcend the Effects of humane Art as infinite Power and Wisdom exceeds finite, infer the Existence and Efficiency of an Omnipotent and All-Wise Creator ?³

Of course Ray includes in his discussion of design, just like all physico-theologians, a claim to discern the divine purpose and thus an argument for right belief and worship. This is precisely the cause of new levels of resistance, among them Descartes, and a host of other sceptics and rationalists: since God's final causes are impenetrable, nothing can be said about them. What is important for the present is the creation as mechanism and that essential to its serving the glory of God is its stability and self-perpetuation as a finished product.

Like other theologians of his day, Ray is acutely aware that the philosophical trends from the sciences have forced the construction of a new theological model upon Christian culture. The only problem is which model? Will the most persuasive

¹ Famous Botanist and member of the Royal Society, see Ray (1717). The typically lengthy subtitle read, The Heavenly Bodies, Elements, Meteors, Fossils, Vegetables, Animals, (Beasts, Birds, Fishes, and Insects); more particularly in the Body of the Earth, its Figure, Motion, and Consistency; and in the admirable Structure of the Bodies of Man, and other Animals; as also in their Generation, &c. With Answers to some Objections; <http://www.jri.org.uk/ray/wisdom/index.htm>.

² MacIntyre (1990).

³ Ray (1717), p. 30.

model be a theist (read deist)/mechanist model or atomizing atheism? Ray quotes approvingly Cudworth's exclamation: "these mechanick Theists have here quite outstripp'd and outdone the Atomick Atheists themselves".⁴ Ray identifies himself within the taxonomy of science oriented theists in that the creation has been made to sustain itself and to exhibit regularity of motion, all according to the "Laws of Mechanism".⁵ Ray does not want a reduction of theistic reasoning to the detection of mere divinely ordered nature but the detection of divine purpose in all things. In them, God

settled ... Laws or Rules of local Motion among the Parts of the universal matter, that by his ordinary and preserving Concourse, the several Parts of the Universe thus once completed should be able to maintain the great Construction or System and economy of the mundane Bodies, and propagate the Species of living creatures...⁶

Physical law is seen as a form of moral law, instituted in the material universal by the divine Lawgiver. Great resistance to deistic distance is asserted in the attempt to maintain the law is always also about power constantly energizing "senseless" matter to maintain its forms and behaviors. God both implants and executes the laws of nature at every moment. Together with other physico-theologians, Ray acknowledges that from the gradual processes of nature one could infer that God is not omnipotent and indeed that the deformities and catastrophes of nature suggest less than an infallible and irresistible Designer. In the dizzying multiplication of encyclopedic references, Ray clearly hoped he would indicate the necessity of the grand argument (of divine providence and good pleasure), even the mass of aesthetic references to nature in the Psalms. It only serves to a satisfying reason that all things have for their continuing existence "the immediate Presidency, Direction and Regulation of some intelligent Being".⁷ God must be "the Operator",⁸ "an infinitely wise and powerful Efficient",⁹ occasions of "a special Interposition of his Providence",¹⁰ plants achieving such perfection of form that "there seems to be necessary some intelligent plastick Nature",¹¹ inferred "superintending Providence",¹² "Omniscient Creator"¹³ provisioning the human for modification and improvement of the world "the Almighty interpretatively speaks to" humanity through all these

⁴ Ray (1717), p. 41.

⁵ Ray (1717), p. 44.

⁶ Quoting Boyle, *Enquiry into the vulgar notions of Nature* (pp. 77f), p. 48.

⁷ Ray (1717), p. 52.

⁸ Ray (1717), p. 55.

⁹ Ray (1717), p. 71.

¹⁰ Ray (1717), p. 89.

¹¹ Ray (1717), p. 102; and plants with such complexity and 'so strange, that one cannot believe it to be done by Matter, however mov'd by any Laws or Rules imaginable'.

¹² Ray (1717), p. 121.

¹³ Ray (1717), p. 161f, here there is a massive listing of every imaginable engagement and exploitation of the environment for human advantage and well-being through first-person address by 'the bountiful and gracious Author of Man's Being and Faculties, and all things else'.

natural characteristics; all culminating in repeated calls for worship and enjoyment of this highest knowledge, so characteristic of all monotheisms, in this case also, since one cannot, Ray declares, imagine heaven to be anything but an expansion and intensification of human enjoyment in the variety and majesty of creation now redeemed. In the meantime, all scientific research is “justly accounted a proper or *Propaideia Preparative to Divinity*¹⁴ the Benignity of the Deity”,¹⁵ so that the human “Machine (form, order, and motion)” cannot be conceived apart from the notion of “the Contrivance of some Wise Agent”.¹⁶

And yet rather irresistibly Ray cannot help but speak of nature’s own agency, as with plants, “Nature hath taken more extraordinary Care, and made more abundant Provision for their Propagation and Encrease,” so that “for the Security of such Species as are produced only by Seed, it hath endued all Seed with a lasting Vitality”.¹⁷ Finally he can equate the two: “which Disposition … Nature, or rather the Wisdom of the Creator, hath granted”¹⁸ everything commodious for animal life and survival – all instances of “the Wisdom of Nature, or rather the God of Nature”¹⁹; and this is because nature has been created, in itself to be “most free, diffusive, and communicative”,²⁰ “those rational Contrivances… the Wisdom and Providence of our great Creator… the Artifice of Nature is wonderful in the Construction”,²¹ reasoning based upon the rest of the seventh day, yet the continuance of everything that was made, Ray understands from the creation story in Genesis “if there be any Spontaneous Generation (which is the ‘strongest Hold’²² of atheism) there was nothing done at the Creation, but what is daily done; for the Earth and Water produc’d Animals”²³ – which he refers to as his own “persistent denial” of spontaneous generation, yet the daily production of things by nature is as the first day according to the Creator’s purpose in its agency, so that proponents of the idea citing imperfections in nature, Ray asserts that the vast “Force and Strength” required to bring everything into being is itself the perfection²⁴;

…that they do all friendly Conspire, all help and assist mutually one the other,
all concurr in one general End and Design, the Good and Preservation of the Whole, are

¹⁴ Ray (1717), p. 171.

¹⁵ Ray (1717), p. 234.

¹⁶ Ray (1717), p. 241.

¹⁷ Ray (1717), p. 110; and yet of course always ‘the Works of Providence, for the continuation of the Species and upholding of the World’, p. 121.

¹⁸ Ray (1717), p. 143.

¹⁹ Ray (1717), p. 156; every animal is well proportioned: ‘Nature hath not only furnished them therewith, but with such an one as is commensurable to their Legs, except here the Elephant, which hath indeed a short Neck…’

²⁰ Ray (1717), p. 182.

²¹ Ray (1717), p. 286.

²² Ray (1717), p. 322.

²³ Ray (1717), pp. 300f.

²⁴ Ray (1717), pp. 324f.

certainly Arguments and Effects of Infinite Wisdom and Counsel; so that he must needs be worse than mad that can find in his Heart to imagine all these to be casual and fortuitous, or not provided and designed by a most Wise and Intelligent Cause.²⁵

The only consequence here for Ray is to declare an “Evasion of the Atheist is fitted only to elude such Arguments of divine Wisdom as are taken from Things necessary to the Conservation of the Animal” in the face of this entire two volume treatise designed “to effectual Confutation of this Atheistical Sophism”.²⁶ He asks finally, in connection with the totally of human existence in nature, “we could not but wonder how so curious an Engine as Man’s Body could be kept in tune one Hour, as we use it, much less hold out so many Years”,²⁷ and to this query, inferences are everywhere and to him they all necessarily point to this God.

Ray concludes with praise for the body

Let us give Thanks to Almighty God for the Perfection and Integrity of our Bodies. It would not be amiss to put it into the Eucharistical part of our daily Devotions: ““We praise Thee, O God, for the due Number, Shape, and Use of our Limbs and Senses; and in general, of all the parts of our Bodies; we bless thee for the sound and healthful Constitution of them...”²⁸

The greatest problem in his mind is the existence and practice, as he presumes, of the atheist, but

The true Notion of God consisting in this. ‘That he is a Being of all possible Perfection’”, That I may borrow my Lord Bishop of Chester’s Words, in his Discourse of Natural Religion, page 94...their high crimes of many so that atheism ‘Certainly as this is the highest Provocation that any Man can be guilty of, so shall it be punish’d with the forest Vengeance’ and finally ‘Now a slender Suspicion of the Existence of a Being, the Denial whereof is of so sad Consequence, must needs disturb the Atheist’s Thoughts, and fill him with Fears, and qualify and allay all his Pleasures and Enjoyments, and render him miserable even in this Life.²⁹

Enlightenment Deism: Anthony Collins

Certainly, atheism was as unpopular in the eighteenth century as at any time, so the so-called Deists took another approach based upon a program of more modest inferential reasoning. Deism, a neologism itself, is really a form of Unitarianism which has disengaged itself from biblical narratives or sought to edit them in order to comport with newly imagined feature of ‘true’, i.e., “natural religion”. Critically, deism would regard all religions grounded on revelations as outmoded. Miracles,

²⁵ Ray (1717), p. 291.

²⁶ Ray (1717), p. 360.

²⁷ Ray (1717), p. 378.

²⁸ Ray (1717), p. 375.

²⁹ Ray (1717), pp. 406f.

prophecies and mystical interpretations were all deemed not merely non-rational but antithetical to the vital truths of religion based upon general cosmological and moral intuitions of civilized, i.e., science-based humanity. Not an atheism at all, God's existence as creator and governor of all things, is also the bestower of all rational faculties to the human race for the immediate governance of the world. With humanity in this assigned role, God stands at a distance, no longer according to synergistic agencies of primary and secondary causes, but as entirely out of the way for the only kind of causation to take place, that of sole causation in the motions of every discrete thing. In this role, it would be incumbent upon human beings to recognize their rightful place within the cosmos as its primary moral agents with sole responsibility for how the universe worked out. What is crucial here, as Ray can detect, is that without the embrace of atheism, deism would stand together with the emerging theism, in many respects their only difference in the latter espousing a personal God and through a special rational doorway, making room for the narratives of revelation. In many respects this was an extension of the medieval distinction between knowledge of things by reason and those by revelation.³⁰

Emerging from medieval precursors espousing the rational bounds of religion under Stoic, Epicurean and Averroist traditions, deism could also develop its own rather esoteric cult in noble houses of England. Matthew Tindal (+1733) published late his most famous *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730). Interestingly, the appeal to revelation is its directness through nature, rather than interpreted indirectly through prophets and their disseminators. It was certainly not necessary to hold to the mechanistic distance of God from the world, as with Thomas Morgan or Isaac Newton. Samuel Clarke will be most notable for his Boyle lectures: *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, 1704 and *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*, 1705. He adopts the dualism of a mechanistic, dynamic view of the world in the former where God is free in the imposition of his originating decisions and laws. God is *suprema causa*, infinitely good and just. The question will be the tension between the invariable exercise of these attributes and the actuality of the world. Newton taught a kind of dynamic cosmology: continuous divine action for the maintenance of the world with even the possibility of miracle. This factor makes for a precursor to the recovery of immanent causation through the subatomic universe.

Nevertheless, many interpreters were of the opinion that Newton's cosmology required a mechanistic and deterministic view. Unlike the God of constant providential governance, overseeing and organically causing all this, God designs and engineers the universe to run accordingly. The determinism is in the natural laws and structural plans of God as one time original cause of all things and their ineluctable carrying out of form and function. This became known as 'necessitarianism': God at a distance with a universe 'running on its own'. Interestingly, his view would actually be compatibilist, necessarily, not denied in the least that human beings had

³⁰Cf., Reventlow (1984).

wills, only that because of the will of the designers, they were not actually free. Indeed, it is foundational to Collins that any compatibilist model of divine and human wills would be deterministic the only question as to how much the human will played a role in the causal nEXI of the world. What is different here from the medieval conceptions is divine immanence and divine human coaction. Instead, it is what the human will has to do within the mechanisms of nature for itself and in relation to the wider environment of the human organism and its societies. One of the great exponents of this view was Anthony Collins (1676–1729), particularly in his work: *Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty* (1715). As one of the founders of ‘free-thinking’ (together with John Toland, whose thought is discussed in this volume under “Ultimate Unity”) as it was called, embracing a robust view of the existence of God, his rejection of revelation made him a complete outsider religiously. Samuel Clarke would respond with a massive and intense attack upon the work to which Collins appears to have responded, publishing in the last year of his life, *Liberty and Necessity* (1729). Very problematic would be the central argument from ultimate causation as thoroughgoing requiring determinism of everything as ‘self-evident.’ What is crucial at the time is the materialist precursor of anthropological monism, the denial of an immaterial soul and therefore the rejection of a classical dualist model.³¹ Indeed, since the rise of modern philosophy in light of natural science, one of the most fundamental metaphysical issues to survive beyond the remove of revelation from its sphere is that of freedom and necessity. One might say that this is largely due to the divine distance entailed in the deist model of God.

Collins’ deist model of God means that the problem of God’s foreknowledge is resolved by God’s design of a world and individuals that is completely deterministic. This is the case as nature is a product of the laws of causal relations. The problem of divine foreknowledge is resolved by this means, again, not by God’s nearness, but by God’s cognition of the settings and operations of nature’s mechanisms which God designed and put into effect. If freedom is to have any meaning, it is only in terms of unimpeded action so that the determination of design can be worked out. All action is caused and therefore necessarily occurs; nothing has ever happened otherwise. Human actions are fully volitional, but they are not free. What is so crucial here is that Collins was committed to the rejection of anthropological dualism because it presented such a fundamentally flawed account – the impossibility of something immaterial moving the material body. But as to determinism, Collins held that like the past, all future events were determined. Indeed, much like the implied problem in all accounts of exhaustive divine foreknowledge: since God knows the future infallibly, the future cannot be otherwise. Only a God of limited knowledge could allow for the kind of free will that is traditionally asserted. But God would then be limited in power and such a God could not have created the

³¹ Interestingly, as early as Thomas Aquinas, there is acknowledgement that the human being must be a single nature composed to two fundamental elements of bodily substance and incorporeal soul.

existing universe. Thus, to acknowledge God correctly, which is at the heart of true religion, one must acknowledge the truth of human being and necessary action.

Collins' arguments include the basic features of experience, that the self-conscious human subject is always able to identify the causes of personal action. Since one's actions always have a cause, they could not have been the result of absolutely free will. One of the measures of free will would be indifference in all choices. Since this is not real for the human condition, we are not free. Indifference would result in no choice, but this is of course not the case. We do choose because we must choose, either the best among options or as a result of causes that have on some other grounds led deterministically to our particular choices. By the same token, Collins further argues that because all actions have a point of initiation, they occur as the result of causes therefore and not because of free will. As such, he is a moral determinist. Yet another argument is the impossibility of choosing the worst (not from ignorance or coercion) since if this were the case human beings would be worse off than they are. Perhaps Collins' weakest necessitarian argument is that human action must be determined by the contraries of pleasure and pain or there would be no sense or basis in rewards and punishments. Causeless free will would have no orientation to the realities of the world and this clearly cannot be the case. In all, Collins, a deist who rejected special revelation as contrary to reason, but held to an afterlife, is concerned that human beings acquire a proper anthropology and natural religion – based upon reasonable orientation to natural law, to go with it. One must be careful here however, since although he rejected the doctrine of the Trinity beyond reason and even contradictory, he could accept the historical testimony of Christ's resurrection³² – as of course Newton could. It is possible to consider that while Collins rejects revelation, he is thinking theistically on the basis of natural religion.

In the Inquiry, Collins begins with expressing his great appreciation for the work of Malabranche, the great occasionalist who saw all things in God. This Collins regards as a fundamentally flawed understanding of the universe. "...are we not manifestly determined by pleasure or pain and by what seems reasonable or unreasonable to us to judge, or will, or act?"³³ Indeed, one of the arguments most persuasive to Collins for determinism is the "perfection in God necessarily to know all truth..."³⁴ The model of the God/world//human relation is a cognitive one based upon God whose knowledge is exhaustive and infinitely precise within respect to all past, present and future states and acts. God does not act directly nor has an immediate or organic relation to all things, but God's rational and volitional faculties are such that the world is, was and will be what God's knows it to be. He regards this "confirmation of the argument, from the consideration of the attributes of God"³⁵

³² Collins (1707), p. 24; cf., Rowe (1987), pp. 52–67. Overhoff (2000), O'Higgins (1976).

³³ Collins (1707), p. 17.

³⁴ Collins (1707), p. 51.

³⁵ Collins (1707), p. 74.

which feed directly into his fourth argument based on divine foreknowledge or “prescience”.

The argument from foreknowledge, is in point of fact, the one which establishes divine distance:

that all things future will certainly exist in such time, such order, and with such circumstances; and not otherwise. For if any things future were contingent or uncertain, or depended on the liberty of man, that is, might or might not happen, their certain existence could not be the object of the divine prescience; it being a contradiction to know that to be certain, which is not certain; and God himself could only guess at the existence of such things.³⁶

He continues

And if the divine prescience supposes the certain existence of all things future, it supposes also the necessary existence of all things future, because God can foreknow their certain existence only, either as that existence is the effect of his decree, or as it depends on its own causes.³⁷

And further

If he foreknows that existence, as it is the effect of his decree; his decree makes that existence necessary: for it implies a contradiction for an all-powerful being to decree any thing which shall not come to pass.³⁸

And finally, since natural necessity is no less perfect than divine

If he foreknows that existence, as it depends on its own causes; that existence is no less necessary...causes and effects having a necessary relation to and dependence on each other...[as] decreed by God.³⁹

The greater reality is divine knowledge which is omni-temporally perfect.

Collins finally is not willing to leave determinism//necessitarianism in the hands of those who imagine a kind of non-volitional subjugation, instead, it is compatibilist, as stated earlier. Once one considers his final statements, one realizes that Collins had opened a door with his free and scientific theologizing that is not easily contravened:

(of mind and body) ...I take man to have a truly valuable liberty of another kind. He has a power to do as he wills or pleases. ...unless prevented by some restraint or compulsion, as by being gagged, being under an acute pain, being force out of his place, being confined, having convulsive motions, having lost the use of his limbs, or such-like causes.

And is it not a great perfection in man to be able, in relation both to his thoughts and actions, to do as he will or pleases, in all those cases of pleasure and interest?...Had he this power or liberty in all things, he would be omnipotent!⁴⁰

³⁶ Collins (1707), p. 79.

³⁷ Collins, *ibid.*

³⁸ Collins (1707), p. 80.

³⁹ Collins, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Collins (1707), pp. 101–102.

What the human being does is what the divine being does, according to their respective domains and dimensions. Both act according to the conditions of knowledge and the certainty of whatever is actual and not otherwise.

Reasoning about the God/world relation has called always for a constellation of analogies and symbols. As the scientific understanding of natural processes complexified in the early modern period, models of divine causation which conveyed God as an omnipotent and omniscient agent acting concurrently with human agents fell by the way side. But divine immediacy never really loses its usefulness; it just goes somewhere else: into the sub-atomic world.

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How a Modest Fideism may Constrain Theistic Commitments: Exploring an Alternative to Classical Theism

John Bishop

Explicating and Motivating a Modest Fideism

I begin with the assumption that legitimate practical commitment to the truth of any religious beliefs will always involve a *faith-venture*. A faith-venture is taking a proposition to be true under conditions of *evidential ambiguity* – that is, under conditions where our total available public evidence neither shows the proposition’s truth nor its falsehood to be significantly more probable than not, and where that total evidence is systematically open to viable overall interpretation, both on the assumption that the proposition is true and on the assumption that the proposition is false. To put it more popularly, my assumption is that acceptable religious commitment always involves a cognitive ‘leap of faith’. I do, in fact, believe that this assumption holds generally – but I restrict it here to theistic religious beliefs.

This ‘Faith-venture’ assumption needs qualification. As so far stated, it is clearly false. Orthodox Christians hold, for example, that, after His resurrection, Jesus ascended into Heaven, and they hold this belief on the basis of supporting evidence – namely, the account of this event found in Scripture. But, of course, what I mean by my assumption is only that *our most foundational* religious beliefs involve faith-ventures: clearly, once one accepts as foundational (for example) that God exists and is revealed in Jesus Christ as related in the canonical Scriptures, one then does accept certain religious beliefs – such as belief in the Ascension – on the basis of evidence. But one’s practical commitment to the truth of Christian beliefs is still ultimately subject to a faith-venture, since its being supported by evidence of this kind – according to a Christian *evidential practice* which incorporates various norms including hermeneutical principles applicable to Holy Scripture – is itself within the

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scope of what may aptly be called Christian *framing principles*, and the truth of these can be committed to only by a faith-venture beyond the support of one's evidence. Or so the Faith-venture assumption maintains.

Philosophers who think that our total available public evidence makes it (much) more probable than not that the God of theism does *not* exist will, of course, maintain that practical commitment to the truth of any religious belief that presupposes God's existence involves a venture *against* the evidence. And, if it is wrong for people to commit themselves to foundational religious truths *against* the recognised force of the evidence, then those philosophers will be able to conclude that such faith-ventures are illegitimate. I endorse that normative claim. The assumption that theistic religious commitment involves taking certain foundational propositions to be true under conditions of evidential ambiguity is an assumption about *legitimate* religious commitment. I concede that if a rational assessment of the total available evidence counts against the truth of a given foundational religious claim, then practical commitment to its truth is *not* legitimate – though it may certainly still be possible. Legitimate faith-ventures require evidential ambiguity, and, of course, there is no evidential ambiguity when the evidence decides against the truth of a claim.

So, on my Faith-venture assumption, if there is to be any legitimate theistic religious commitment, arguments that claim to disambiguate in favour of atheism must all be flawed. And, of course, it is controversial whether that is the case. Furthermore, my assumption also requires that all arguments that claim to disambiguate *in favour of theism* must be flawed as well. For, if any such arguments succeed, the evidence will tell in favour of theistic religious commitment and no venture beyond the evidence will be required.

Now, I have no intention of trying to argue that the Faith-venture assumption is correct. But I do maintain that it is plausible enough for its implications to deserve serious consideration. The view that theism is evidentially ambiguous – and that, therefore, those who commit themselves to its truth venture beyond the evidence – does seem initially plausible in the light of religious diversity, and, also, as a response to the long history of unresolved debate between theists and atheists, given that thinkers of equal intelligence and integrity are manifestly to be found on each side. It is a view that may be bolstered by case studies of the arguments both of natural theology and of natural atheology that show them to be circular – deeply so, perhaps, but circular none the less. Arguably, such arguments succeed only under hidden assumptions that assume the truth of their conclusions. (For example, arguably the ‘necessity’ version of the cosmological argument assumes that there must be an explanation for the fact that something exists rather than nothing – and that assumption may be compelling only for someone who is already thinking within an implicitly theistic perspective. For another example – on the side of natural atheology – the argument from evil arguably rests on the ‘noseeum’ assumption that our inability to discern a reason God could properly have for letting fawns die lingering deaths when caught in forest fires entails that there is no such reason.¹) An addi-

¹ The reference is to a much-discussed example due to Rowe (1979). The term ‘noseeum’ is due to Wykstra (1996).

tional, potentially powerful, way of supporting the claim that theism is evidentially ambiguous would be to show that such ambiguity is more than historical and contingent (as one might still suppose it to be if offered just as an explanation for the unresolved debate between theism and atheism). The ambiguity would turn out to be necessary if foundational theistic beliefs constituted *highest-order framing principles* in terms of which all else is to be interpreted. There would then *necessarily* be no wider framework within which any question of external evidence for or against a foundational belief such as belief that God exists could be assessed.

There is a currently influential position in the epistemology of religious belief that would concede that theism is evidentially ambiguous *at the level of arguments* for and against the claim that God exists, yet strenuously deny that legitimate theistic commitment involves a leap of faith beyond one's evidence. This is, of course, the position of Reformed epistemology, which holds that foundational theistic beliefs can be properly basic. That God exists can be supported by one's total available evidence just because it is evident *in itself*, without needing to have its truth inferred from other justifiably held beliefs which provide the evidence for it. This is not to say that God's existence is *generally* self-evident, but just that, *for believers*, it may be evident basically, non-inferentially. And the standard comparison is with basic perceptual beliefs, where it seems entirely sensible to accept that we find their truth to be evident non-inferentially, provided certain potentially overriding conditions are excluded.² A person for whom God's existence is basically evident, it may seem, can hardly be committing herself beyond her evidence if she takes it to be true that God does indeed exist.

I concur with those philosophers who have argued that Reformed epistemology is, in fact, a fideist position – even though its chief defenders stoutly reject this description.³ Or, at least, I believe that Reformed epistemology is a fideist position in the sense in which the Faith-venture assumption I have been explicating is a fideist one. The view that legitimate religious commitment involves cognitive venture beyond (though not against) one's total available evidence does, I think, deserve to be classed as a fideist position – though it is a modest or moderate fideism, certainly, by comparison with views that build into the idea of fideism the acceptance of commitment wholly independent of (and therefore potentially counter to) rational assessment of one's evidence in accordance with the norms of a public evidential practice. Yet the view that reason needs to make room for faith, and that authentic theistic commitment must require a risk that would be eliminated if the truth of theism had adequate rational evidential support, could, it seems, be adequately accommodated by a modest, *supra-evidential*, kind of fideism and need not require accepting fideism of an irrationalist, *counter-evidential*, variety.

² Perhaps what is basically evident is not so much God's existence as such, but other claims that presuppose God's existence, such as God's comforting me, God's speaking to me, etc. I will here ignore this qualification, however. The most fully worked out defence of Reformed epistemology is to be found in Plantinga (2000).

³ See, for example, C. Stephen Evans, who argues that fideism is implied by the commitment of Reformed epistemology to externalism. See Evans (1998), pp. 45–47. For Plantinga's rejection of the charge that his Reformed epistemology is fideist, see Plantinga (2000), p. 263.

Reformed epistemology is fideist, I think, because it has to recognise that the status of foundational theistic beliefs as basically evident can apply only within the perspective of the believer. People generally do not find theistic beliefs basically evident (indeed, for that matter a large number of committed theists do not find any of their religious beliefs basically evident either). There is thus a real question for reflective believers who do find their belief that God exists to be basically evident *whether it is properly so*. (For, notoriously, someone *could* find basically evident his belief that the Great Pumpkin returns to the pumpkin patch each Hallowe'en.⁴) Alvin Plantinga's famous appeal to externalist epistemology (in his theory of 'warrant') yields at best the conditional claim that, *if Christian theism is correct*, then basic belief in God is highly likely to have warrant, that is, to be properly basic belief. But this does not suffice to satisfy the reflective believer that what he finds basically evident is *in fact* properly, warrantedly, so – not without epistemic circularity, anyway. And the upshot seems inescapable: given that Reformed epistemology admits the *inferential* evidential ambiguity of theism, Christian believers *do* commit themselves beyond their evidence. For, even those believers for whom God's existence *is* basically evident go beyond their evidence in taking it to be *properly, warrantedly, so*.⁵

Notice that I have here appealed to the situation of the *reflective* believer. Clearly enough, believers who find God's existence basically evident need not even be conscious of, let alone concerned about, any venture beyond their evidence – any more than anyone outside of the Philosophy classroom is concerned about venturing beyond their evidence in taking their perceptual experience to be of an independently existing external world. In Philosophy of Religion, however, we have to consider *reflective* believers who do become concerned about the issue of the *justifiability* of their beliefs. But what precisely is that issue of 'justifiability'? This is a vitally important meta-question – and Plantinga, again famously, has argued at length for his answer which is that the only issue worth debating is the question whether theistic beliefs have warrant, where warrant is his name for a kind of epistemic worth that a belief may have in virtue of being caused in the right sort of way.⁶ I will not here discuss Plantinga's answer: I wish only to state what seems to me a more immediately appealing answer to the meta-question. And that is this. Religious beliefs count as such only because practical commitment to their truth makes a significant difference to how one acts and lives one's life.⁷ Practical commitment to the truth of religious beliefs is thus a *moral* issue. What reflective believers are concerned about is whether they are *morally* justified in taking their religious beliefs to be true in their practical reasoning. And this, of course, is something over which believers do have

⁴This example is discussed in Plantinga (1981, 1983). More serious examples do come to mind, of course: the basic beliefs of a suicide bomber, perhaps, or of nationalists convinced they are specially favoured by God.

⁵For a fuller presentation of this line of argument see Bishop and Aijaz (2004).

⁶For the definition of Plantinga's notion of warrant, see Plantinga (2000), p. 156. For useful discussion, see Kvanvig (1996).

⁷I thus accept the straightforward implication that any belief that God exists that does *not* make such a practical difference is not a religious belief, but rather some purely theoretical or 'thin' metaphysical belief. Compare Paul Helm's distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' beliefs (Helm 2000, pp. 103–110).

direct control: they do not have any (direct) control over whether they *hold* certain religious propositions to be true – but they do directly control whether they *take* those propositions to be true in practical reasoning when they come to act.

So my modest fideist assumption is that practical commitment to theistic religious beliefs involves venturing beyond what is supported by the total available public evidence, and can yet be morally justifiable. And, as I say, I am not claiming to be able to show that this assumption is actually true: only that it is sufficiently plausible for its implications to be worth exploring. This modest fideism thus opposes the kind of moral evidentialism that maintains that one may commit oneself practically to the truth of a religious proposition only to the extent justified by one's total available evidence. Not that there is any dispute about the general importance of weighing one's evidence when one comes to act on a belief: all the modest fideist maintains is that *under certain conditions* it may be morally permissible to commit oneself to the truth of a proposition beyond the recognised rational support of one's evidence, and that this can apply, in particular, to the foundational framing principles involved in the cognitive content of religion. There is thus a need for an account of the conditions under which faith-ventures are morally justifiable. How are we to distinguish, in other words, between good and bad 'leaps of faith'? How do we avoid conjugating the following irregular verb: *I am a knight of faith, you are an ideologue, they are fanatics?*

I have recently attempted to articulate and defend a modest fideist position that builds on William James's 'justification of faith' in his famous 1896 lecture 'The Will to Believe'.⁸ I thoroughly agree with James that faith-ventures can be justifiable only under quite severe constraints: there is no basis for the common objection that James is simply giving *carte blanche* to wishful thinking. The first constraint is that faith-ventures may be made only when it matters for how one acts and leads one's life whether one does or does not commit oneself to the truth of the religious (or relevantly similar) proposition at issue. The second constraint I have in effect already canvassed: faith-ventures may not be made *against* the rational weight of one's evidence as established under the applicable public evidential practice. There is to be no 'believing six impossible things before breakfast', or any other time for that matter.⁹ Furthermore, the question of the truth of the proposition concerned must be *essentially and persistently* evidentially undecidable: it cannot be the case that there could be future evidence that might decide the matter. These constraints are essentially Jamesian (on a certain interpretation of his views, anyway). But there are further constraints, I think, about which James is not explicit.

⁸ See Bishop (2002, 2007). James's famous lecture is to be found in James (1956), pp. 1–31.

⁹ The question why people make religious faith-ventures can, of course, be treated as an empirical scientific question, and there has recently been considerable interest in evolutionary psychological explanations of religious belief. See, for example, Boyer (2001) and Dennett (2006). Wolpert's (2007) recent book on this subject uses in its title the White Queen's remark to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*: "Why, sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." But the implicature – that religious beliefs are (always, or even typically) held counter-rationally – is evidently contestable. On the question whether our current understanding of the natural, evolutionary, causes of religious belief has implications for the normative issue of whether one ought to commit oneself to religious beliefs of any kind, see Bishop (2007), 204–205.

Under Nazism, some people were motivated to believe the truth of the Nazi religion – for so, I believe, it may be regarded.¹⁰ Yet, arguably, the existence of ‘the Nazi gods’ was indeed essentially and persistently evidentially undecidable. Furthermore, it was of vital importance for many of those people whether they did or did not commit themselves to the truth of Nazi religion: trying to maintain a neutral position of suspended judgment was *in practice* effectively equivalent to rejecting Nazi religion as false. Now, on the Jamesian constraints stated so far, a faith-venture in favour of the existence of the Nazi gods would seem morally permissible. But that surely cannot be right.

So further constraints on faith-ventures are needed – and those constraints are *moral* constraints. Where epistemic, evidence-based, assessment of faith-commitments gives out, moral assessment takes over. And that moral assessment recognises moral constraints of two kinds. First, there are constraints on *the kind of motivation* we have for making a faith-venture. Since, necessarily, we are not motivated to take our faith-propositions to be true by our assessment of our evidence, we must have some other kind of *non-evidential* (or, in James’s terminology, *passional*) motivation. And the possible types of motivation here are morally evaluable. Many people may have been motivated to take Nazi religion to be true by a desire to conform, or by fear of not doing so. Understandable though such a motivation may be, it is not a motivation of a morally admirable type: and, on those grounds, one may reject as morally impermissible faith-ventures that are so motivated. On the other hand, some may have been motivated by the sincere conviction that a world in which the divine perfects humanity through the coming to power of a racially pure master race was indeed the best kind of world. And there seems nothing morally wrong with that *general type* of non-evidential motivation for belief – there is nothing wrong as such, that is, with a motivation for belief that evaluates what is believed as realising a high ideal. So, to exclude the faith-ventures of Nazis of this ilk, it will be necessary to reject as impermissible ventures whose *content* is morally objectionable. To commit oneself justifiably beyond one’s evidence to a religious (or similar) view of the world, that view of the world must conform to correct morality. That view of the world must be a view of a morally good world, judged by the correct moral standards. So, since any morally acceptable *passional* motivation for sincerely held Nazi religion is directed at a morally flawed object, the Nazi faith-venture is accordingly ruled out here also.

Reflective believers who wish to satisfy themselves, so far as they can, that their religious commitments are indeed morally permissible must thus satisfy themselves of the moral probity both of their non-evidential motivation for, and the content of, their commitment. So they will need to appeal to their own theory of what correct moral values are. That theory might, of course, be wrong. Our sincere Nazi may agree that faith-ventures must meet these moral constraints, and go on to judge that his faith-venture does indeed meet them – because he judges the framing principles of Nazi religion to conform to what he takes correct morality to be. We will say, of course – and rightly – that his account of correct moral values is distorted and wrong. But the

¹⁰ See Burleigh (2000).

fact remains that any judgment of the moral permissibility of a faith-venture will rest on in principle fallible moral judgments.¹¹ Faith-ventures should therefore not be made in a close-minded or dogmatic spirit – though it does not follow, I believe, that they can therefore be only half-hearted or tentative. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that it will be problematic if people's moral values remain wholly derivative upon their maintaining a specific kind of faith-venture – for then any potential for them to make an independent moral critique of that faith-venture will be excluded. Morally acceptable religious faith-venting requires, I believe, an appropriate tension between one's evolving faith-commitments and one's evolving moral commitments, with neither becoming purely subordinate to the other. What I mean by this claim may, I hope, become clearer as I come to the point of this paper – which I am just about to do.

What I want to do is to add to the exploration and assessment of potentially religiously viable alternatives to orthodox classical theism a perspective that emerges from the modest, extended Jamesian, fideism I have been outlining. If we do accept that theistic commitment requires a venture under conditions of evidential ambiguity, and that it may yet be legitimate, what are the plausible constraints on commitments of this kind? I have sketched a Jamesian answer – and, again, I appeal only to its being plausible enough for its implications to be worth considering.¹² What I now want to observe is that once we have such a theory of the constraints on admissible faith-ventures, we have a set of criteria against which we may measure the moral adequacy of classical theistic faith-ventures and of faith-ventures in favour of any proposed alternative to classical theism.¹³

Applying Extended Jamesian Fideism to Classical Theistic Faith-Ventures: A New Perspective on the Problem of Evil?

I shall now consider how classical theism may fare under extended Jamesian fideism. If the truth of classical theism is evidentially ambiguous (as this position assumes), then the existence of evil and suffering does not provide adequate evidence for the non-existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect God. Nevertheless,

¹¹ Indeed, it is worth remarking that judgments as to the applicability of the previously mentioned, non-moral, constraints on permissible faith-ventures will *also* be fallible.

¹² As Imran Aijaz has pointed out to me, the evidential ambiguity of theism may impose constraints on justifiable theistic commitment independently of those arising from the conditions imposed by an acceptable fideism. Aijaz cites, for example, the implication that acceptable expanded theistic beliefs can hardly include the claim that it is a matter of great importance to God that humans should have very specific beliefs (e.g. that Jesus died for their sins) [private communication]. I agree that this may well be the case: my present interest, however, is just in the constraints that arise from the need to justify a fideist position in order to defend faith-commitment under evidential ambiguity – and, in particular, from accepting that the right fideist position is the modest extended Jamesian variety I have been sketching.

¹³ By ‘classical theism’ I here mean a theism that takes God to be the omnipotent, omnibenevolent, supernatural personal Creator *ex nihilo* of all else that exists.

I believe that considerations about actual concrete instances of evil may still lead to the conclusion that a faith-venture in favour of classical theism is not permissible.

Suppose we focus on a concrete case of truly horrendous evil.¹⁴ There might, for all we know, be a higher good that is both (a) logically unobtainable without the given evil (or, at least, without an equally bad or worse evil) and (b) of sufficient value as to outweigh the disvalue of the evil. The evidence that we have is consistent with the truth of this claim. We might, nevertheless, reasonably reject the view that the truth of such a claim would give God a morally sufficient reason for permitting the evil. *That will depend on what normative ethic we are assuming in relation to which God counts as morally perfect.*

If we are utilitarians, then the horrendous evil's being logically necessary for an overall outweighing higher good *will* provide a morally adequate reason for God to permit it. But perhaps we are not utilitarians: in which case, trading off evils for the sake of outweighing higher goods may count as inconsistent with God's moral perfection. Arguably, God may be morally perfect only if, furthermore, God is good to each of the creatures whose suffering is necessary for achieving the outweighing higher good, treating them as ends in themselves, perhaps by compensating them abundantly *post-mortem* in ways which satisfy a requirement of at least virtual consent to their suffering.¹⁵ Pace the Kantians, I do not think it possible to show that such a further requirement is *rationally* required and utilitarianism rationally excluded. I take the view, that is, that it is consistent with our total available evidence that the correct normative ethic from which to assess God's perfection is indeed utilitarianism, and the evidential argument from evil thus fails since, for all we know, there is a higher good which both outweighs and renders logically necessary the worst historical evils. Nevertheless, for those who reject a purely utilitarian view of divine moral perfection and whose values imply that a perfect God would need to do more than simply bring outweighing good out of horrendous creaturely suffering, a faith-venture in favour of classical theism will count as permissible only if an appropriate further condition (such as the one just canvassed) is held to be satisfied. For, from the perspective of those value commitments, a world in which the Creator did not ensure that He was good to creatures who suffered for the sake of a higher good would not be a morally adequate world – or, at least, certainly would not be a world whose Creator possessed moral perfection – even if the evil of the suffering was indeed, to use Marilyn McCord Adams' term, *balanced off* by the value of the higher good.

It is now possible to see, I think, that *there could be value-commitments which would exclude a faith-venture in favour of classical theism*. I am taking the – Humean – view that fundamental value-commitments are not rationally determined, and that

¹⁴ I do mean here to evoke Marilyn McCord Adams' notion according to which horrendous evils are “evils the participation in which … constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole” (Adams 1999, p. 26). My present argument is not, however, committed to this definition, and would go through, I believe, with ‘horrendous evil’ understood less precisely.

¹⁵ For a defence of the importance of the notion of virtual consent in theodicy see Forrest (1996), pp. 226–230.

there is room for people of equal rational integrity to differ in those commitments, at least to some extent. I thus accept that one may indeed be a utilitarian, and that, if one is, one may have good reason to regard as acceptable a faith-venture in favour of the existence of a morally perfect omnipotent Creator. I also accept that those whose values require of a morally perfect Creator that he do more than merely outweigh the horrendous suffering of His creatures may still have good reason to regard as acceptable a faith-venture in favour of classical theism. For, they may think (for example) that ‘the more’ that is required to defeat the evil of horrendous suffering is the provision of adequate compensation (in the form, for instance, of an incommensurably good eternal relationship with the divine), and they may believe that this is indeed provided.¹⁶

It may be possible, however, that one might reasonably have values according to which certain horrendous sufferings are *simply uncompensatable*, so that nothing God might do could ensure that He is overall good to the creatures who participate in them. Anyone with *those* values will *not* be able to regard as legitimate a faith-venture in favour of the existence of a morally perfect omnipotent Creator, given that there also exist horrendous sufferings that count as uncompensatable and which are thus such that no conceivable higher good could serve as a justification for permitting them.¹⁷

The idea that some finite creaturely sufferings are uncompensatable might be thought, however, to exhibit a failure of imagination, given that God has infinite resources for compensation. Yet there may nevertheless still be *something* morally problematic about the kind of world that the classical theist envisages – a world, that is, in which an omnipotent and omniscient Creator is ultimately responsible for horrendous evils which (in ways inscrutable to us) are somehow logically necessary for the achievement of a supreme good that includes providing effective compensation to those creatures who participate in the evils. Causing, or not preventing, evil that good may come is always a morally delicate business – and there is a case for concluding that the scale on which an omnipotent creator and sustainer *ex nihilo* of the entire universe would have to be engaged in such delicate business is not consistent with such a creator’s being morally perfect.

In human terms, causing others harm in order to do them an otherwise impossible good is always to put oneself (at least temporarily) into a manipulative relationship with those others. Of course, it is sometimes justifiable to behave like this – for example, when parents can obtain a vital good for their children only by causing them suffering. The highest form of loving interpersonal relationship, however, is not consistent with an overall situation in which one party to the relationship is constantly manipulating the other party – even with the best of intentions – for that

¹⁶ Adams (2006) endorses a view of this general kind. Here she elaborates her view that a God who loves individual created persons will not merely *balance off* but *defeat* horrendous evils, and proposes a detailed three-stage account of how such defeat is possible. Adams’ distinction between ‘balancing off’ and ‘defeating’ evil has significantly informed my present argument.

¹⁷ This is the view Dostoyevsky (1958) puts into the mouth of his character Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 286–288.

other party's good. Human parents, of course, may manipulate their children in this way (when the occasion demands it) and still have the best kind of loving relationship with their children: but that depends crucially on the opportunity for genuinely mutual relationship between parent and child as their lives continue. When it comes to the Divine Parent, however, the same kind of opportunity does not seem generally available – not *within* human history, anyway, where participants in horrendous evils typically have no inkling of how their participation may be logically related to defeating higher-goods. *Post-mortem*, we may be assured, the compensation will come, and *then* we will be able to do the same kind of 'growing up' into mutual relationship with our Divine Parent that children do with their human parents when they later come to understand how well they were in fact being treated when earlier caused to suffer for the sake of an otherwise unobtainable good.

The world as the classical theist envisages it, then, is arguably a world where God-to-creature personal relationships remain manipulative throughout the historical order.¹⁸ The classical theist's world might accordingly be judged to be morally flawed because it devalues historical human existence in favour of a putative life to come.¹⁹ And then, for those committed to rejecting such devaluation, a classical theistic faith-venture will be excluded by the moral constraints of extended Jamesian fideism.

Certain apparently sensible value-commitments may also exclude venture in favour of classical theism in the following way. According to classical theism, God's act of creation is freely chosen. And God has the freedom to choose, not just what kind of world to create, but whether to create at all. If we accept the basic premise of theodicy that the supreme good logically requires horrendous evils of the kind we find in the actual world (if not just those evils, then different ones of equal seriousness), then God had a choice between creating a world where the supreme good would be realised along with unavoidable horrendous evils and leaving well alone – avoiding ultimate responsibility for evil at the cost of abandoning the chance of realising the supreme good. Now, I suggest that it is genuinely morally moot which choice accords with moral perfection. On the one hand, there is a strong intuition that holding back from enabling the supreme good to become actual would be sheer cosmic wimpishness. But when one considers in full detail what God as creator apparently has to do in order to achieve the supreme good – in every episode of torture and abuse, sustaining not only the torturer's capacities to inflict suffering but the victim's

¹⁸ Furthermore, it might also be argued that it is a world where historical creature-to-creature personal relationships must also fall short of the highest ideal of mutual loving personal relationship because those relationships cannot but be contrived by supernatural omnipotence. That conclusion will be resisted by appeal to the libertarian free will of created persons – but it may threaten if scepticism about the possibility of created libertarian free will turns out to be justified. For further discussion, see Bishop (1993).

¹⁹ Though this general line of criticism is reminiscent of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, the postponement of 'real life' until the hereafter might also be rejected by Christians who maintain that fully mature relationship with God is possible for the redeemed *within* the historical order. (Is Christ's assurance that we are to be his friends and no longer servants – John 15:14–15 – a promise realisable in historical existence, or only in a future *post-mortem* state?)

capacity to endure it – and when one reckons the scale on which God has actively to sustain dreadful suffering, there seems an equally strong intuition that this is just not something which a perfectly virtuous moral agent could bring himself to do, even though the supreme good be at stake. Indeed, it somehow makes it even more sickening to reckon that all the while God sustains terrible suffering within history he does so recognising that ultimately he will make everything come right as all the participants in horrendous suffering are reconciled in eternal relationship with him. Not that there is any reason to doubt that, overall, it is better for the supreme good to be realised at the cost of horrendous evils than for there to be no created order at all (indeed, to reject that evaluation would be to misunderstand what ‘the supreme good’ means). But the correctness of that evaluation from a detached perspective does not entail that God would be morally justified in doing all that needs to be done if the supreme good is achievable only through multiple horrors. Indeed, arguably there is a case for denying that God would be justified *as a participant* in carrying out what undeniably counts *from the perspective of the detached observer* as the best plan.

Doubts such as these about whether an omnipotent creator and sustainer of a Universe like ours could be morally perfect will thus block the acceptability of a faith-venture in favour of classical theism *for those who endorse the value stances which sustain these doubts*. This is not say, of course, that no one could ever reasonably regard themselves as morally justified in venturing to take the world to be a classical theist one – as we have seen, certain utilitarian theists may well so regard themselves. Nor is it to maintain that our total available evidence does after all favour God’s non-existence. One may retain the view that the truth of classical theism is evidentially ambiguous while nevertheless regarding faith-venture in its favour as *ethically excluded, relative to* a certain set of value-commitments. No disproof of God’s existence results, however, since no proof is available that rationally requires the relevant value-commitments.²⁰

How This Fideist Critique of Classical Theism may Point the Way to a Revisionary Theism

What of alternative understandings of the God of theism? Might those whose value-commitments preclude their continuing faith in the God of classical theism nevertheless properly regard as acceptable faith-ventures in God alternatively understood?

Perhaps they might. The sorts of ethical concerns raised about a classical theistic world may point the way, I believe, to alternative understandings of the divine that are at least worth considering as potentially adequate to theistic religious tradition.

²⁰ My account is here equivalent to the view that it is the *logical* version of the Argument from Evil that succeeds (contrary to the currently widespread view that only ‘evidential’ versions of the Argument could possibly hope to succeed) – but then *only relatively to* prior specific value commitments which are not themselves rationally required.

When we reflect on what seems morally problematic about classical theism, I think we find a basic assumption coming under severe pressure – namely, that God is *both* the supreme individual personal agent on whose creative activity all else depends *and also* the One who actively brings good from evil, redeems, restores, forgives, reconciles. If retaining this assumption yields a worldview of questionable ethical status (even if it can be sustained as one viable total interpretation of all our generally accepted evidence), then progress may perhaps be made by revising it. The question will then be, of course, whether any such revisions can yield a concept of the divine that may be defended as religiously adequate to some living theistic tradition or traditions, even if it transgresses what has come to be accepted as orthodoxy within that tradition or traditions. In the remainder of this paper, I will do no more than sketch one line of thought about how this problematic assumption of classical theism might be revised. It is a line of thought driven by an interest in trying to take metaphysically seriously the New Testament claim that God is Love.²¹

In theistic religion, God is the sole object of worship: and that mightily constrains what can count as a viable concept of God.²² Anselm's formula articulates this constraint: God is that than which a greater cannot be conceived, where the kind of greatness at issue is greatness *qua* being. Recent philosophical discussions of classical theism typically take this greatness to be the greatness of a supreme individual person.²³ But this assumption is contestable. Greatness *qua* being is not merely an ontological notion – it is also ethical. And we do seem able to think of something *ethically* greater *qua* being than a morally perfect individual, namely a society of individuals in morally perfect mutual relationship – that is, in perfectly loving relationship with one another. No individual personal agent, however powerful and good, could be that than which a greater cannot be conceived: a supremely good society or community of personal agents is arguably more fitted to that status.²⁴

So far as Christianity is concerned, such a shift from God as supreme individual agent to God as supreme community is congenial: on one possible interpretation of the social doctrine of the Trinity one may say that what is truly divine is the dynamic relationship amongst the Persons, for which the individuality of each Person is

²¹ I John 4:16.

²² This is, of course, a constraint independent of those imposed by extended Jamesian fideism.

²³ For example, Richard Swinburne defines God as “[a] person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the Universe” (Swinburne (1977), p. 1, my emphasis). And Alvin Plantinga introduces his account of the theistic component of Christian belief thus: “Classical Christian belief includes, in the first place, the belief that there is *such a person as God*” (Plantinga (2000), p. vii, my emphasis).

²⁴ A community of personal agents a greater than which cannot be conceived is not, of course, equivalent to a community of individual personal agents each unsurpassingly great. For, very plausibly, there cannot be more than one individual personal agent such that none greater than it can be conceived – see, for example, H. P. Owen's discussion of Aquinas's argument for the oneness of God (Owen 1971, pp. 5–8). Rather, the idea is that what can count as unsurpassingly great *qua* being *isn't any kind of individual at all*, but some kind of society of individuals instead.

equally required, so that each Person is God only in the – strictly, derivative – sense that He equally participates in the Godhead. But why stop with a Trinity of persons? Surely a vast plurality of interrelated persons will be greater *qua* being than a mere threesome? To have a perfectly loving society one needs only as many individual persons as that requires: and there is a Trinitarian argument for the conclusion that, while two is not enough, three is quite sufficient. For, perfect love amongst three persons requires that each pairing makes room for the third, thus transcending the simple mutuality of regard and concern that would be all that was possible with just two persons. Perfectly loving relationship (on this view) can exist amongst three persons, when they relate to one another in the *perichoretic* dynamic – literally, where each ‘goes round making place for the other’.²⁵ Of course, there will in one obvious sense be ‘more’ of the good of loving relationship the more persons there are who participate in such relationship. It does seem intelligible, however, to hold that a larger community characterised by loving perichoresis is not greater *qua* being than the Trinity itself. (Greatness *qua* being is not increased by *mere* addition.) Arguably, once perfect love exists in such a Trinity, there is nothing conceivably greater than it, however indefinitely further it may be extended. Nevertheless, it clearly is a good – a great good, indeed, the supreme good – that it should be extended, and there is, therefore, a supremely good reason for a Trinity of Love to engage in creation even though it is itself already that than which a greater cannot be conceived.²⁶

Does this Trinitarian understanding of God’s being as that of the most economical perfectly loving society of persons provide a viable alternative to thinking of God as a supremely perfect individual person? Even if the doctrine of the Trinity ought arguably to provide a corrective, many Christians do continue to think of God’s perfect being as the being of a perfect individual person. In particular, when God is thought of as creating and sustaining the world, as issuing commands, and generally as exercising personal agency, there is a tendency effectively to collapse the Trinity into God the Father, even if this is officially heterodox. I think the explanation for this is straightforward. Divine being, if it is to be that than which a greater cannot be thought, does indeed have to be being whose moral excellence could not conceivably be exceeded. But that is not enough: recognising the ethical dimension of greatness *qua* being should not result in neglecting the ontological. Supremely great being has to be supremely *non-dependent* being, and it has to be supremely *active* being. And the natural way to accommodate this is to think in terms of a supremely great personal substance – an agent, not himself dependent on anything else for his exercise of agency, and upon whose agency all else depends: in other words, the omnipotent, omniscient, creator and sustainer *ex nihilo* of all else that exists.

²⁵ This description of perichoresis rests on the most fundamental meaning of the root verb ('to make room for another'): my attention was drawn to it (*via* Robin Angus) by Professor John Richardson (St Columba's-by-the-Castle Episcopal church, Edinburgh).

²⁶ For a succinct account of recent theological advocacy of the social doctrine of the Trinity, and the use of the notion of perichoresis to characterise the divine nature, see Kilby (2000). Kilby herself questions whether the historical point of the doctrine of the Trinity is to give insight into the nature of God. Even if her doubts are well founded, the doctrine of the Trinity might yet provide useful resources for the revisionary Christian theist who has come to reject the classical theist understanding of God.

So we seem to face a dilemma. The ethical dimension of greatness of being points to divine being as essentially relational; the ontological dimension, however, seems to require a supremely powerful, free and active individual personal agent. This dilemma may perhaps be resolved, however, if we take seriously the idea that the supremely powerful activity of the Divine is the activity, not of any individual agent, however great, but the activity of perfect community, of perfect relationality – the activity, that is, of Love itself, where ‘Love’ with a capital ‘L’ signifies not an abstract universal, but the concrete reality of divine existence as perfectly loving interpersonal relationship.

Many philosophers will no doubt maintain that any talk of *a relationship*’s being active must reduce to, or be elliptical for, talk about the activity of the related persons. But what I am suggesting is needed here goes against that reductionist thought. What is needed is the notion that there can be activity that is *irreducibly* the activity of a community of interrelated persons. While it is clear that human corporations and groups may perform actions, it is not clear whether the ontology of such group action involves commitment to anything more than individual agents acting as (properly constituted) representatives of the corporation or group. It is also unclear whether human groups can act as groups other than in virtue of legal or other customary conventions under which group agency is constructed. So it is quite a conceptual stretch to suggest that personal relationships might themselves have active powers that transcend the agency of the persons so related (as if, for example, a child might be acted upon by *the relationship* between her parents, without that action belonging to either parent, or even to both parents jointly). Yet this stretched notion seems what we need if we are to retain the – ethically desirable – notion that Divine Being is the being of persons-in-relationship while accommodating the ontological requirements of supreme greatness *qua* being. That it makes possible this welcome accommodation may then tell in favour of insisting that the idea of the irreducible agency of a relationship is an intelligible one, even if its only application is in this particular theological context.

The alternative to classical theism I am canvassing, then, takes literally the New Testament claim that God is Love and identifies Divine Being with the concrete relationality of the divine persons (in accordance with one possible interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity). To the allegation that this model of God neglects the vital ontological dimension of supreme greatness *qua* being that God must possess to be worthy of worship, I have suggested in reply that the model may preserve God’s supreme agency if it can be accepted that divine agency belongs irreducibly to the relationality which, on this view, constitutes the Divine Being.

That reply may seem inadequate, however. God’s supreme greatness *qua* being surely requires that God should have totally uncreated being – being that is not in anyway dependent on the being of anything else, but is, rather, that upon which everything else ultimately depends. If, as my alternative model proposes, Divine Being is essentially relational – constituted by persons-in-relationship – then surely it follows that Divine Being (so conceived) is metaphysically dependent, since the being of any relation is dependent on the being of its relata? My alternative model may thus seem to fail to meet all that we require of that than which a greater cannot be conceived.

Perhaps there is no need, however, to accept in general the ontological priority of relata over the relation to which they belong? Some relations could be such that relata and relation are mutually dependent: neither the relation itself nor its relata could be what they were without the other. One might, perhaps, make a case for this as a view of human personal relationships – by contrast to the widespread tendency to treat individuals as ontologically prior to relationships amongst individuals. Arguably, becoming and being an individual person can be possible only within a network of interpersonal relationship. But, in any case, a proponent of the model of Divine Being as perfectly loving interpersonal relationship will of course have to insist that the divine persons are not ontologically prior to the relationship into which they enter: the relationality of the divine persons is as eternal as the persons themselves. On this view, then, the identification of divine being with perfectly loving relationship amongst the divine persons will not render divine being ontologically dependent on something prior, namely the being of each person taken individually.

There is, however, a further difficulty in defending this model of the divine as a genuine alternative with the potential to overcome ethical concerns about classical theism. The absolute ontological priority of the divine surely requires that God be creator and sustainer *ex nihilo* of all else that exists? Now, of course, this requirement can be accommodated on the model I have been developing by ascribing the role of creator to the agency of the eternal Trinity *qua* community (rather than to God *qua* individual person). But then, even if classical theism has hereby been somewhat revised, it has not been revised enough to break free of the ethical problems canvassed earlier. There remain all those difficulties that flow from God's ultimately being responsible for the very horrendous evils from which ultimately he rescues his creatures, achieving an otherwise unachievable supreme good that transcends the historical order. Those who reject a classical theistic world because of these problems will also reject a world where the role of supernatural creator and sustainer is played by the Trinity *qua* community.

The only remedy, I believe, will be to make the bold move of detaching the Divine altogether from the role of creator and sustainer *ex nihilo*, at least as it is usually understood in terms of ultimate efficient causality. Such a move may seem to render any alternative model of God thereby produced clearly religiously inadequate to any theistic tradition. Surely it is essential to a religiously adequate God-concept that whatever fills it should provide the ultimate explanation for all that is, with God's being the ultimate source for all else that exists? Indeed, that does seem to be so. Nevertheless, it may be that notions of God as ultimate explanation and as ultimate source have enough flexibility to allow their retention in recognisable form even if the idea of an eternal and necessary First Cause is rejected.

To see how that may be so, let me re-introduce the alternative concept of God I have been sketching in positive terms as apt to fulfil a crucial function that belief in God plays within the conceptual economy of the religious theist – namely, to be the ground of our hope. It is in God that we base our hope that evil, suffering and brokenness can indeed be overcome – our hope that trying to live a morally good, loving, life is not merely a great ideal, but has real point, despite the limitations of our finiteness, our tendency to selfishness, our mortal vulnerability, and the awful cycles

of violence, exploitation and abuse that seem inseparable from our communal, national and institutional lives – including our religious institutional lives. If we understand the Divine as concrete interpersonal being of the most conceivably excellent kind, and if we affirm of that concrete loving relationality that nothing conceivably exceeds it in its active power to bring good from evil – if we affirm all this as what we find revealed in the concrete experience of the theistic religious traditions, then we arguably do have a concept of God fit to serve as grounds for our hope. There may indeed be Good News here – provided, that the presence of the Divine Love active in human history can strike us as no mere wonderful fantasy but as a viable interpretation of concrete human experience in the midst of suffering and evil. There must then be an *incarnational* element in theistic religion in the sense that the activity of God has to be made concrete within human history – though whether this requires the God-Man (the one substance with two natures) of orthodox Christianity is, however, a decidedly moot point.²⁷

For belief in God to ground our hope, then, divine activity in overcoming evil, suffering, death and hopelessness needs to be made concrete. This is not to require, of course, that it should be rationally certain, on the evidence, that God's love is active and ultimately victorious in the world: whether that is so seems clearly enough to be evidentially ambiguous. But it does require that there be historical events that can justifiably be interpreted in this way, and that people should have the (non-evidential, passionnal) motivation to make a faith-venture in favour of such an interpretation. And that requirement gives theistic religion a vitally important further cognitive dimension beyond the articulation of ethical ideals.

Under classical theism, of course, the God who is active in human history overcoming evil with good is also the God who created human history (and the entire Universe) ‘in the first place’. As already argued, from the perspective of certain value-commitments, anyway, this dual role is ethically uncomfortable. And it therefore seems worthwhile at least to try the experiment of making no attempt to attribute to God understood as Love active in the world any additional role as creator and sustainer *ex nihilo*. Contemporary ‘Big Bang’ cosmology finds no *scientific* need for any notion of an overall ultimate efficient cause of the Universe. Maybe a viable alternative theism can follow suit by allowing that there is no *metaphysical* need for such a cause either? Maybe philosophical theism can break with the long-established ontology of necessary being by accepting that the contingency of the Universe is a *radical* contingency that does not stand in need of any necessary ground? Indeed, perhaps such a break would enhance the spirituality of wonder at a universe that did not have to exist but gloriously does?²⁸

²⁷ Even if they are cautious about orthodox understandings of the divinity of Christ, theists in the Christian tradition will still need to give some content to the claim that the divine is incarnate. For example, they may affirm that in Jesus they have experienced the power of divine love working among us, that Love's means of confronting evil is revealed on the Cross, vindicated in the Resurrection, and then made into *our* means of dealing with suffering and evil through the outpouring of the Spirit. I do not assume, however, that Christianity has a monopoly on incarnational insights.

²⁸ Compare Wittgenstein's (1963) remark that ‘it is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.’ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.44.

On the alternative theism I have been sketching, the Universe is such that Divine Love comes to exist within it. So, in marvelling at the Universe, we are marvelling not simply at material existence, but at that which – looked at from the perspective of efficient causality anyway – gives birth to the Divine. As already noted, this may seem to violate the required ontological supremacy of the divine. But such a violation follows only on the assumption that *it is the order of efficient causality that determines the order of ontological supremacy*. And that assumption seems contestable. From the perspective of final causality, God is the *telos* of the Universe. And the only *ultimate* explanation we can give for the existence of the Universe will be a teleological one: the Universe exists so that the supreme good (which is the existence of dynamic interpersonal love) should come to exist and ultimately be victorious. There may be a temptation here to take the path of John Leslie's extreme axiarchism, by arguing that it is the Good which *brings itself* into existence.²⁹ I prefer, rather, to try to unite the ontological and ethical aspects of greatness *qua* being by emphasising that, even if the existence of the divine is ultimately contingent, it is not contingent *upon* some other necessary being, and retains ontological supremacy by being the realisation of the supreme good *for the sake of which* all that has come to exist has come to exist.

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The God Insight: Vengeance or Destiny?

John Bacon

*God preaches, a noted Clergyman—
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of going to heaven, at last—
I'm going, all along.*

(Dickenson 1999).

For most of my life, I've pondered the meaning of the religion in which I was reared, Presbyterianism, as well as of several of its rivals (particularly Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism). The upshot in my old age is, finally, a virtually unheard-of religion, roughly in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which I call “Ætism” [rhymes with ‘elitism’ (minus the ‘el-’), derived from the Greek root $\alpha\epsilon\tau\alpha$, “cause”]. (Since this term is unlikely to roll trippingly off most tongues, I also use the name ‘causalism’.) This unlovely name is short for the virtually unpronounceable “achristological aetiology”, which Demosthenes could no doubt have used to good effect in his speech practice on the beach. Ætism is not, to be sure, entirely new: many of its features have been anticipated and evaluated by other thinkers in the broad Christian tradition. I'll try to expound Ætism as straightforwardly as I can, mindful of the contrary virtues of brevity and simplicity on the one hand and accuracy and thoroughness on the other. Basically, Ætism is a form of Unitarianism or gnosticism, i.e. Christianity minus the messiah, or Judaism minus the personhood of god, or Manichaeism minus the implacable duality of good and evil.

The novel name may get a laugh, but the presentation here is meant quite seriously. Having been raised as a species of Protestant, I attended church voluntarily and joyfully most every Sunday until I was about 24. But even since then, unlike many of my academic colleagues, I've always held that religion is of the first importance. I believe that religiosity, or the impulse to spiritual clarity and fulfillment, is

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as essential to our humanity as our defining penchants for thinking and feeling, procreating and amassing possessions.

Around the age of 24 or 25, like many post-adolescents, I began to have doubts. For a while, I said I was not an atheist but an agnostic. Later I came to what is now the core of *Æ*tistic belief: that the world exists and goes on for the sake of a “final cause” (to employ the Aristotelian jargon), which is God. I didn’t find very many people to agree with me. (My philosophy colleagues assumed that I have missed the lesson of Philosophy 101, that the notion of “final cause” had been shown to be systematically misleading and obsolete, at best a medieval superstition.)

Under social pressure, I’m ashamed to say, I even came to doubt *that*. The final-cause hypothesis began to seem as wishy-washy to me as the anthropic hypothesis (lately made much of by weary scientists, in need of new paradoxes upon which to whet their over-trained minds). Maybe it’s all just whirling fundamental particles, I thought, arranged into ever more evolved clusters of protoplasm, etc. (I thought tenderly of a wife and children so constituted.)

In contemporary intellectual circles, you don’t really have to have *any* religious views to get invited to the interesting parties. If you do have, you may find less willing conversation partners at those parties. But who said intellectual rigor was fun? *The voice of the one crying in the wilderness...*

Impelled by such and other experiences of social rejection, not to mention the even more excruciating rejection by my own heart, I have thought long and hard about this for about 50 years (since I was 17). The shortish summary here is the ultimate fruit of that whimpering in the wilderness. I have striven to make our ways logically straight, to prepare in the contemporary spiritual desert a highway for our God. In particular, I’m concerned to work out whether God (if such there be) is a God of vengeance (as much of the Old Testament strongly suggests) or a God embodying our ultimate intelligible density. (You guessed it: my answer is the latter.)

To anticipate, the central, controversial point here is to scotch the preposterous belief in the redemption of man through the death of a messiah. This brings us closer to Judaism as well as to early para-Christian heresy. In fact, the doctrine of redemption through resurrection came comparatively late on the proto-Christian scene. To the earliest Jewish Christians, Jesus was a wonder-worker and messiah in the Old Testament sense. Such a messiah had no need of political execution and stagy resurrection in order to get about his task. The kerygmatic, resurrected Christ was rather a favorite of the early gentile Christians, and received its decisive affirmation as a foundation stone of Christianity from the ever busy St. Paul. So in removing salvation by crucifixion from Christianity, *Æ*tism is really just being true to its roots in the early Jewish church.

In one of my favorite television shows, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon 1997–2003), Buffy’s best girlfriend is teaching herself witchcraft spells. (They have time on their hands at the University of California at Sunnydale.) Occasionally she is more or less successful. I think superficial reflection suffices to persuade us that the chance of being redeemed by an execution that took place 2,000 years ago, in a place most of us have never been near, is even smaller than the chance that one of Willow’s more outlandish spells will succeed in ridding her kitchen of cockroaches. Jesus may have died on the cross; there’s historical evidence for that. I hold that the

significance of that injustice is metaphorical or allegorical: Jesus' death, supposedly for our benefit, is a metaphor for our natural (probably false) conviction that God cares about us and is determined to help us if we adopt the right attitude. (Ætism leaves the issue open.)

I've fast forwarded here to touch upon some substantive issues in order to give you a foretaste of the unpalatable medicine to come. Now it's time to swallow the pill.

Meaning

We can't get far in a would-be religious context without attending to the intuitively apprehensible condition of meaning, or meaningfulness. I say 'intuitively apprehensible' to forestall the objection that we possess no such empirical faculty. I maintain that we do, in addition to sense-perception, concept formation, and reasoning. The best and most direct way to demonstrate this is to appeal to experiences that most of us have had, or in some cases can be made to have. It's intuitively evident to many of us that the lives we lead are sometimes meaningful. The vulgar dig 'Get a life!' means "Make your life meaningful (if you can, you *nebbakh*)."¹ And I'm afraid it's lamentably evident to some that they lead practically meaningless lives.

I think these claims are best documented by examples drawn from literature. To the extent that the literature cited is well crafted, the incidents described therein may reproduce or parallel the actual subtle weft of real life, but in a possible world, as it were. The philosopher Richard Taylor, once of the University of Rochester in New York, who, like me, has had an eye out for the religious proclivity of man, gives simple, vivid examples of meaningful and meaningless lives in his book *Good and Evil* (Taylor 1970). His example of a *meaningless* life is that of Sisyphus, who never gets anywhere pushing his stone up a hill. Taylor then writes,

Let us suppose that the gods, while condemning Sisyphus to the fate just described, at the same time, as an afterthought, waxed perversely merciful by implanting in him a strange and irrational impulse; namely, a compulsive impulse to roll stones. We may if we like, to make this more graphic, suppose they accomplish this by implanting in him some substance that has this effect on his character and drives...However it may appear to us, Sisyphus' fate now does not appear as a condemnation, but the very reverse. His one desire in life is to roll stones, and he is absolutely guaranteed its endless fulfillment...his is now filled with mission and meaning, and he seems to himself to have been given an entry into heaven (Taylor 1970, 33)

I don't know about you, but I find this totally unconvincing and rather lame. It suggests that the presence of a strong desire can suffice to render a meaningless life meaningful. There are plenty of counterexamples. I have a persistent, obsessive desire to shoot up heroin, but that will not necessary make my life meaningful. I may have a strong, persistent desire to seek amputation of my limbs, but that may not confer meaning on my life.¹ Everyone can think of many similar such counterexamples.

¹ Strange as it may seem, this is a perversion that actually afflicts some unhappy individuals. They make up excuses to be operated upon in hospitals for other ostensible conditions, thereby shedding a leg or whatever.

Taylor is a *naturalist* in ethics, meaning one who bases value and duty on natural, factually, contingently occurring states of the world and of the individual agent. Sisyphus' new desire is conceived as a sort of biochemical infection. Many of us think that there is more to desire, or anyway to serious striving, than: it presupposes a *telos*, something for the sake of which the object is sought. And the *telos* may itself be embraced rationally or irrationally. No, the meaningfulness of a life is not a disease. Let us turn now, as I earlier suggested, to realistic literary illustrations.

Two examples of strikingly meaningless lives: Rosamond and Mr. Casaubon in *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (1973). Mr. Casaubon is particularly interesting, especially to academics, because in his futility he imagines himself to be engaged in important research. His ARC grant² (so to speak) is for a compendious work, *Key to all mythologies*, which, we may imagine, will illuminate all that is dark and hidden. The devoted effort to fulfill this prodigious design preoccupies him both before and after his wedding. He has had the apparently normal gumption to propose to Dorothea and secure her as his wife. (Little does he know that he is totally unfit for matrimony, and that it is only going to make him unhappier.) Casaubon understandably (under the circumstances) spends his honeymoon looking up obscure references in libraries in Rome, while Dorothea twiddles her fingers (so to speak).

As for fair Rosamond, she is just a flitting do-nothing. Her prettiness and her social station appear to suffice for complacency in life. She does, it must be admitted, possess rather a sharp tongue, to her mother's discomfiture. Little does she know that her childish spendthriftiness will undermine her marriage to Lydgate and turn into a hell for them both. I think the meaninglessness of these two lives is manifest; not that they couldn't bounce back one day. Now for some meaningful lives.

I would instance George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (Eliot 1980), Dickens' *Little Dorrit* (Dickens 1855–1857), and Adalbert Stifter's Major Stefan Murai in the masterful novella *Brigitta* (Stifter 1948).³ To get one with things, I'll leave it to the reader to look these up if you will, and I'll concentrate on Little Dorrit (a favorite of mine). The essential point about her is that in order simply to get on with a somewhat abnormal childhood, Little Dorrit must repeatedly help others who are unappreciative and, in some cases, downright sabotaging. And she must achieve this without bending herself out of shape into something sick or perverted, but also without flouting the straightjacket of the manners imposed by Victorian society. Thus Amy Dorrit deals with one crisis after another, tactful and effective beyond her years, often receiving little thanks. Her trials mature her, although she remains small of stature. As time goes by, she is rewarded by her sister's becoming more realistic about her vocation (dancing), her self-deluded father's becoming more lucid and realistic, and, last but not least, by the dawning awareness that his helpful

² In Australia, money sorely needed to support university education for the general population is diverted into “research” projects and boondoggles by the Australian Research Council. The idea seems to be forwarded “research” by dumbing down Australian youth to the demonic level of Ozzie beach culture.

³ The case of *Brigitta* is covered in detail in the Introduction to my translation *Brigid of Brigitta* (not yet published).

acquaintance with her has not just cushioned and improved the sturdy engineer Mr. Clennam, but that they have fallen in love with one another. Thus, in the end, Amy reaps every kind of personal satisfaction, while growing up a fine, altruistic young woman with a life of service, fulfillment, and conjugal love before her. Clearly, this is a meaningful life. I think the reader will be disposed to agree, but if not, read Dickens, and that will cure you.

Thus I take it as an empirical fact, often knowable to us, that some lives, or stretches of lives, are meaningful and some are not. At a more refined level, we can also often apprehend when a life hits a turning point, becoming more meaningful than it was before. This is the case when Silas Marner (Eliot 1861) discovers baby Eppie and decides to adopt her. It's his salvation; and we all know cases like this amongst our acquaintances. Most of us know a man "saved by a good woman," although the cliché now seems a little sickening and is politically incorrect. Kemal Attatürk adopted about fifteen children, most of them girls. It would be interesting to know what that did to him (and to the girls). By his own testimony, Saul of Tarsus' life was totally changed on the road to Damascus, when he was struck temporarily blind and a voice from heaven seemed to call out, "Saul, Saul why persecutest thou me?" As a result, a life became more meaningful. Saul changed his name to "Paul," and the founding of Christianity was assured.

Given that lives or stretches of lives can be, and often are meaningful, we now ask how to account for this remarkable fact, which seems so central to the worthwhileness of the human journey. There must be an overarching *telos*, for the sake of which the meaningful life is lived. In the view of the fundamental, overarching character of this *ur-telos*, it can only ultimately be the same for all. It is God, I say, or at any rate an aspect of God. That is not something we precisely know. As in natural science, it is a probable explanatory hypothesis for which we have evidence, not conclusive. With time, we may expect to acquire more evidence (or perhaps a refutation).⁴ This hypothesis is falsifiable, in good Popperian form.

Creation

So God is a reasonable posit as the ultimate purpose of human striving, rational and irrational, emotional and otherwise. But Aristotle, who introduced the concept of "cause" into Western philosophy, recognized four kinds of cause (Aristotle 1941). The one dealt with in the preceding section is called (in English) "final cause". In addition there are efficient cause, material cause, and formal cause. The last two are usually left aside nowadays. The material cause of a thing is the material it's made of. It was Aristotle's idea that the thing couldn't have existed without the matter, so that matter had to be conceived as helping to cause it. Similarly with the

⁴ This point was essentially made by "John" in the dialogue "What shall we live for," by John Bacon & Juliet Richters in *On being human: meditations on experience* (Bacon 1990, 1, 10 f.). (Interestingly, "Juliet" disagrees with "John" there.)

formal cause. Whatever exists has a form, without which it wouldn't be that thing. Thus the form is a cause of the thing.

When modern people, including physicists, talk about causation or causality, they mean efficient cause. This is the circumstance, typically earlier, that makes or helps to make a thing or event come about. Further distinctions can be called for. If several things act together to bring the effect about, then each of them is a *necessary* or contributing cause. If together they are enough, they constitute jointly *sufficient* cause. In the modern era we also recognize causings that are not 100 % but less: the cause confers $n\%$ probability on the effect, or brings it about with $n\%$ probability, or probabilizes the effect to an extent of $n\%$.

A fundamental principle of causation goes back to the Middle Ages: the so-called *Law of Causality*: Every event has a cause. More precisely, every event or occurrence has a sufficient cause (which can itself be plural). Probabilification has not really been brought within the purview of the Law of Causality to general consensus.

Given the Law of Causality, today's events presuppose many causal chains stretching far back into the past. As Aristotle noted, either they stretch back infinitely, or the chains terminate in a *first cause*. Actually, it would seem that there must be at least as many first causes as there are backward-reaching chains. But Aristotle held, and Scholasticism followed him in this, that all first causes must be identical: there is just one first cause. That is God, asserted the Scholastics. I think so too. But the uniqueness move just explained is a genuine hitch in the argument. We note that empirical cosmologists tend also to assume it. If (as is now doubtful) it all began with the Big Bang, so far as I know nobody has proposed that there may have been two or seven or a million Big Bangs. One is enough, it seems, to get things off the ground.

Our reasoning is not quite close to being Aristotelian. There is a unique, final cause, which Aristotle called the Good. There is a unique first efficient cause, which Thomas thinks is God. My view is that the resulting pair <Creator, Good> *is* God, or a core aspect of God. A God, to be sure, postulated out of scientific method, not proven. (This God may have still more ingredients than just the two so far expounded.)

Communication and Faith

We're left with a philosophical construct that consigns us to loneliness, so far as the hoped-for companionship of God is concerned. We don't know whether our God thinks, feels, hears our prayers, or communicates with us or with other types of beings. And it's not clear what more in the way of knowledge, observation, or inference could suggest to us an answer to these questions.⁵

⁵ But cf. Section IX, paragraph 2 below.

I submit that the content of prayer and voices from heaven, if any (such as ‘This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased’ or ‘Remember not, remember not, O Lord my sin’ or ‘Turn again, Dick Whittington, thrice Lord Mayor of London’) are more or less vivid fantasies whose symbolic content (what we take them to signify) potently motivates or consoles us. In this way they are a bit like daydreaming or masturbation fantasies, in which a more or less vivid picture of the coveted activity or sex object strongly motivates pretend lovemaking, foreplay, or other conation. This praying, “Lord, let me reach the summit” is like the Little Engine that Could puffing away “I think I can, I think I can...” (Jacobs 1910).

The consolation afforded by prayer is not a two-way dialogue, as it seems. There is no one on the other end of the line, not even an answering-machine message. Praying is something that we do sincerely to ourselves. Imagining a conversation partner comes naturally to many, but is not essential. The power of prayer is to psych ourselves up.

From prayer we move on to an attitude of commitment considered absolutely central to Christianity and, in fact, to most religions. The word ‘faith’ is often a synonym of ‘religion,’ as when we say ‘Elizabeth Taylor embraced the Jewish faith’ or ‘Buddhism is not a theistic faith’ or ‘Thus I had to suspend knowledge in order to make more room for faith.’

However, when Luther and other Reformers insisted that faith alone is the way to salvation, they meant a sort of loyalty or devotion to God, rather than any kind of creedal belief. We may take leaf from Buber’s book, *Zwei Glaubensweisen* (Buber 1950). Buber is forced to take such an approach partly because ‘Glaube’ in German is ambiguous between ‘belief’ and ‘loyalty or trust’. In English we have the opposite linguistic embarrassment: too many words in this area: ‘belief’, ‘loyalty’, ‘trust’, ‘faith’, etc.

The Protestant is supposed to get faith as a gift from God. If that doesn’t work, we may be able to psych ourselves up directly to having faith in God. But by now it should be clear that for me the concepts expressed by these badges or labels are not crucial. God doesn’t talk to us, and we talk to God only by way of psyching ourselves into the right God-centered attitude. God, so far as we are acquainted with him, is an intentional object (in the sense of Brentano⁶). The \mathcal{A} Etistic God cannot be propitiated, persuaded, or bought off *dō ut dē s*. Even if the God of \mathcal{A} Etism were a person (which is not established), it’s still not clear whether we could have a meaningful sort of relationship with such a person (so far away, probably, and made up of about five different components, none of them flesh and blood). For the Christian, it’s faith or works. For the \mathcal{A} Etist, it’s theological science *and* works. It’s not clear that there’s anything to be faithful to, or that it would make any difference if we *were* faithful.

⁶The notion of an “intentional object” of “intentionality” was introduced into philosophy by Franz Brentano (Brentano 1874), a late nineteenth-century ex-priest who taught in Germany and Austria. He was a prominent source of what came to be called “phenomenology”, as well as of the Polish school of symbolic logic. Intentionality is an attitude of directedness upon an object, which may or may not exist. Thus I may fear the bogey man, even though the bogey man does not exist. Veridical directedness guarantees the existence of the object.

The Resurrection etc.

Physically or otherwise impossible events alleged in Holy Scriptures did not happen, and it's silly to believe that they did after all happen miraculously. (I don't by any means assume that the many healings reported of Jesus didn't happen. We still have an incomplete understanding of psychosomatic effects, and we don't appreciate sufficiently how much difference a foreign culture base can make.) Conceiving of such impossible events, perhaps even imagining their reality, is *symbolic* thinking, by which we practice taking a sort of science-fiction point of view.

For instance, announcing during the *Seder* that Elijah has come to the back door and prompting the youngest son to investigate it, doesn't make or presuppose an actual visit from the real Elijah. The ritual has a traditional significance, which we choose to relive each year during the *Seder*. Elijah's visit and our traditional response are not facts that we record but rituals that we choose to undergo. Ritual, not dogma; pragmatic experience, not dogmatic message.

It's essentially the same, I would argue, when during the Christmas pageant traditionally enacted in many churches on Christmas Eve, the three Wise Men are seen following the Star. "For we have seen His Star in the East, and are come to worship Him." Probably they never did. Probably baby Jesus never lay on straw in a manger with lowing cattle hovering over him. Presumably Joseph didn't look 70 and Mary about 19 as they watched over their new baby. Presumably Mary didn't wear a turquoise robe with bright red lipstick. The beloved contents of the Christmas pageant are *symbolic*, motivating ritual, resolution, and practice. We go to the pageant not to remind ourselves of certain historical facts, but to marshal and tune up our attitudes and feelings. Not dogma, but pragma.⁷

Pragma vs. Dogma

In the Reformation, a hotly contested dispute arose over the role of *faith, not works* in the Christian life (Protestant version). Against this was maintained *Both faith and works are needed, sufficiently many of the latter* (Catholic view).

The fact is that the practice of a religion would be ineffectual and arbitrary without works. And works would be arbitrary and unmotivated without faith. Faith is the dogmatic side of religious adherence; works are the pragmatic side. (Martin Buber distinguished further factual belief from the faith of loyalty [Buber 1950]).

The proper solution to the faith/works controversy is to recognize that both are important, but faith without works would be far more disastrous for religious health

⁷ We could also say, with my student Mairéad Costigan, "tone up our logos" (probably in a draft of Costigan 1998. Socrates' characterization there of appropriate love has indeed a religious echo. Love is for Plato not a mere empirical, factual, psychic or psychological occurrence, but a well-spring of value, as symbolized by the white steed in the *Phaedrus*. (I would have never thought of this but for Costigan's work.)

than works without faith. Ritual, pragma, and works with no or only vague religious belief is a widespread orientation in modern Judaism, particularly of the Reform variety, but not only.⁸ Christians tend to view this condescendingly as a mistake, or a respect in which Judaism isn't really a religion at all. But on the whole, it's the Christians who make the mistake. They imagine that if they think carefully, naturalistically doping out the virgin birth, the loaves and the fishes, the wedding feasts at Cana, the temptations by the devil, the stone rolled away, etc. they are safeguarding their religion and its place in the world. But religions worthy of the name don't work like that. They involve both thought and action (and feeling). The thought can be to some extent curtailed, the action not so easily.

We needn't rest with the argument from meaninglessness alone to substantiate God's existence. Let's look at St. Thomas's "Five Ways" (Tomasso 1972) of arguing for that conclusion. I'm going to move fast here. (If you're bewildered, I suggest you bone up on some of Thomas's writings (or Dawkins' potted exposition [Dawkins 2006, 77ff]). They will more than repay the effort.)

The five ways are.

1. Argument to the first cause
2. Argument from sustenance of the world
3. Argument from the world's arising out of nothing
4. Argument from design
5. Argument to the final cause

I submit that cogency of (1) and (2) is pretty straightforward (*pace* the swarm of thinkers who have poo-poohed them). (3) doesn't work, in my view. I think it's a pity that Thomas, who took so much from Aristotle, ignored the Stagirite views on the ur-void. [Ironically, the lame (3) is generally agreed to be Thomas's best "proof".]

We get close to parallel to (4) if we construe "design" as beauty. Just as explanatory ethical theory presupposes objective, absolute value, so, I would argue, aesthetic explanation presupposes objective, absolute beauty. (This does not mean that all beauty, as apprehended, is objective. I would stick to the suggestion that Paris Hilton's beauty was objective, even if it is handy and lucrative for her (even in the slammer, perhaps). Similarly the "beauty" of Disneyland or of the Denver Art Museum.⁹ Examples of objective beauty may perhaps be found in Sarah Silverman,

⁸One must take care here not to misassess some modern liberal developments in Judaism, such as Samson Raphael Hirsch's Modern Orthodoxy, Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionism (Kaplan 1957) and Sherwin Wine's [Secular] Humanist Judaism (Wine 1995). Reconstructionism includes a fully articulated philosophy of life and society; thus it is far from creedless. And Wine's Humanist Judaism likewise comes with a carefully thought out philosophy and guide to life. (Wine studied philosophy at the University of Michigan, where he was particularly impressed by logical positivism.) The creedal content of Modern Orthodoxy retains to a great extent that of traditional Orthodoxy, filtered through modernizing ways, as set out by Hirsch in his doctrine '*Torah im derech eretz*' ("the written law with worldly civility").

⁹In fact, it might plausibly be argued that no building of Daniel Liebeskind has objective beauty. (World Trade Center Committee beware!)

in Mozart's Piano Concerto #21 or in the Main Quadrangle Building of Sydney University.) The two normative theories are parallel in this regard. I would suggest that Einstein espoused some such view when he said, "Raffiniert ist der Herr; boshaft ist er nicht!" and the famous "Gott wüfelt nicht." That is, unless he was joking; you never can tell with Einstein. He also said,

We have to admire in humility the beautiful harmony of the structure of this world, as far as we can grasp it. That is all (Einstein 1972).

When I say 'presuppose', what I mean is that ethical theory, as an explanatory framework, results from the inference to the best explanation from experience in our observations and conduct of value, moral force, or obligative cogency. Similarly, aesthetics, as an explanatory congeries of hypotheses, arises by argument to the best explanation from our experience of some beauty (not all). It moves us with unanticipated force, like the non-lover in the *Phaidros*¹⁰(*Ars longa, vita brevis*.) The "dull, sublunar lovers' love" that is in the eye of the *voyeur* is not necessarily less striking or less intense, but simply local and evanescent. (*Ernst ist da Leben, frivoal ist die Kunst.*) Objective beauty [$\tau\delta\kappa\alpha\lambda\delta\omega\kappa\alpha\tau\delta\omega\kappa$] is eternal.¹¹

Explanations have to stop somewhere, but they needn't stop at the level of moral and aesthetic theory. The theories, to the extent that they explain and are well-confirmed, themselves cry out for further explanation. This explanation we may call God.

There remains the Fifth Way of St. Thomas', the argument to the final cause. When we become conscious that we must do something; conscious that enhancing some components of the world is called for; that sometimes we are genuinely soothed (perhaps by ourselves; perhaps by love; perhaps by prayer); that an aspect of our life is meaningful to some degree, and capable of becoming more so (knock on wood!); when any of these things happen to us in our experience of life, argument to the best explanation leads straight to God.

Historical Assumptions of Æticistic Gnosticism

The God of Ætism differs from the Christian God in the following ways. As already said, he is not a savior who dies on the cross to save us all from our sins on the condition that we believe on him. He doesn't talk to us. Although he sustains the world, it's not clear that he intervenes in the world from day to day to tidy up or do up his creation. Nor is it clear that he is a deist god, laying down the entire future by setting a cosmic mouse-trap at the outset as it were, and then running away. Modern science is indeterministic, leaving scope for God's will to assert itself.

¹⁰Cf. n. 3 surpa.

¹¹Cf. Bacon: "Real Beauty" (Bacon 1991) and the gifted aesthetician Zemach: "Real Beauty" (Zemach 1991; Zemach 1997). I didn't collude with my friend. We each thought the title up independently. (Eddy sent me a copy of his paper, but I hadn't read it!) Eddy was working mostly in Jerusalem, and I in Sydney. (Abduction from this coincidence leads to the beautiful itself or at any rate the serendipitous itself. *Dies zeigst sich, es ist das Mystische.*)

It might appear that the God of Ætism is manifestly different from the God of Judaism. However, it's fatal to take a simplistic view of the Old Testament (Torah) (*Ketuvim* 1953) interpretation. Reputable scholars are agreed that several voices speak to us in the *Tanach*, and how they are related to one another is not sufficiently understood, not known for certain, even today. Without going into the intricate details here, as sources we have the Yahwist J, the Elohist E, the extended Elohist E+, and the Priestly code P. When the *OT* God says famously "I am that I am", there are many interpretations, and it is not known which is right. When God gives his name out, he may be doing so to conceal his real (unannounced) name, or he may be giving a definite description (whose uniqueness conditions may themselves be unknown). These difficulties and uncertainties with God's name are repeated throughout much of the *OT* text. Interpreting it correctly could be the lifetime work of a committee of scholars (like the committee that produced the *King James* text.)

The closest historically significant precursor of Ætism is Unitarianism. The main difference of Unitarianism from Ætism is the personhood of the Unitarian God. (Some Unitarians reject this in favour of a deistic God.) Quite similar to Unitarianism credibly (though not ritually) is Orthodox Judaism. This is the established religion I feel myself closest to. It makes a good deal of sense.

Next in affinity to Ætism is Gnosticism, accounted a heresy in the early Church partly because it was rampant and perceived as a dangerous rival. The two best known versions of Gnostic religion were that which the early Church combated (itself partly the creed of conscientious Christian apostates and feminists) and Zoroastrianism in Persia. We may distinguish two basic types of Gnosticism, which I shall call "hard" and "soft" Gnosticism respectively. Hard Gnosticism is ditheistic. Its adherents believe that there have been *two* Gods. The first, the *deus absconditus*, was the creator of the world, a component of which was the second God, the one who is active today.

It's a bit like a modern corporation that has a strong, creative founder to help it get off the ground, who then resigns, appointing a successor to do all the actual CEO work for some years to come. At Wolfson (Iffley) College, Oxford (my college, in a manner of speaking¹²), the most prominent, energetic, and influential founding President was the philosopher and cultural historian, Sir Isaiah Berlin. Once the building at the end of Linton Street was nearing completion, and the students were preparing to move out of their temporary quarters, Sir Isaiah withdrew into the background, to be succeeded by Professor John Morrison the first President proper of Wolfson College. Thus you might say that Wolfson had a bi-presidential administrative structure. The *praesidens absconditus*, Sir Isaiah, having been decisively creative in the founding, threw his influence behind Morrison, who was thereupon duly appointed as the first proper function President.¹³

In the spirit of my exposition here, we could view the hard Gnostic position as a failed, or at any rate wildly implausible, attempt at explanatory hypothesizing.

¹² I was a member of Common Room in 1986, and not otherwise an Oxford student. Members of Common Room have a recognized status in the governance of the college; they attend and vote in business meetings, for example.

¹³ See articles on the history of Iffley/Wolfson College (*College Record*, 1998).

A little investigation and a little imagination suffice to persuade us that one God is enough, if not more than enough. The *deus absconditus* is out of work from our hypothetico-deductive point of view. His abduction fails. ('Abduction' is Peirce's term for inference to the best explanation.)

\mathcal{E} tism is far more affinity with soft gnosticism. This type of religion is monotheistic and highly plausible to many serious Western religious thinkers, me included. Zoroastrianism is a historically prominent example. However, this religion includes one characteristic component that will have no place in \mathcal{E} tism. Although soft gnosticism is monotheistic, it is nevertheless dualistic. It teaches that the world is under the sway of a good principle, God or Ormazd or Ahura-Mazda, and evil principle, Ahriman or Angra-Mainyu (or Satan).¹⁴ The trajectory and vicissitudes of the actual world reflect God and Satan eternally fighting it out.

The dualism of soft gnosticism, unlike its ditheism, is highly plausible. As a hypothesis, it seems to answer to what we actually see going on around us. Bad always fighting good, till good turns around and kneecaps evil. Although we have a predilection for good (in spite of our sinfulness), the battle is never resolved. If it were, the world would grind to a halt. (Perhaps it would expire at the heat-death of Sol, the ultimate global warming and humanity fry.) To complicate matters, Zoroastrians also recognize a sort of messiah figure, *Soshyans*. (To that extent, the religion is a bit hard.) But, although dualism is possible, appealing to many, we are not actually forced to acknowledge it as the best explanation of our experience of the world. A good principle is enough. The evil that claims our attention can just be the corners that God didn't get around to cleaning up. Here the problem of evil again rears its ugly head. As we shall see below, the solution to this very difficult theological problem is simply to acknowledge that God is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Like a benevolent but understanding parent, he lets us muck about on our own a great deal. From that we learn more than if God fixed everything up for us. If mum always picks up our socks for us, we'll never learn to keep our rooms tidy ourselves. If god never lets a murderer go free, we'll never learn how to rehabilitate (or murder) murderers, not to mention how to discourage their recidivism.

Atrocities in the Old Testament

Although my title alludes to Dawkins, the main drift of my study will be seen to be against him. Nevertheless, when it comes to the crucifixion, I'm with him all the way (Dawkins 2006, 252). That goes also to some extent to the atrocity discussed below (about the worst I have found in the *OT*): murder of the Levite's concubine and the massacre of the Benjamites in reprisal. But, *contra* Dawkins, bear in mind

¹⁴ In some versions, Ormazd creates Ahriman as an intentional object just by thinking of him. This conception aggravated the problem of evil for Zoroastrian theologians. – It is also appropriate here to take note of Elaine Pagels' reinterpretation (or restoration) of the idea of "Satan", who may have had a bad press (Pagels 1995).

that it's not the case that one God perpetrated all these things. In fact, some of the atrocities reported were probably committed without the complicity of any God. But be that as it may, we *A*Etists are under absolutely no constraint to lay it all at the feet of Yahweh, let alone our God.

One more significant objection to Dawkins' account. As he combs the Bible to glean "Biblical morality" from the alleged behavior of God and scores of men, he overlooks entirely that to report conduct is not to condone or advocate it! Everybody knows this. When the local paper reports a murder, we don't like copy-cats take it as a moral command to go out and commit another murder! What we read of a drug bust, we don't hasten to sell some crack on the nearest street-corner. Gleaning the morality of the Bible is a far subtler matter. In fact, I doubt that it can be done. The Bible, like a mediocre novel, doesn't report and illustrate just one moral system, but many. And it doesn't deliver formulas but rather ambiguous illustrative acts. Only over the long haul does it approximate proselytization for a morality.

I turn now, quite in the spirit of Dawkins, to just two examples in the *OT* of cases in which we're less than thrilled by Yahweh's¹⁵ approach to his Hebrew children's affairs. The *OT* God speaks to them, explains pontifical developments, intervenes in their projects, vaunts himself of his jealousy, turns the tides of battles, and rewards or punishes individuals. The book of *Job* (*Ketuvim* 1953), e.g., is very moving, and has doubtless inspired many religious readers. Yet in it Satan intervenes actively in Job's life, while God sits back and watches with the detachment of a couch-potato to see how Job will take all the setbacks Satan is able to mete out to him. In the end God gives back to Job the equivalent of what he has lost, and we have a "happy ending". Job gets a new wife, and with her begets as many sons and daughters as he had before the Satanic experiment commenced. However, we know that each human being is unique and irreplaceable, and that goes for Job's first family too. The advent of ten new children will by no means have compensated the loving parent for the ten lost children (seven sons and three daughters), a stolen generation of Job-offspring, as it were. For that matter, the healing of Job from boils, etc., is no full recompense. Job will likely remember the pain of those boils all his life. He may dream of them in nightmares, if Yahweh doesn't step in with some celestial chloral hydrate:

And in all the land were no women found so fair as the daughters of job: and their father gave them inheritance amongst their brethren. After this lived Job an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, even four generations. So Job died, being old and full of days (*Job* 42:15ff).

Job forgave God of the terrible sufferings and the Deity had countenanced. Would you have done the same?

Job may be a good story. It may, indeed, be an edifying and inspiring story. But we're under no obligation to believe it. I doubt whether it ever happened. If it did, I think a better explanation of Job's terrible sufferings can be found than the cruel and callous agency of Satan, abetted by a voyeuristic Yahweh.

¹⁵ Readers whose religious scruples constrain them from pronouncing 'Yahweh' may substitute in their minds the traditional *Tanach* scriptural abbreviation, 'Y'eyah' (Ashkenazic 'Y'eyaw').

About the most horrible story in the entire *OT* is the account of the confrontation of the children of Israel (minus one tribe) with the Benjamites (the other tribe).¹⁶ It all started with the attempt of a conscientious host to spare his male guest gang buggery and sexual abuse. A medium-six quotation from the Bible will give the flavor. (This time I translate freely, rather than drawing as from above on the *King James*.)

[The Levite's host speaks to the rabble:] "Behold, here are my virgin daughter and Levite concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do with them what you like; but against this man [the Levite guest] don't do so vile a thing... and they abused her all night until the morning. As the dawn began to break, they let her go...Her master [the Levite] too rose up in the morning, and when he opened the door of the house...behold: there was his concubine lying on the threshold...He said to her, "Get up, let us be going." But there was no answer...[They went home.]...When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and laying hold of his concubine he divided her, limb for limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. [Then people said], "Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day..." (*Judges* 20:24–30).

What do you suppose happened next? The Israelites, compatriots of the Levite, attacked the Benjamites (the tribe of the concubine abusers). Yahweh was there to cheer them on:

And the men of Israel rounded on the Benjamites, and smote them with the edge of the sword, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns which they found they set on fire...And the people [of Israel] lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. And they said, "O Lord, God of Israel, why has this come to pass in Israel, that there should be today one tribe lacking in Israel?"...[The Benjamite] Yevash-Gilead was there. So the congregation sent thither twelve thousand of their bravest men, and commanded them, "Go and smite the inhabitants of Yevash-Gilead with the edge of the sword; also the women and the little ones. Every man, [woman, and child] you shall utterly destroy" (*Judges* 20:48–21:10).

(They didn't actually do it, but they did massacre a considerable fraction of the Yevash-Gileadites.)

This account may well be based on an actual historical incident. It is absolutely horrifying to read. Did Israel really do this with the Lord's complicity? Whether one holds that they did or that they didn't, the sins lay at the feet of the men of Israel or their commanders. We Ætists have no reason to believe that God did any of it. The dreadful war between Israel and the Benjamites need not be reckoned among God's many sins, properly understood. The perpetrators were the ones who did it!

Who's That Guy up in the Sky?

What I think will be deeply offputting about Ætism to the believer-in-the-street (any street) is the total lack of guarantee that its God is a person. Christians and Jews alike (with the possible exception of Secular Humanist Jews and some Unitarians)

¹⁶ Dawkins cites this case too, but I didn't borrow it from him. I've worried for years about the Benjamites and the Amalekites. (I've never heard the relevant passages read out as the *OT* lesson in church, I must say!)

are accustomed to seek solace in direct conversations with God. The Christians make it official: God is a member of the Trinity, and in another of his Trinitarian guises he is the man Jesus. The human Christian God, or Son thereof, humanly eats, quarrels with his mother, wrestles with temptation, answers our prayers, and hears our adoring hymns, no doubt with a human aural sense of pitch. Compared to gentle Jesus, meek and mild, the God of Ætism is definitely a drink of cold water.

This problematic, indeed, is the most burning question thrown up by Ætism, which is otherwise a carefully worked-out benign, logical, rationalist system of religion and theology. *Is God a person, a conscious being who acts in the world and hears our prayers?* My answer: we don't know, but it's not bloody likely. Such a hypothesis is not incompatible with Ætism, but neither is it entailed by it. There may be something about the world, or our experience of it, that is explained or partially explained by the hypothesis that God is a person. I wouldn't rule it out, but frankly I should put little stock in such a hypothesis.¹⁷

For example, it may be that a change of heart such as that experienced by Jean Valjean (Hugo 1862) or Silas Marner (Eliot 1861) or Richard Henchard (Hardy 1975) presupposes that something causally innovative beat in their breasts, which no human being, including them, and no buzz of atoms or cloud of radiation could have effected. Perhaps God softened their heart; what do we know? Stranger things have happened, we might concede.

Basically, you would think that Christianity minus messianic redemption would simply be mainstream Judaism. That isn't exactly true, however. The Jews in the Torah are represented as praying to and conversing with God all the time. As just observed, Ætism doesn't definitely affirm such communication, but only accepts it provisionally as a possible hypothesis. Then the Old Testament (Stifter 1948) ("OT") has a concept of *sin*, which, of course, does actually occur from time to time (too often, more's the pity). It's not immediately clear what the status of "sin" would be in Ætism. Presumably a failure of moral duty rather than of obedience to God. The question cries out for closer scrutiny. The Jews and the Christians, then, have their sin; Ætists maybe not, or not in the same sense. (This doesn't mean that Ætists can't be just as evil.)

But What Would Jesus Say?

Not all sincere believers in some version of the Judeo-Christian faith would put Jesus at stage center. All the same, he is a uniquely awe-inspiring, engaging man, whom we are strongly motivated to consult, both on religious matters and on questions of human and emotional conduct. So what would Jesus make of Ætism?

¹⁷ But cf. Franklin: "The most intelligent, interesting and ethically valuable things we know about directly are humans, which are personal. It is hard to imagine how such things could have arisen from a completely non-personal divinity, or why it would have wanted...to produce any such things" (Franklin 2007).

It's my reading of the synoptic Gospels that *Aetism* wasn't the whole of Jesus' religious faith and practice. He prayed sometimes. He referred to God or the Lord as doing things that made a difference in the world. He ended his life with a direct, moving appeal to god. This was not a man who doubted the personhood of God.

On the matter of Messianic salvation the picture is cloudier. The doctrine of salvation from the cross is essentially Pauline. Nevertheless, no one can deny that Jesus seems somehow to have considered his death to be meaningful, not just a waste of human or divine resources.

It's hard for us twentieth-century people to accept the resurrection. Such things just don't happen, we're very strongly inclined to say. How, then, do we explain Jesus' striking earthly apparitions after his death?¹⁸ What I suspect is that the gospel writers made them up, or drew on fabricated sources such as *Q* or the *Toldot Yeshu* (if they could stand them) that may have come to be accepted in the fledgling church. After all, we know that the gospels were not written down until about 65 years after Jesus' death. Time for a lot of water under the bridge, a lot of busy creativity, not to mention bowdlerization.

One of the most striking things about the Jesus tradition is the imputation of divinity. Trinitarians hold that three Persons are distinct from one another, and that they are yet all One. This has widely been dismissed as illogical by arrogant agnostics and atheists. But it can be innocuously reconciled with logic as follows. The three persons are not identical with one another, they are indeed distinct; they merely bear a strong equivalence relation to each other. (An equivalence is one that is reflexive, symmetric, and transitive.) Such a relation partitions its field into *equivalence classes*. One of these classes is the trinity <Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit>. But what is the equivalence relation? We're hard put to say. Thus this logical reconstruction of the Trinity is somewhat empty, even if mathematically quite tenable.

In this connection it's very noteworthy that Jesus seems most often to refer to himself as "the Son of Man". Who's that? Perhaps Christians read it as a kind of informal or secularizing euphemism for 'Son of God'. The Son of Man just is the second person in the Trinity.

Quite the contrary: the Son of Man is by definition a *man* (obviously), not God or any aspect thereof. To be sure, he claims on occasion to the Messiah, as when he addresses the Samaritan woman at the well (who is living with her fifth partner):

The woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah is coming... when he comes he will show us all thing." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he" (*John* 4:25f).

But my view is that this could easily have been interpolated by the evangelist in order to make a convincing story. (Also, most Jews in that time would have had reservations about acknowledging the Samaritan messiah, since they regarded the Samaritans as irretrievably apostate.) When Jesus says, "The Son of Man has now where to lay his head", I don't think it's the second Person of the Trinity who needs a pillow; it's a man. The Son of God would have other resources for getting forty winks, if he had any need of them.

¹⁸Cf. *Mark* 16:9–20; *Luke* 24.

The “Son of Man” tradition was not Jesus’ invention. It goes back at least to *Ezekiel* and Second *Isaiah*, a Psalms-like book of the Prophets containing passages that have moved Christian and Hassidic messianists alike through the ages. In *Ezekiel*, the narrator (presumably Ezekiel) begins nearly every chapter with ‘And thou, O son of man...’, representing God as speaking to him. There is no implication that Ezekiel is God or the savior.

The following passages will be familiar as furnishing the lyrics of one of the loveliest oratorios ever (*have you not heard?*):

Comfort ye, comfort yet my people, saith your God.
 The voice of one that crieth,
 “In the wilderness, prepare ye the way of Yahweh:
 make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”
 Every valley shall be exalted, and every hill made low,
 and the crooked shall be made straight,
 and the rough places plane.
 The glory of Yahweh shall be revealed,
 and all the flesh shall see it together:
 for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken it.
 Behold, a maiden shall conceive, and bear a son,
 and his name shall be called ‘Immanuel’.
 O Zion, that bringest good tiding,
 lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be no afraid.
 Say unto the cities of Judah, “Behold your God.”
 He shall feed his flock like a shepherd:
 he shall gather the lambs with his arm,
 and carry them in his bosom,
 and shall gently lead those who are with the young.

(*Isaiah 7:14; 40:1–11*)

The words ‘Son of Man’ don’t appear here, but that’s what Isaiah is talking about. *Immanuel*, “God with us”, is not God but the *son* of a maiden, a (possible unwed¹⁹) mother who has named him “God with us”. Jerusalem is adjured to say, “Behold your God.” That doesn’t mean that Jerusalem points to itself and claims to be god. Nor does it mean that Mary points to her baby and says, “This is God.” It means that Jerusalem and Judah are to acknowledge Yahweh as their God because the babe, the son of a maiden, has appeared amongst them. The son of man, like his cousin, is a *harbinger*, not a pretender.

If we had any lingering doubts about the identity of the Lord and the son, Second *Isaiah* helpfully explains:

To whom then will you liken God,
 or what likeness compare with him?
 . . .
 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
 Has it not been told you from the beginning?
 Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,

¹⁹For more lurid gossip about the Holy Family, see [Toledot Yeshu](#).

and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.
 Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
 and spreads them like a tent to dwell in.

...
 “To whom then will you compare me,
 that I should be like him?”
 says the Holy One.
 Lift up your eyes on high and see:
 Who created these?

...
 Have you not known?
 Have you not heard?
 Yahweh is the everlasting God,
 the Creator of the ends of the earth.

(Isaiah 40:18–28)

God is the Creator: it couldn’t be made more plain. \o tism accepts this (on good authority, you see). It’s surely likely that even Jesus, with his obvious and impressive training in the oral and written law, would have figured this out.

The Problem of Evil

One of the knottiest (and naughtiest) problems in theology is the *problem of evil*. The atheist Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoyevski, 1976) rejects God because at least one child has suffered at some point. For many thoughtful people, God and evil simply cannot coexist in the same world. What does the \o tist do about it?

My New York University colleague Stephen J. Brams revealed the essential answer to me 30 years ago: *God is not omnipotent* (Brams 2003). Some evil exists for which *God is not responsible*. At a stroke that obviates the need for predestination, in which as a Presbyterian I was so thoroughly drilled.²⁰

Denying the omnipotence of God also makes free will tenable. This is welcome, in my view, because the evidence for freedom of the human will is overwhelming.

Since God is not omnipotent, when a particle is fired through a small slit, it may be deflected either left or right according to the quantum theory. Either way, we need not lay the behavior of the particle at the feet of God. God may be a spectator of the experiment, just as we are. (Of course, such observers may affect the experiment, as Heisenberg pointed out.) God has other fish to fry. In this he is not so different from us, even if he has no government research grant to conduct research at HILAC.²¹

²⁰ Drilled because it’s so hard to accept – perhaps because it’s false!

²¹ The Heavy Ion Linear Accelerator at Berkley (which I was privileged to inspect in the summer of 1957, when I still wanted to be a nuclear physicist when I grew up).

Salvation and Redemption

One of the most enduringly popular services on offer in Christianity (and some other faiths) is the promise of “salvation” to those who have merited it (whether by faith or by works). What place does salvation have in *AEtism*? Apodictically, none whatsoever. Yet I am convinced that some people are “saved” or redeemed “from sin” and are allowed in some sense to survive death. How could this be?

A firm tendency of modern physics seems to be atomism, the doctrine that the whole world, and everything therein, is ultimately made up of tiny fundamental particles in various patterns, structures, and configurations. For convenience, let's call these putative fundamental particles “itzybits”. Nowadays we no longer believe that protons and electrons are among the itzybits. Indeed, even neutrinos and their ilk fall short of the role of fundamentality. But whatever it is, is a congeries of itzybits, whatever those may be.

Unlike persons, microbes, and the Parthenon, itzybits are truly eternal. Modal logicians debate whether each possible world has the same domain of individuals. There's no general agreement on this. But I hold that all possible worlds have the same domain of itzybits. No itzybit is ever generated or destroyed. The changes that are palpable as we move from world to world are restructurings of itzybits.

A common move in modal logic is to substitute times, or moments, for worlds. I make that move here. Thus I am saying that every time (every moment of time) has the same domain of itzybits. As Wittgenstein observed,

2.0271 Der Gegenstand ist das Feste, Bestehende; die Konfiguration
ist das Wechselnde, Unbeständige.

Wittgenstein's Gegenständ are our itzybits.

When a configuration breaks down, ceases to be, its itzybits live on, presumably in some new or related pattern or structure. If that new structure is sufficiently like the one before death, or bears some other appropriate internal relation to the one that went before, it can happen that the new structure *continues* the thing or person we had before the death. For example, Shakespeare is sometimes said to be an “immortal” poet. Solon is sometimes said to live on in our legal system. The Parthenon is sometimes said to be the repository of timeless beauty, that never dies. (Indeed, were the Parthenon “destroyed”, say by the iron rods unwisely embedded in the pillars by past would-be conservators, it would *be* beautiful. Most people have no trouble seeing that.)

Human beings, too, can survive death, just as the Parthenon can. Their immortality, to be sure, is by no means assured. Many will cease absolutely to exist at the very time of their death. Those with the great privilege and the heavy burden of carrying on will be able to do so in virtue of appropriate relations between person-stages. The most intuitive evidence for this is our confident practice of referring to people after their death. We may say, e.g., that Jesus is a good person, that Socrates is innocent of the charge of corrupting the Athenian youth. And I still love my wife, just as faithfully and intensely, even though she died last year. We make take the Wittgensteinian point here that the possibility of reference in general presupposes

existence as substance. (This doesn't necessarily mean, of course, that structures or configurations last forever.)

Unlike Christians, however, *Ætists* do not segregate the long-lived from the irretrievably dead by the criterion of who has sinned the most and who has purchased timely pardon. Life after death may partly be our doing, but we are in general powerless to secure it with certainty. It's partly a gift, not necessarily from God but from the ontological structure of the four-dimensional cosmos. Plato got it; Luke the helot (who carries out Mrs. Plato's rubbish on Thursday evenings) did not. Unfair? It's not a question of fairness but of the successive configurations of the world. The rejection of Luke was not an act of God, any more than it was an act of his society or culture circle. It's just the way things worked out. Plato has no more justification to vaunt himself of his relatively long endurance. He just *is* immortal, or near enough. And modestly-lived Luke just fell short, through no sin of his own.

So How Good is God?

According to Puritan tradition, God is very good but is characterized in terms that make him sound quite evil. Here is what the greatest Puritan preacher had to say:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell much as one holds a spider or loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful and venomous serpent is in ours. . . (Edwards 1995).

I don't suppose any of us would want such a God for our father, let alone as the *telos* of all our virtuous actions. Jonathan Edwards sincerely recommended this God to his parishioners, but it would be surprising if many of them made it back to church the following Sunday.

Yet Edwards' sermon is planted foursquare in the prominent Judeo-Christian tradition: the tradition of "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." The God of *Ætism* doesn't say that; perhaps he says nothing at all.

Traditionally, God is reckoned to be extremely good, perfect. What about the God of *Ætism*? If he isn't Puritanically vengeful, is he good? Now, I have claimed that the positing or recognition of God is the conclusion of an argument to the best explanation. In general, the fact that a circumstance has been found to be an appropriate conclusion of an argument to the best explanation does not make that *explanans* a good thing. When Ignác Semmelweis discovered with moral certainty that germs on dirty hands caused puerperal fever in the First Division of the Vienna General Hospital, it didn't make those germs a good thing.²² All the same, when we

²²For Semmelweis's investigation of childbed fever, cf. Hempel (1966), page 3, *et seq.*

approve of an action as undertaken for the sake of the *ur-telos*, it would be odd to hold simultaneously that the *ur-telos* was bad, or not good. If it's not good, then acting for its sake loses its point. We seem to be close here to the classical view that some things are good for their own sake. The *ut-telos*, God, is good for its (his) own sake. Otherwise, I don't see how he could fill the role defended in this paper, of being the final cause of earthly striving for improvement.

Comfort Ye, My People

Now that I've expounded the main lineaments of the heretical new religion of *Ætism*, it may seem like cold comfort to the traditional believer. All I can say is, first, agnosticism and atheism, the most popular theological positions among "secular humanists"²³ and intellectuals of our day, is even *colder* comfort. In fact, they are no comfort at all. *Ætism* weeds out the unacceptable dogmas of Christianity. It is closer to, but by no means identical with, Judaism. If you would rather be comforted by objectionable falsehoods, then you may remain a Christian, with all my heart. But if you would rather believe the truth about God, *circumspice!* Look into *Ætism*, which at least *tries* to track the truth.

Whither the Christian Right, the Christian Left, the secular humanists? The Christian Right is grievously mistaken, even more so than mainstream Protestantism or Roman Catholicism. Secular humanism (the non-Jewish variety) is just plain wrong: it turns its back on an extremely important truth. The Christian Tory Wets, the so-called neo-orthodox (Barth, Niebuhr, Tillich, Spong, Martin Marty, etc.²⁴), provide the most nearly tenable of the three positions. But it's still a far cry from the truth as unfolded here.

I pray that *Ætism* will catch on – not that my praying will make any difference. I'm far too pessimistic about mankind's defining characteristic of rationality to expect the new dawn of *Ætism* overnight.

I close with an invocation that in all probability was spoken by the Israelites at the Mizpah, just before they butchered the Benjamites:

May Yahweh watch between me and thee, while we are absent one from the other.

That formula, known as the Mizpah benediction is frequently recited at the close of Protestant worship services. But you can bet that Yahweh will oblige off his own bat, if he does, and not in answer to prayer.

²³ Adherents of Secular Humanist Judaism (Sherwin Wine's movement) are expected here. Towards the end of his career, Wine often dropped the word 'secular' from the name of his faith. I think that's a very good idea.

²⁴ Incongruously, we must mention here also the neo-orthodox (not Orthodox) Jewish theologian Will Herberg (Herberg 1960), who had a strong influence on me in my youth.

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A New Existential Model of God: A Synthesis of Themes from Kierkegaard, Buber, Levinas, and Open Theism

John Davenport

Introduction

This paper draws together ideas about the nature of God (or the divine) from several sources that regard the dominant western philosophical account of divine attributes (tracing to Plato, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas) as inadequate. For convenience, I will call the dominant conception of God as the unique exemplifier of a maximal combination of “great-making properties” the “Standard Anselmian model” (SAM).¹ My goal is not to argue that God as redescribed here exists, but rather to offer a different conception of the God whose existence is more relevant or debateeworthy today. According to major thinkers in the alternative traditions to which I will refer, the personal, creative, temporal, and eschatological aspects of divine reality are not sufficiently articulated in mainstream western accounts of God developed from the idea of unsurpassable metaphysical greatness (sometimes called “perfect being” theology). In particular, the divine attributes of simplicity, impassibility, atemporality or eternity, and governance through total providential design with complete foreknowledge need to be challenged or at least radically reinterpreted – not simply to articulate a conception of God that comes closer to Jerusalem than to Athens, but more broadly, to explain a God whose existence is more believable given the importance of human freedom and the problem of evil, more clearly distinct from metaphysical and ethical principles, and more meaningful for the lives of twenty-first century persons of plural religious backgrounds.

¹ For a representative standard account, see Morris (1991, pp. 35–40). It’s noteworthy that *all* the essays included in Morris’s (1987) collection defend some aspect of SAM.

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According to the “new existential model” (NEM) outlined here, a better conception of the divine can be developed by synthesizing ideas found in at least six alternative traditions:

- the recent theology of “open theism”² with its limited conception of divine foreknowledge;
- older “panentheist” accounts of the relation between God and the created order, which hold that God transcends the world but also includes it, that God develops, is affected, suffers, and experiences joy as well as being eternal, the ultimate cause, the most active being, etc.³
- Søren Kierkegaard’s portrayal of temporal freedom and faith; related themes in Heidegger;
- Emmanuel Levinas’s account of alterity and creation *ex nihilo* as transcending erosiac desire (meaning lack-seeking-fulfillment, or “eros” in Anders Nygren’s sense)⁴;
- Process theology as a source for a non-Platonic, dynamic conception of perfection;
- insights from the non-reductive strands of comparative mythological studies (especially the mythographies of Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade, who interpret the holy or sacred as a numinous, perilous, pan-appropriation of all being that transcends yet enters into time⁵).

With the exception of the last, these sources develop a more “personalist” conception of God than SAM allows; although SAM accounts distinguish their God from Plato’s Form of the Good and Spinoza’s One by insisting that God is a personal agent who is distinct from creation, it seems that “personhood” is not their focus, since it is not explained by typical sets of greatness-making properties. My goal is to show that the main ideas in the alternative sources which distinguish their views from Anselmian models of divine attributes can be combined and made mutually reinforcing if we start from two fundamental points that characterize broadly existential conceptions of the divine:

- (1) A *process-conception of perfection* that differs radically from the traditional static conception;
- (2) An *eschatological significance* not deducible from any attributes posited in natural theology (or the parts of perfect being theology not generally considered to depend on revelation).

² See essays in Pinnock et al. (1994). A number of attacks on Open Theism have also been published; in particular, see Bruce Ware’s work, and House (2000).

³ See the Introduction to Hartshorne and William Reese (1976), which equates panentheism with the “dipolar” approach that recognizes God as passive as well as active, temporal as well as eternal, complex as well as simple, immanent as well as transcendent, etc. (pp. 3–5). Compare their discussions of Socinus (pp. 225–227), Schelling (pp. 233–234), who influenced Kierkegaard and Berdyayev, and Alfred North Whitehead (pp. 273–277).

⁴ See Levinas (1969, 1996). Also see the comparisons in Westphal (2008). For development of Nygren’s notion of erosiac desire, see Soble (1990, ch. 1). Also see Davenport (2007a, ch. 4).

⁵ See Otto (1950) and Eliade (1969, 1959, 1971, esp. chs. 3 and 5).

Rather than comment in detail on the non-Anselmian traditions and figures listed above, this paper will briefly outline the main elements of the new existential model (NEM), along with their relation to (1) and (2), and explain how this account of God diverges from the picture given by perfect being theology on many (though not every) traditional attribute. When thus developed, the elements of NEM fit well together to form a coherent rival to the Anselmian picture. This possibility has not been sufficiently appreciated in recent philosophy of religion, because the various thinkers who developed parts of NEM worked separately. But when their ideas are put together, they present a more powerful alternative to SAM that undercuts Tom Morris's claim that perfect being theology captures "the most majestic conception of God imaginable" and has an "intuitive and integrative force" that is "without parallel."⁶ On the contrary, NEM provides a more majestic conception with at least as much intuitive appeal and integrative force.

Seven Aspects of God or Divine Reality on the New Existential Model

God as Ground and Creator

It is easiest to begin with an aspect of divinity that is not always considered an essential attribute, since it is metaphysically contingent according to most versions of SAM.⁷ However, the new existential account recognizes that all original conceptions of the "sacred" or "divine" in human history begin with the idea of an ultimate genesis or source of reality.⁸ Within biblical monotheism, this idea develops into the more radical notion of God as *creator ex nihilo*, rather than God as the forming principle of formless stuff (or prime material). This new conception of divine creativity involves more than hylomorphic ordering: matter itself arises from cosmogonic power, and non-being is a radical nothing rather than mere chaos or formlessness.⁹ Thus being is not a property that forms an entity or makes it intelligible: instead it is a radical relation to the sacred source. There is an inherent tension in this idea: for it makes the created being more radically derivative, yet also more radically novel.

⁶ Morris (1991, p. 43). Morris should have considered the detailed counterarguments to the intuitions on which he relies given by Hartshorne and Reese (1976).

⁷ Morris argues that the Anselmian approach entails that God is the "absolute source" of all else (1991, p. 45), but this still less than conceiving God as a personal agent who freely creates *ex nihilo*.

⁸ As Barbara Sproul says, all cultures regard their creation myths as "the most sacred for these myths are the ground on which all later myths stand" – see Sproul (1979, p. 3). She adds that "genuine religions proclaim an absolute reality as the centerpoint of their structure" (p. 6), an ineffable reality whose essence is unknowable, but which sanctifies everything that comes from it (pp. 19–20).

⁹ The ubiquity of the hylomorphic conception of creation in archaic mythogony across the world is shown Eliade's work, e.g. Eliade (1971).

This is especially important when God is conceived as creator of finite persons with free will: for the new notion of existence provides precedent for the idea that personhood is more than a substantial form imposed on matter, and thus that the distinctness of a person is more than material individuation in space-time of a species-kind: although human persons are embodied animals, instances of evolved kinds, personhood is not animality. Since personhood is not a natural kind, the fact that a particular member of some species is also a person cannot have a purely naturalistic explanation. This makes possible a non-fungible value in each individual that is related to their uniqueness and freedom, and which can be the object of agapic regard. If creation *ex nihilo* is a free divine act, then its liberty reflects the nature of personhood, and thus of human persons created in the divine “image.” This includes not just alternative-possibilities freedom (leeway¹⁰), but also freedom to transcend erosiac desire in agapic love. Thus we can will goods beyond our own flourishing and give freely in turn. Still, things we make are not as independent of us, since God’s creative power is distinguished by God’s ability to create free wills, to originate radically new beings who can exercise their own derivative authority and turn away from their maker’s purposes. Kierkegaard’s authoritative pseudonym “Anti-Climacus” writes that despair is possible for human persons because of the freedom “in which the synthesis [of mind and body] relates itself to itself, inasmuch as God, who constituted man a relation, releases it from his hand – that is, inasmuch as the relation relates itself to itself.”¹¹ In other words, we are not just a psycho-physical synthesis; our volition is freed to operate on that synthesis and thereby generate a “self.” This capacity reflects the radical novelty in divine creativity; by human choice, something new enters being.

The other side of cosmogonic power, however, is the dependence of what is created. In pre-biblical mythology, we always find the cosmogonic source portrayed not as an abstract principle of being (as in later rationalist accounts of divine emanations) but as the absolute *owner* and thus rightful *destiner* of reality that determines our *telos*.¹² For example, in northern European mythologies, the ultimate divine reality behind the gods is the “Wierd” or “Wyrd,” a pregnant word that refers to an incomprehensible transcendent director, fate, “what comes to pass,” or the way of things.¹³ But as Brian Bates notes, this is not a “simple fate” or a “fixed future;” rather “Wyrd was the inexorable deeply embedded evolution of the world.”¹⁴ It includes the idea that the creative source of reality orders its unfolding, much as in the concept of Dao, or the archē that preserves justice over the course of time according to the Anaximander Fragment. Wyrd is closely associated with other

¹⁰ I regularly refer to “leeway-liberty” to distinguish this kind of libertarian freedom from source-control or ultimate origination, though the two are often closely connected.

¹¹ Kierkegaard (1980, p. 16 [XI 130]). For an explanation, see Davenport (2013).

¹² As Sproul says, cosmogonic myths “assert that the structure of the absolute pervades the relative: the Holy is the *ground of being*” and its ways “should also be understood as the *goal* of being, indications of what we should become” (1979, p. 23).

¹³ See David Wright (1957, p. 17).

¹⁴ Bates (2003, p. 76); Bates notes the similarities to the “Great Tao.”

symbols of the divine, such as the cosmic “Wyrm” or uroborus dragon that holds reality together, the cosmic tree or *axis mundi*, and the three Fates who sit in Hel at the root of this tree, spinning the thread of time. “Wierd” is related to “weothan,” the verb for “being,”¹⁵ and in old English poetry, its power governs the end of all things as well, drawing them back to it:

In earth-realm, all is crossed;
 Wierd's will change the world.
 Wealth is lent to us, friends are lent us,
 Man is lent, kin is lent
 All this earth's frame shall stand empty.¹⁶

On this archaic view, all just possession (i) derives from God, (ii) is temporary and provisional, and (iii) our property, life, and even our works are owed back to God in the end.¹⁷ This idea of divinity as Pan-Appropriation is found in cosmogonic myths across the world (see Eliade¹⁸). This dimension of Ereignis or appropriation of being is what makes the divine a *mysterium tremendum* in pre-monotheistic religions (see Rudolph Otto),¹⁹ and it becomes eschatological purpose in monotheistic faiths.²⁰ However, this aspect of divinity is compatible with biblically inspired conceptions of human freedom: in archaic mythology, fate and free choice work together. This combination is lost in SAM conceptions emphasizing complete divine providential control and foreknowledge as aspects of maximal sovereignty and omniscience. But in biblical traditions, the combination can be found in the paradox of creation *ex nihilo*: while the divine has the sole right to own and destine created persons, it gives up absolute control to make us free. Created persons mirror this paradox at one remove: we are naturally creative beings who express themselves in making, but our children cannot be our possessions, and we cannot lay any absolute claim to our works. This idea has been developed by Tolkien in his conception of “subcreative” art as part of the human *telos*. In his view, making art and works of beauty is among the basic expressions of our nature, but we must accept that we are only co-creators and offer our creations back to the divine source.²¹

¹⁵ See Alexander (1977, p. 22). For more examples of “Wierd,” see the fragmentary poem, “The Ruin,” along with “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer” in Alexander (1977).

¹⁶ See “The Wanderer” in Alexander (1977, p. 73). Compare similar usages in “The Ruin” (p. 28).

¹⁷ In Norse and German mythology, this idea is most clearly illustrated in the motif of misappropriation of a piece of gold from nature (e.g. from a river or deep underground source) which then becomes cursed until it is returned.

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade (1991, 1988, 1985, 1979).

¹⁹ Otto (1950); also see Davenport (1999).

²⁰ At the intersection of ‘pagan’ and Christian thought, one finds fairy tales that combine symbols of the Wyrd with eschatological judgment; for example, consider the perilous figure who represents both the sacred power of life and judgment of human virtue in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

²¹ See J.R.R. Tolkien’s lecture “On Fairy-Stories,” in Tolkien (1964, 1975, 1983). Compare the contrast between archangelic Valar subcreating parts of the universe either unpossessively or more possessively in Tolkien (1977), Valequanta and Quenta Silmarillion chs. 1–2.

Thus instead of a single attribute, NEM includes four related sub-attributes under the cosmogonic side of the divine:

- A. *God as the necessary being* and ground of contingent reality. This includes the traditional idea of God as origin and metaphysical foundation in cosmological arguments (on this point, NEM agrees with classical western theism).
- B. God as free creator *ex nihilo*, who expresses God's nature in creating a world and creatures that are more than a mere extension or aspect of God's being.
- C. “*Wierd*,” *Destiny*: the divine as absolute Owner or rightful Appropriator of all beings, ruling out absolute ownership by creatures.
- D. *Alterogenesis*: Only God has the power to create *alterity*, i.e. beings whose character is radically *independent* of their creator, since they respond freely to their source.²²
 - (i) God is the paradoxical source of beings who are derivatively *autonomous* (Kierkegaard, Emmanuel Levinas²³): they exercise leeway-liberty, partially fashioning themselves, subcreating in God's image, and can even separate finally from God.
 - (ii) The alterity of created persons makes them unappropriable by each other: none can rightfully own or destine others. This free uniqueness is the *imago dei* and ground of agapic duties.
 - (iii) By contrast, thing we make cannot attain alterity from us: they remain expressions or extensions of ourselves. Yet in our lesser way, we can also make beauty for its own sake, without possessiveness.

These components together form the ‘existential conception of cosmogonic divinity.’ As we will see, the final component of alterogenesis as a divine attribute is central to the rest of NEM. It explains the idea that creating free wills whose choices exhibit finite *aseity*²⁴ is a divine perfection: aseity is important not only because the moral agency it makes possible has unparalleled intrinsic metaphysical value, but also because through it, created persons *share* a finite image of God's being as self-donating love. The greatest possible being is that which can *create beings who in turn are creative*, able to add genuine novelty to reality, to shape their own identity, and to give themselves to others.²⁵

²² See Davenport (2007a, ch. 9) and Davenport (2002).

²³ See Levinas (1969): “... the idea of creation *ex nihilo* expresses a multiplicity not united into a totality; the creature is an existence which indeed does depend on another, but not as a part ... Creation leaves to the creature a trace of dependence, but it is an unparalleled dependence: the dependent being draws from this exceptional dependence, from this relationship, its very independence, its exteriority to the system” (pp. 104–105); compare p. 218.

²⁴ I take this term from Katherin Rogers' work on Anselm, Rogers (2008). In this context, “aseity” means that choices originate from the created agent and add something new to being, thus mirroring divine aseity – not that the agent exists from herself or exists necessarily.

²⁵ See Marcel (1964, p. 53). Karl Jaspers follows Kierkegaard's teaching in *Sickness Unto Death* so closely that he says we discover the reality of our creator precisely in our freedom: see Jaspers 1954, p. 45).

God as Perfect Agapic Love

As this sketch of alterogenesis suggests, the existential conception of God's creativity coheres with the idea that the core of agapic generosity is to value intrinsically what is other than self *as distinct or anterior*, to value its freedom, novelty, and difference from one's own being. The greatest possible expression of such pure generosity would then be to create beings that have alterity in relation to their creator because of their freedom, i.e. to create *persons*. This paradoxical accomplishment is the expression of ultimate personhood and absolute love. God is not a metaphysical principle or form, but rather absolute personality, whose basic relation to everything else is agapic love that is free from lack or need and that creates purely for the good of what is created.²⁶ Open theism tends to connect divine agape with rejecting control of persons and valuing freely given devotion above all else.²⁷ Moreover, open theists have argued that, given God's nature as perfect love or the permanent offer of relation, God is not *impassible* (at least in the standard Anselmian sense – more on this below); God motivates Godself, acts on these loving motives, and even reacts to the decisions of human persons.²⁸ While God does not desire anything in the erosiac sense, God wills goods in creating contingent beings, in sustaining the universe, and in preparing the hereafter. “Willing” in this sense, which includes agapic love as a volitional state, is a non-erosiac type of motivation directly generated by the agent in response to actual or potential values as grounds.²⁹

The personalist and religious-existential genres have supported this agapic view in even more radical forms. For example, Martin Buber conceives God not as the ontological ground of the being of entities but as the personal basis for non-objectifying relations who enters into time and history. To Buber, *God is the ultimate Thou* (*Du*) who is absolutely different from things or objects and whose nature distinguishes the personal (*You*) from the realm of objects (*It*). This “actuality” that makes possible direct contact with the other person as anterior, is something we cannot “appropriate.”³⁰ While humans are only partly personal beings, since we are also possessive egos (the “I” of I-You versus the “I” of I-It), God is the “eternal You,” the “You that in accordance with its nature cannot become an It.”³¹ This conception of God thus incorporates the negative aspect of cosmogonic ownership (absolute unappropriability) into the agapic framework that emphasizes God's pure self-giving: the power of destiny becomes a call to relation and vocation that awaits each person's

²⁶ See Nygren (1982). Though Nygren is not an open theist, his emphasis on God's agapic love is important for NEM.

²⁷ See Rice et al. (1994, p. 40).

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 34–38.

²⁹ See Davenport (2007a, chs. 5, 9, and 14).

³⁰ Martin Buber (1970, Part II, p. 113).

³¹ Ibid, Part III, p. 123. It is also implicit in Buber's descriptions that God does not objectify or apprehend anything else as a mere “It,” despite God's right of ownership.

free turning to it.³² God is the only infinite You who can be in exclusive relation with all persons at once.³³ Moreover, on Buber's conception, God creates human persons to participate in creation themselves, and thus to be in free relation with God and with one another, rather than to live as modes of a divine totality.³⁴

God as the Source of Eschatological Possibilities

Some defenders of SAM have tried to *infer* from the abstract idea of a perfect being God's personality, creativity, and love. But the heart of the new existential model lies in a revelation that is inferable neither from natural theology or classical perfect being theology: the distinguishing mark of the divine is not simply cosmogonic power and creativity, or even pure love, but rather the promise of salvation for individuals and possibly the perfection of the whole created order, i.e. *the actualization of an ethically ideal state of affairs* by divine power in time, or in a hereafter.³⁵ This idea is the core of Kierkegaard's conception of the God who is the object of religious faith, which is a direct, singular relation of trust in God as the source of eschatological possibilities that are revealed in divine promises; only through divine action are eschatological goods possible.³⁶ Existential faith thus consists in a kind of *eschatological hope* that cannot be justified on the basis of natural knowledge; it is not simply *belief* in a God who grounds such hope, but absolute trust in God to make one's life, effort, and suffering meaningful. In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham's situation involves the following six elements:

- (A) *An agapic ethical ideal* E that is not rejected or transcended as a moral imperative: the agent must continue to recognize this ideal. [Abraham must love Isaac with his whole soul].
- (B) *An obstacle* O to the ethical ideal: some misfortune, problem, or set of circumstances make it practically impossible for the agent to secure his ethical ideal by his own effort [in this unusual case, the obstacle is God's mysterious and terrible command to give Isaac back].
- (C) *Infinite resignation*: having concentrated his entire identity in commitment to E, the agent accepts that E is humanly unattainable because of O: E is accessible to his agency only as an ideal in atemporal eternity. Thus the agent either

³²Ibid, Part II, p. 102, p. 108. Yet the Wierd remains in Buber's conception of God. For example, Buber 1958, he describes God's name as given to Moses as meaning not only the one who exists always, but also the one who cannot be conjured (pp. 52–53).

³³Buber (1970, Part III, p. 127).

³⁴Ibid, Part III, p. 130.

³⁵See Davenport (1996) for a general account of eschatological faith.

³⁶See Davenport (2008c) for an analysis of *Fear and Trembling*. See Davenport (2008a) for an analysis of faith in the *Postscript*; and Davenport (2008b) for a defense of Kierkegaard against critiques by Levinas and Derrida (1993).

- stops actively pursuing E by his own endeavors, or pursues it as a pure expression of principle without any hope of thereby realizing E. [Abraham continues to love Isaac despite accepting that he cannot save Isaac if God demands him].
- (D) An *eschatological promise* (from God or God's prophets) that E will be actualized by divine power within the created order of existence – either *within time*, or in the *hereafter* as a new temporal series (rather than as a Platonic *aeternitas*). [In Abraham's case, God has promised to him that Isaac will become the father of a holy nation to bring the Word to all peoples].
 - (E) *The absurd*: the content of the eschatological promise, which is only eschatologically possible given O (and thus appears unintelligible outside of faith). [For Abraham, the absurd is that Isaac will survive to fulfill his promised role, *despite* being demanded for sacrifice].
 - (F) *Faith* in the “existential” sense is defined in terms of the prior elements: the agent wills E in infinite resignation, yet trusts entirely in the eschatological promise, stakes her identity on the trust that E will be actualized by God. [“Even in the moment when the knife gleamed,” Abraham believed that he would get Isaac back “by virtue of the absurd”³⁷].

On this existential conception, not only human faith but also its divine object is distinguished from the source of reality and the ground of ethical norms by its eschatological role: God is the being who makes eschatological promises and brings them to fruition. This clearly transcends anything in SAM: from maximal power and maximal goodness we can infer that God will achieve what is best, but we cannot infer the idea of a *final good*, or the ways that such a culminating good could be structured. In particular, the idea of a new temporal order in which creation is renewed appears to be *sui generis*.³⁸ That limit of religion within pure reason is part of Kierkegaard's response to Kant.³⁹ This is not to say that God's eschatological function can play no role in philosophical argument. John Hick's notion of “eschatological verification”⁴⁰ draws on such a soteriological conception of God to defend the meaningfulness of religious claims against positivist reductions.⁴¹

This distinctive eschatological conception of divinity helps connect all the other components in NEM. It extends the idea of perfect agapic love to the salvation of individual persons and transformation of the world, since it conceives the hereafter

³⁷ Kierkegaard (1983, p. 36 [III 87]).

³⁸ Note that even if Kant's famous deduction of the highest good from the moral law is convincing, it only yields the idea of endless time to perfect one's will. Similarly, the idea that the divine itself becomes enriched or fuller in the hereafter is not part of classical perfect being theology, though it is found in mythology: see van der Leeuw (1957).

³⁹ See Davenport (2002). Compare Hans Küng's argument that faith in God is a “radical and fundamental trust” that cannot be justified in advance by prior deduction or rational proof of its validity: Küng (1981, pp. 572–776).

⁴⁰ See Hick (1960, 1977). However, Hick does not thematize the temporal distinction between here and hereafter; on this issue, see Davenport (2002).

⁴¹ Compare Paul Tillich's discussion of the Holy as “the judgment over everything that is” and as the ultimate dimension in which one “can win or lose his soul” in Tillich (1957), pp. 56 and 84.

as the perfect fulfillment of agapic ideals. It requires a personal God who stands in unique relations to created persons through their faith in God's revealed promises and action in history, which express God's love for them. But it also preserves from the existential conception of cosmogonic creativity the idea that divinity is not merely an ethical principle or exemplar but also a unique kind of power – not “omnipotence” in a generic, logically maximal sense (if a single coherent conception of this can be found), but rather the specific power to own, destine, and fulfill. Yet the paradox of eschatological omnipotence is that the ultimate power is expressed in self-limiting, waiving the right to absolute control by creating alterity, and responding to the free faith of created persons. For the mutual relationships of eschatological trust and grace between created persons and God require an ontological distinction between them that God respects and values. The eschatological conception *combines* the core of the oldest religions in history, which conceive the divine as the sacred power from which all reality flows, with the axial vision of ethical ideals – justice and universal love: God is the person who promises to remake the original creation in accordance with the goodness that God personifies. Thus NEM incorporates central aspects of panentheistic or dipolar views while adding what they missed or underemphasized – namely the distinctive eschatological function of divinity.

The Process Conception of Perfection

Taking these first three attributes seriously requires rejecting the static conception of perfection that comes down from Plato (and perhaps the *Upanishads*), which is the basis for the Anselmian conception of “maximal greatness” and thus all the divine attributes according to SAM. According to NEM, perfection should not be conceived as a static state or maximum, but rather as a process of endless growth and qualitative enrichment.⁴² Such a process has an asymmetry characteristic of a temporal order without being “a less perfect mode of existence” that is transitory, incomplete, or wearing down.⁴³ (1) Such a processive conception of perfection is implicit in the idea of the divine as Wierd or Dao, which is not only the original cosmogonic source but also the purpose revealed in the shape of unfolding history. If we add to this that history is partly shaped by the free decisions of created persons, then through alterogenesis, God becomes qualitatively fuller in the resulting relation with creatures. Perhaps the same goes for the universe itself: to the extent that it has significance independent of God's creative intervention, God's being becomes richer through relation to this created order. (2) Perfect agapic love is precisely the willingness to create alterity,

⁴² We could add “to the greatest degree possible,” but it is not clear that we can define any unique maximum possible growth, enhancement, or enrichment through new relation. It might also be better to have freedom to create more or less. Thus NEM is not committed to the idea that God must create an infinite number of universes or persons.

⁴³ See William Craig (2001a, p. 133). Craig argues for an omnitemporal God (existing at all times).

which is possible in its pure form only for God; infinite ontological generosity is the possibility of endless encounter with new entities, new relationships – which is endless expansion or development of being. (3) Similarly, eschatological perfection entails process (though not the converse). It is essential to the concept of a perfect hereafter that cannot be *directly created* at the beginning of time, since it has to build on history (accounts that allow no freedom in created persons face the challenge of explaining why God did not immediately actualize the hereafter rather than creating this universe). And when the eschatological aspect of the divine is distinguished from its cosmogonic function, the perfection of the hereafter cannot be a return to the pre-creation state: it is a higher state in which divine being itself is advanced through God's union with creation. This is another aspect of eschatological perfection that cannot be deduced from static perfect being theology.

This processive conception of divine perfection provides a coherent way to reject simple notions of divine “impassibility” that go together in SAM with Platonic or Boethian conceptions of divine eternity and simplicity. I have argued elsewhere that Plato’s own deduction of divine impassibility in *Republic* II (from which the later arguments descend) depends on the implicit premise that all motivation is *erosiac* in form, i.e. lack seeking fulfillment or completion.⁴⁴ Yet Plato himself eventually came to reject that premise, and the agapic form of divine motivation is active rather than passive, volitional rather than appetitive. The agapic aspect of divinity thus leaves open the possibility of a God who responds with care to individual persons and events in time, a God who makes decisions and changes as a result of them, growing in excellence (and thus exhibiting processive perfection). This in turn fits both with leeway-liberty and alterogenesis as divine attributes: God freely creates free creatures and responds to their choices in time.

Divine Temporality or Higher Time

As this gloss suggests, the processive conception of perfection requires a different conception of God’s relation to temporality. The traditional debate about this aspect of SAM has concerned whether God is “eternal” in the sense of being completely atemporal or whether God is “in” time (views that connect respectively with four-dimensionalist tenseless conceptions of time, and presentist versions of tensed time with a “moving now”). NEM must affirm a tensed conception of time with a moving-now or “A-series,”⁴⁵ but it reframes the issue significantly because

- (a) Physical time (P), as part of the natural order, is created by God in generating the laws of nature: therefore God (at least as creator) cannot be *in* P-time.
- (b) However, since God’s being is processive, it comes in stages or an asymmetric order that is *like* a temporal A-series: this *higher time* (H) is an uncreated aspect of divine reality itself.

⁴⁴ See Davenport, *Will as Commitment and Resolve*, ch. 9, pp. 289–296.

⁴⁵ See Davenport 2012, ch. 5.

This higher temporality as a divine attribute is not simply the “hyper-time” dimension discussed by Craig and others, “at each of whose moments our entire time dimension exists or not.”⁴⁶ For it is a process whose direction embodies divine growth. At least three stages in the asymmetric order of H-time are already implied by other divine attributes listed above on the existential model:

- (i) H1: God H-before creating this universe;
- (ii) H2: the existence of this universe with its entire physical time-series;
- (iii) H3: the hereafter: God and the new creation following the eschaton or end of P-time.

H2 could also have intermediate stages that are correlated with moments of P-time (rather than with the whole P-time dimension) so that God can be said to experience the passage of P-time and know what P-time it is now.⁴⁷ On this account, God’s making decisions in response to choices and events in our universe would be H-temporal changes within stage H2. But the resulting development and the forward arrow of H-time do not result from the causal arrow in P-time or correlated arrows of temporal necessity⁴⁸; rather, the H-arrow is an essential aspect of God’s being. Here NEM incorporates the Heideggerian idea that Being is essentially temporal (in the A-series sense), the idea covered up by the Eleatics and their successors (including the originators of SAM). While P-time exists contingently, H-time exists necessarily and constitutes a perspective that transcends P-time. Thus the Boethian eternalists and more recent temporalists (e.g. in Open Theism) are each partially right according to NEM: God is not in P-time, but in H-time; and the passage of P-time is real to God (God does not see P-time as a tenseless four-dimensional whole).⁴⁹

Limited Foreknowledge and Anti-Molinism

This position on God’s processive nature supports the sorts of limits to divine foreknowledge and providential planning that Open Theism derives from the freedom and finite alterity of created persons. Since God does not have being in a timeless,

⁴⁶ See Craig (2001b, p. 24). Higher time in my sense also has nothing to do with the extra dimension of physical time postulated in some recent versions of string theory.

⁴⁷ Though details are beyond the scope of this essay, I believe this view is better than Craig’s idea that God’s life has “two phases,” one timeless and one omnitemporal (with creation), “that are not related to each other as earlier and later” (Ibid, p. 235). For then creation cannot be an action (in any familiar sense); there is no development in God; and no adequate way to fit the hereafter into the picture (would it be a third phase in no time-like relation to others?). See also Talbott 1992.

⁴⁸ See Linda Zagzebski’s groundbreaking paper “Omniscience and the Arrow of Time,” *Faith and Philosophy* 19 no. 4 (Oct. 2002): 503–519, in which she defends causal asymmetry from certain dilemmas.

⁴⁹ I take the position sketched here to be very similar to the view defended in Pinnock (2001); compare Sanders (2007). However, the NEM view that God develops and risks need not be based specifically on Christian doctrine, as in Nicholas Wolterstorff’s argument against the Anselmian model: see Wolterstorff (2001).

static heaven, but is in harmony with created physical time, to the extent that the truth-value of future contingents is undetermined by present and past hard facts, God cannot observe these future states of affairs: they are accessible to God, as to us, only *through* the unfolding of the process that is ultimately God's own growing being (though God may be an infinitely better predictor based on available information).⁵⁰ The existential model agrees with Open Theism's primary argument for these limits: to be morally responsible, persons must be free in a leeway-libertarian sense that is incompatible with the temporal necessity resulting from omniscient foreknowledge of their future choices (and NEM is open to the idea that some future contingents lack a precise present truth-value).⁵¹ Of course, the thesis that leeway-liberty is needed requires significant defense,⁵² as does the further thesis that leeway-liberty is incompatible with omniscient foreknowledge,⁵³ but both these theses have received extensive recent defense and remain viable.

Rather than trying to review these arguments here, I will briefly argue that the existential conception of created persons with finite aseity in NEM is also incompatible with Molinist subjunctive conditionals about their free choices to which God could look in deciding which “personal essences” to actualize. That *there are no such Molinist facts or essences* H-before individual agents exist and make choices⁵⁴ is one of several propositions involved in the signature existentialist idea that “existence precedes essence.” Similarly, a person is not a Leibnizian monad, nor a Kantian noumenal self whose temporal choices are all made in a single atemporal choice of basic character. The burden of argument is on Molinists to come up with plausible reasons for their view, but the viability of NEM undercuts the idea that divine sovereignty requires kinds of providential control that would be possible only if Molinism is true: thus the basic motivation for this strained metaphysical position is removed.

The existential approach to moral freedom provides additional arguments against Molinism, beyond rightly influential argument (from William Hasker and Robert

⁵⁰ As this language implies, NEM is probably best developed with a “growing-block” rather than presentist conception of both H-time and P-time. For it would be very strange to say that God’s H-past no longer has being.

⁵¹ For a review of some of the recent literature, see Davenport (2006).

⁵² See Hasker redefinition of omniscience and defense of “free will theism” against Molinism in Hasker (1994).

⁵³ See Davenport (2007b) and Hasker (1994, pp. 147).

⁵⁴ When Plantinga implicitly invokes Molinist haecceities in his “Free Will Defense” against the logical problem of evil, H-priority is also implicit. For there has to be an ontological sense in which these personal essences “are” *before* God makes any choice about which of them to actualize, or they could not constrain God’s choice. Yet since they are supposed to consist in a set of *logically contingent* facts about what each creatable person would choose to do in different situations, Molinist haecceities are not like mathematical truths holding in all logically possible worlds. Still, they are also *transworld* truths: *within* each logically possible world, a different set of facts concerning what some persons would do obtains, but these world-relative conditionals cannot be the Molinist facts, which render some of these possible worlds unactualizable (by making some of their conditionals transworld-false). This paradox can be explained by saying that Molinist conditionals obtain at H1, while the world-relative conditionals are indexed to H2. But this then supports the existential anti-Molinist argument sketched below.

Adams) that there are no plausible truthmakers for subjunctive conditionals of freedom in many cases (especially for possible persons who are never actual).⁵⁵ This argument depends on denying the Molinist response that a createable agent A's merely *possible will* serves as the truthmaker for the subjunctive conditional saying that if A were in circumstance C at time T, she would choose X among the options open to her (X, Y, Z, etc.). The outline of NEM sketched above clarifies three further reasons to doubt the plausibility of this Molinist response. First, if Molinism were true, God would not be the genesis of alterity in created persons; the directions of their will would be eternal uncreated facts at H1 (like *possibilia* though logically contingent) that further constrains what combinations of entities God's omnipotent power can actualize. Second, process theory argues that leeway-liberty makes nothing the case without time-succession; time must really flow for choice to have a medium in which to operate. On this view, no merely possible free will can make true any contingent facts about what it would choose in situations with open options *before it exists*. Third, if a logically possible person's will could serve as truthmaker for her counterfactuals of freedom, they would be incompatible with the control-conditions of moral responsibility. To see this, consider the following sketch of an existential anti-Molinist argument employing the concept of higher time (H):

1. If Molinism is true, then the set of Molinist counterfactuals M about possible person A constrains the states of affairs that God can directly actualize because the contingent facts stated in M obtain *H-prior* to God creating any persons, including A [otherwise, Molinism would do no theological work].
2. Any set of facts F1 that are H-prior to the determination of H-later states of affairs F2 function as *synthetic necessities* in relation to F2. For example, if the laws of nature are fixed H-prior to the history of the physical universe at its creation, then they are nomologically necessary throughout that history [the concept of synthetic modal kinds, including temporal modality]
3. Thus Molinist conditionals M about what A would do in various choice-circumstances if A were created make each of these subjunctive truths H-necessary for A [from 1 and 2]
4. But H-necessity is incompatible with the leeway-freedom required for responsibility, just as P-temporal necessity and nomological necessity are incompatible with real leeway power to bring about alternative decisions or intentions [by analogy with libertarian intuitions relative to other kinds of synthetic necessity]
5. But normal human persons meet the freedom-conditions of responsibility and the creation of responsible beings capable of finite aseity is among God's perfections [alterogenesis premise]
6. Therefore Molinism is false [4 and 5 entail that 3 is false: *reductio* of premise 1].

In other words, the set of ideas drawn together in NEM helps clarify exactly why Molinism has seemed so implausible to many persons of biblical faith and other

⁵⁵ See Hasker (1989, ch. 2), Hasker (1995), Adams (1991), and Zimmerman (2009). Contrast Flint (2006).

theists: if it were true, then human agents would be responsible for choices that follow necessarily from a set of truths over which *they have no actual control* in time – truths that, while not holding in all possible worlds in which they exist (since choices contrary to their Molinist conditionals are *logically* possible), nevertheless have a kind of truth that is H-prior to the temporal existence in which leeway-control can operate. The synthetic necessity of future choices according to Molinism is very similar to the temporal necessity that would result if these choices had been determined in the past of our universe long before their birth. This point is obscured when Molinism is introduced into an eternalist framework with God conceived according to SAM, but it becomes clear when libertarian intuitions are considered in the NEM framework incorporating ideas from process theology and panentheism.

Risk-Taking Open Sovereignty

There have always been some followers of late Augustine who have accepted that classical conceptions of divine sovereignty as control of every detail in the history of the universe are incompatible with human leeway-liberty and make God at least causally responsible for all evil, both moral and natural, even if humans share the responsibility via compatibilist freedom.⁵⁶ NEM stands almost on the opposite end of a spectrum of views about divine sovereignty within western theism in general: it says that God's relation to created time and to free creatures within the created temporal order implies that divine sovereignty over creation is exercised neither through total providential control over details of history, nor pre-calculation of which persons to create based on their Molinist sets. Natural determinism, constant miraculous intervention to control all details (as in occasionalism), or pre-established harmony would destroy the moral freedom of personal agents and reduce all creation to a mere extension of God's being – an emanation without alterity.

Instead, God creates so freely that the development of an indeterministic universe and the history wrought by the free choices of its finite persons is *alterior* to God's direct control and pre-coordination, which is exactly why the results add something to God's being that was not already nascent in the divine mind. Through relation with such radical creation, God develops, surpassing any alleged maximal greatness as a static state. NEM thus implies that God is the ultimate risk-taker, accepting that moral evils may be created by the free choice of finite persons, and perhaps also natural evils that result from indeterminism in the natural order too.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The best statement of this view is perhaps in Jonathan Edwards' work. For a contemporary statement, see John Feinberg (1986).

⁵⁷ See Hasker (2004). This is consistent with divine omnipotence, even on conceptions which insist that an omnipotent being could create a world completely ordered by providence (conceptions that NEM likely rejects). For God might be “capable of creating a universe every detail of whose history is solely determined by divine decree” but wisely choose not to (Hasker 1994, p. 151).

This is the highest expression of processive perfection.⁵⁸ But God's sovereignty is still expressed in what created persons owe to God, both ontologically and ethically: rightful authority is inherently linked to the divine essence, and all other authority is derivative.

Conclusion: NEM and the Problem(s) of Evil

I have only offered a bare sketch of central elements in the new existential model of God, but this should be enough to indicate how this model opens new ways of answering the problems of natural and moral evil, while foreclosing others: instead of Plantinga's Molinist version of the free will defense, we have a free will defense that emphasizes the need for divine risk if moral freedom is to matter. In conclusion, I wish briefly to explore how NEM might be extended to address natural evil by connecting moral freedom and creaturely aseity with a physical order involving strong laws of nature (not mere regularities) that are nevertheless indeterministic and open to input from creaturely agent-causation.

In discussions of the problem of evil, beyond free will defenses, soul-making theodicies, and wholistic theodicies (emphasizing overall goodness that requires value-contrasts and complex goods arising from response to evils),⁵⁹ there is a less well-recognized but still long line of proposals that might be called a 'defense from the need for order in nature' (or 'natural order defense' for short).⁶⁰ Its central idea is that, for free will and moral responsibility to be real for a plurality of created persons, they must *co-exist* in a temporal law-governed nexus in which outcomes are not all causally determined by its initial conditions and natural laws,

⁵⁸ Compare Sanders (2007). The difference between my approach and those of Pinnock and Sanders is that I do not make arguments for NEM based on biblical texts; instead, I argue that NEM coherently combines several ideas found within the religious existential and personalist traditions in philosophy, broadly construed. But of course these traditions are strongly influenced by Kierkegaard, who was a profoundly biblical thinker.

⁵⁹ For example, in *Evil and the God of Love*, John Hick famously draws a "soul-making theodicy" from St. Ireneaus and Leibniz famously develops the wholistic approach in his *Theodicy*. Peter van Inwagen explains why these two approaches are existentially unsatisfying in his chapter on "The Global Argument from Evil:" see van Inwagen (2006), Lecture 4.

⁶⁰ Van Inwagen calls his version of this idea an "anti-irregularity" argument (van Inwagen (2006), pp. 114–120). But this label could mislead someone into thinking that mere Humean regularity is enough to avoid the defect of "massive irregularity" in the order of nature, when strong laws are needed to avoid this (for otherwise the regularity we experience is an accident, not an essential property of our universe). The idea of a defense from the need for natural order comes up occasionally in Swinburne 1998, though most of his theodicy is of the soul-making type (see ch. 9). The importance of natural order is also mentioned in C.S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* (see ch. 2) though he also mostly focuses on soul-making. A novelist who has explored the natural order defense is Stephen Donaldson in his existential fantasy trilogies, *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*. In Donaldson's version, for choice to be meaningful, God must create a universe that would be destroyed if its laws were too severely violated.

nor temporally determined by total divine foreknowledge. For the choices of persons within it to matter, this matrix of co-existence must exhibit a high degree of order and predictability in which significant harms can be caused and prevented (consequences and risks are thus genuine). Notice that it fits with NEM to envision such a natural order as largely independent of direct divine intervention: this constitutes its basic alterity. Even if God must continually keep this natural order in being, that divine activity does not determine each contrastive fact as it unfolds internally (like keeping the movie projector on, rather than editing or selecting each successive image). As van Inwagen has suggested, it may be that in such a natural order, the only way for a diversity of life-forms to develop is through an indeterministic evolutionary process.⁶¹ If so, then God accepts the risk that the process of evolution will lead to natural evils that are not preventable by pre-design.

In my judgment, such a picture has a better chance of meeting the challenge of natural evil than defenses relying mainly on complex or higher-order goods as completely counter-balancing or justifying the natural evils involved in our biological order. For a natural order defense more directly addresses the reality of animal suffering (now and in evolutionary history) and offers a hypothesis for why life takes the form it does that integrates evolution with a divine design. If this is right, then the openness of NEM to a natural order defense is among its strengths. However, NEM adds to any such defense the eschatological idea that the universe will not always remain as it is now⁶² – that in the hereafter it can be transformed in ways that may compensate for the natural evils that were necessary to a universe in which intelligent animals can both evolve and experience sufficient order for their choices to be morally significant. This combination promises a different kind of response to the problem of evil than those which have received most attention in classical western theology. In sum then, the existential conception of God sketched here has a number of advantages over more traditional perfect being models, and needs to be considered as a serious rival. Open theism, process theism, and panentheistic proposals can profitably be viewed as aspects of this embracing existential account, or as parts of a larger anti-Platonic tradition that can be adjusted to from a single coherent framework.

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⁶¹ Van Inwagen (2006, pp. 118–120).

⁶² Existential thinkers like Frankl, Berdyaev and Kierkegaard tend to emphasize only the meaning that can be found in suffering and eschatological hope for a transformation of this meaning, without addressing the problems of natural evil in an evolutionary context. So here again, NEM provides a more complete synthesis.

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Taking the Nature of God Seriously

Nicholas Maxwell

Instead of debating the question “Does God exist?”, we should rather, I claim, debate “What is the nature of God?”, it being presumed that God, whatever He or It may be, does exist. Or rather, more accurately, the proper, crucial question is: “What exists that is closest to, and captures the best of what is in, the traditional conception of God?”. In this paper I set out to answer that question.¹

In tackling this question, I make two obvious, modest methodological assumptions. First, any answer to our question must, inevitably, be a conjecture, a hypothesis, which may or may not be true. Our task is to assess the relative merits of rival conjectures about the nature of God.

Second, I assume that reason, though of limitless scope, has only very limited powers. It cannot prove beliefs about the world, about reality, to be true. All it can do, at most, is to establish that some set of factual beliefs is false, because inconsistent. As Karl Popper tirelessly argued, even our best scientific theories cannot be verified or justified; they remain, for ever, conjectures which, at best, can be empirically falsified (or shown to be incompatible with empirical results).²

It is important to acknowledge that reason has only limited powers because, if one does not, it becomes reasonable to hold that reason has its limits, and all sorts of beliefs, including religious ones, are beyond the scope of reason, defy reason, and are legitimately held as articles of irrational faith – even if inconsistent! Interpret the powers of reason more modestly, as helping us to choose, fallibly, between rival *conjectures*, and no thesis, not even a religious one concerning the nature of God, lies beyond the reach of reason.

¹ This question is explored in much greater detail than I can manage here in Maxwell (2010).

² See Popper (1963) or, at a more technical level, Popper (1959). See also these works and Popper (1966), ch. 24 for his defence of critical rationalism – the doctrine that the task of reason is to try to improve conjectures by means of *criticism*.

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We come now to our first conjecture about the nature of God. Christianity, Judaism and Islam, traditionally, hold God to be a Being who created the world and everything in it, a Being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, the source of all value, a Being who cares, profoundly, for the salvation of our souls.

But this traditional answer to the question “What is the nature of God?” cannot possibly be correct. It is refuted by the most elementary facts of human existence. Or, put another way, this conjecture concerning the nature of God plus elementary facts of human existence is inconsistent, and thus cannot possibly be true.

A Being who is all-knowing and all-powerful is knowingly in charge of natural phenomena, in particular those natural phenomena that cause human suffering and death as a result of earthquakes, drought, disease, accident. Even when people torture and kill other people, God is always a co-torturer and co-murderer, in that He decides the knife will not, at the last minute, turn into rubber, the bullet will not evaporate before it hits its target, poison will not, abruptly, become harmless. Day after day, hour after hour, such a Being would knowingly torture and murder innocent children (children dying of painful diseases) – to put the point at its most emotionally inflammatory, but correctly. This is flatly and starkly inconsistent with being all-loving. Knowingly torturing and killing billions of people cannot, in any circumstances whatsoever, be compatible with loving.

The traditional conjecture concerning the nature of God must be rejected on the grounds that it cannot be true because, in our world, given the most elementary tragic facts of human existence, it is refuted.³ This conclusion is inescapable once one child has suffered and died as a result of injury or disease – suffered and died as a result of the knowing actions of God (if He exists). A loving God would take care of His children in at least as humane a fashion as, let us say, a petty thief. No run-of-the-mill petty thief would torture his child to death over a period of days or months, a commonplace action for God (if He exists). God tortures and murders billions; indeed none of us escapes.

Nothing can excuse God for killing one child, let alone all of humanity, one after the other. And yet, over the centuries theologians, instead of emphasizing that this traditional conjecture concerning the nature of God is decisively refuted, have instead struggled to invent excuses for God’s criminal acts. The excuses are

³ Strangely enough, Richard Dawkins (2006) is rather dismissive of this decisive reason for rejecting the hypothesis that the traditional God exists. “it is” Dawkins remarks “an argument only against the existence of a good God. Goodness is no part of the *definition* of the God hypothesis, merely a desirable add-on.” And he goes on to remark “it is childishly easy to overcome the problem of evil. Simply postulate a nasty God” Dawkins (2006, p. 135). But no Christian or Muslim who believes in the traditional God can conceivably calmly acknowledge that God may not be so good after all, and carry on as before, as Christian or Muslim, believing in a nasty God. Goodness is not an optional add-on: it is an absolutely essential ingredient of the traditional God. The manifest monstrosity, on a cosmic scale, of an all-powerful, all-knowing God (should He exist) is a devastating and lethal objection to the traditional God conjecture. As Stendhal said “The only excuse for God is that he does not exist” (quoted in Hicks 1985, p. xi).

dreadful, utterly immoral and hopeless, and yet they continue to be taken seriously today.⁴

“God must allow us to suffer and die, because He must allow us our freedom” runs one excuse. So, should we equally demand of human parents that if their child runs onto the road in front of an incoming lorry, they should not interfere, so that the child may have his freedom? “God is unknowable, and we human beings cannot know why God performs these monstrous acts” runs another. But if God is unknowable, one cannot also hold He is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving. And, in any case, nothing can excuse God murdering a child slowly and agonizingly by means of cancer, let us say. People living in the Soviet Union under Stalin are on record as endlessly excusing the frightful crimes of Stalin; these excuses are morally and intellectually dreadful (however excusable in the circumstances): how can any excuse, whatever it might be, be any better for God’s far more dreadful crimes? “God lets us suffer so that we may grow spiritually” runs a third excuse. Are child molesters to be excused on similar grounds? Can we be so sure that suffering ennobles? Would not this argument imply that we do a person a favour if we hurt him? “It is not God who does these dreadful things, but the Devil”. If God is all-powerful and all-knowing, God has the power to stop the Devil; if He decides not do so, then He is in part responsible for what goes on. “People suffer and die because of the sins of their ancestors.” What an appallingly immoral argument! “God does not murder people; he acts as a surgeon, causing pain in order to cure: those who die live on in Heaven (at least those who deserve it do).” But a surgeon who caused unspeakable pain in a patient over weeks or months, without adequate explanation, and without anaesthetics, would be struck off the medical register, and would doubtless be prosecuted for assault to an extreme degree: even if God does cause us to suffer so that we may be released into the after-life, this might mean that God does not murder, but it does not remotely excuse His actions. (On these grounds, no true believer could be accused of murder either, of course!)

Religious communities should hang their heads in shame at producing such appalling, immoral arguments. Taking such arguments seriously, even if only to set about refuting them, is in itself to take part in a corporate dance of insanity.

Why has humanity, or so much of humanity, allowed itself to be so bamboozled? Because the need for God, in this traditional sense, is so potent, the fear of His non-existence so terrible. God’s criminality is excused for the same reason, essentially, that Stalin’s criminality was excused: the consequences of acknowledging that the

⁴ The endeavour of attempting to excuse God’s criminality even has a name, coined by Leibniz: *Theodicy*. Rarely does one even find the problem stated correctly. It is usually stated as the problem of understanding how God, being infinitely good, can allow evil to occur, and not as the problem of how an infinitely good God could *himself perform* endlessly many monstrously evil acts, torturing and maiming millions (if not billions in that we all suffer to a greater or lesser extent from natural causes during our lives) and murdering billions, in that we all die from natural causes, even those killed by their fellow human beings. For exercises in Theodicy see: Hicks (1985), McCord (1999), van Inwagen (1986), and Swinburne (2003). For a compilation of writings on “the problem of evil”, from Plato via Medieval times to the twentieth century see Larrimore (2001).

crimes are real are too dreadful to contemplate. And this is backed up, in both cases, by a system of “education” which prompts one to believe that it is not God’s (or Stalin’s) criminality that is at issue, but one’s own – any hint of a suspicion that God (or Stalin) is a monster instantly demonstrating one’s own dreadful disposition for sin. How justified God (or Stalin) would be in punishing such suspicion, and how merciful God (or Stalin) so often proves to be in not bringing down instant punishment on those who so sin.

Granted that the conjecture that God is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving is untenable, the question arises: What do we put in its place? What should we conjecture to exist that is as close as possible to the traditional conjecture about the nature of God, and which captures as much as possible of what is best about the traditional conception of God?

One possibility, of course, is that God, far from being loving, is thoroughly evil. But this does not seem to do justice to all the wonderful things that there are in existence. What is so confusing is that life is such a mixture of joy and horror, the extraordinary, the prosaic and the unspeakable.

Perhaps God is confused, schizophrenic even, a dreadful mixture of love and hate? But this does not seem to do justice to the majesty of the universe, its intricate splendour. Could this have been created by a neurotic?

One might take the thing further, by postulating two equally powerful gods, God and the Devil, one good, the other evil, locked in terrible combat, humanity somehow the field of battle.⁵ But if this really were the case, there would be, one feels, more disruptive explosions in the natural world, as the two cosmic Beings fought out their mighty, eternal battle.

Another possibility, of course, is that God is all-loving, but lacks power. He sees the terrible things that go on, but is powerless to intervene. It is a version of this hypothesis that I wish to defend. As it stands, however, it is incomplete: nothing is said about the nature of that which *does* have power, which *is* the cause of natural phenomena, and thus the cause of so much of our suffering.

None of these conjectures seem to capture what is best in the traditional conjecture about the nature of God. This traditional conjecture has two great merits. First, it asserts that *something* exists which is all-powerful in that it is, in some sense, responsible for everything that occurs, and thus such that everything may be explained and understood in terms of it. There is, in other words, *something* in existence which renders all phenomena, in some sense, intelligible or comprehensible. We might call this *something* “the God-of-cosmic-power”. Second, the traditional conjecture asserts that *something* exists that is of supreme value. We might call this “the God-of-cosmic-value”.

The traditional conjecture fuses these two into one entity, the traditional God. But it is just this fusing that is the source of the problem. That which is all-powerful cannot be an all-knowing, all-loving Being, and thus a Being of supreme value: such a Being would be a monster. In order to arrive at a conjecture about the nature of

⁵ This seems to have been the view of Georges Bernanos, the novelist: see, for example, Bernanos (1948).

God which captures as much as possible about what is best in the traditional conception, the essential step we need to take is to sever the God of cosmic power from the God of cosmic value. God must be cut in half – an act I now perform.

The God of cosmic power is utterly impersonal. It is that impersonal *something*, whatever It may be, that exists everywhere, eternally and unchanging, throughout all phenomena, and determines (perhaps probabilistically) the way phenomena unfold. It is what theoretical physics seeks to discover. It is Einstein's "God", eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, but utterly impersonal, an It, not a conscious Being.⁶ It is that physical property of the fundamental physical entity, the fundamental physical field or whatever, that determines the way in which that which changes *does* change. It is what corresponds physically to the true unified theory of everything that physicists seek to discover.⁷

It is this cosmic It that is responsible for all our suffering. And precisely because It is an It, incapable of knowing and feeling, It can be forgiven the terrible things that It does. If It knew that the laws of nature, working themselves out as usual, meant, in this particular case, horrible suffering and death from cancer for this child, agonizing burns for this person, burial in rubble for that person, the It would at once bend a law of nature here and there, so that these ghastly tragedies can be avoided. But this cosmic It has no mind, no understanding, no awareness: it goes blindly on Its way, incapable of knowing anything, and therefore can be forgiven.

But what of the other half of the traditional God, the God-of-value? This, I suggest, is what is best in us. It is that potentially or actually aware and loving self within us that sees, feels, knows and understands, at least partially, and either *does* intervene to prevent disaster, or is powerless to do so. The God-of-value is the soul of humanity, embedded in the physical universe, striving to protect, to care for, to love, but all too often, alas, powerless to prevent human suffering. It is all that is of value in the experienced world. More generally, it is what is of most value, actually and potentially, in the world of sentient life.⁸

Cutting God in half may solve problems that haunt orthodox Theism, but it does so at the expense of creating an immense new problem. Having chopped God into two, into the God-of-cosmic-power and the God-of-cosmic-value, we are at once confronted by the problem: How are the two halves of the bisected God to be put together again? How is it possible for the God-of-cosmic-value to exist and best flourish embedded in the God-of-cosmic-power – the physically comprehensible universe? *How can we understand our human world, embedded as it is within the physical universe, in such a way that justice is done to both the richness, meaning*

⁶ See A. Einstein (1973, pp. 36–52).

⁷ Strictly speaking, it is what corresponds physically to the true unified theory of everything (the God-of-cosmic-power) plus variable physical states of affairs which, together, at any instant, determine (perhaps probabilistically) subsequent physical states of affairs. For more detailed discussion of what it means to assert that the God-of-power exists, in the sense indicated, see my 1998, especially ch. 4.

⁸ For more detailed discussions of the nature of the God-of-value, see my 1984, ch. 10; 2010, ch. 4.

and value of human life on the one hand, and what modern science tells us about the physical universe on the other hand?

This problem (created by cutting God in half) is, quite simply, the most general and fundamental problem confronting humanity. It is a *philosophical* problem – indeed, *the* fundamental problem of philosophy: How is it *possible* for our human world, imbued with sensory qualities, consciousness, free will, art, science, and much else of value, to exist embedded in the physical universe? (This embraces, as subordinate issues, the mind-body problem, the problem of free will, problems of knowledge, of perception, of the philosophy of science, of biology and evolution, even problems of moral and political philosophy, problems of language, culture, history, abstract entities, time, space and causation.) The above is also a fundamental problem of *knowledge* and *understanding* much more generally – the basic problem of science: What is the nature of the physical universe? How precisely do features of our human world, such as perceptual qualities, consciousness, and life more generally, fit into the physical universe? The problem can also be regarded as a fundamental problem of *living*, of *action*: How can we help what is of value in existence, actually and potentially, to flourish? What do we need to do, as individuals, so that what is of value to us may flourish? And what do we need to do, collectively, socially and politically, so that what is of value to people everywhere, to humanity, may flourish? The problem of fitting the God-of-value into the God-of-power (the underlying unified It of the physical universe) is not only a conceptual problem, a problem of knowledge and understanding; it is also a *practical* problem, the most general, fundamental practical problem that there is: to help the God-of-value, what is of most value in us, to exist in the physical universe in ways that are less painful and constrained, more exuberant and joyful, more just, peaceful and noble, than at present. Once we recognize that the God-of-value is what is of most value, actually and potentially, in us, in our world of human experience, it becomes our most profound religious obligation to help what is of value to flourish in the real world.

The outcome of treating the traditional God thesis with a modicum of intellectual honesty is that we are led straight to the most fundamental problems of knowledge, understanding and living that there are. The character of these fundamental problems of thought and life is brought sharply into focus. And as a result, much is changed. Academic inquiry is transformed. It becomes a fundamentally *religious* enterprise: to improve our knowledge and understanding of how the cosmic God-of-value fits into the cosmic God-of-power and, above all, to help the former to flourish within the tight embrace of the latter. Education is transformed. All education becomes religious in character. It has, as a basic task, to explore aspects of the fundamental problem: How can the God-of-value fit into, and flourish within, the God-of-power? Politics is transformed. It too becomes religious, in that it seeks to implement policies which help the God-of-value to flourish inside the God-of-power. Our lives are transformed. Personal life too becomes religious in that the basic task is to discover how we can help that part of the God-of-value associated with our life to flourish in the cosmic God-of-power. The task, of course, is somehow to get the God-of-power so to act that the God-of-value flourishes. Even theo-

retical physics is transformed, in that it becomes a religious quest, that part of science devoted to discovering the precise nature of the cosmic God-of-power. The traditional division between the religious and the secular is annihilated. The secular is entirely engulfed by the religious.

These, at least, are some of the changes that would be brought about were we to take seriously and act on the implications of the simple idea that putting the two halves of the bisected God together again is indeed our fundamental problem of thought and life. Much is lost if we merely discard the God conjecture altogether. Believers in the traditional God have much to learn from bringing some intellectual integrity to religion and to ideas of God – and non-believers have much to learn from this as well.⁹

At this point it may be objected: But why continue to talk of God at all? Is it not far better to get rid of God altogether, and put our faith, straightforwardly, in science and humanism unadorned with irrelevant theological trappings? And in any case is not all this stuff about chopping God in half very old news? Did not Friederich Nietzsche declare God to be dead long ago in the nineteenth century?¹⁰ In cutting God in half, am I not merely repeating what Nietzsche and others did long ago, in killing God off? How, in any case, could God survive being brutally cut into two pieces in the way I have recommended?

God is too important a notion to discard. It is a focus for fundamental issues. What, ultimately, is the explanation for everything? What is the ultimate purpose of life? What is ultimately of value in existence? These are among the questions the traditional God hypothesis seeks to answer. And this answer – the idea of God – has had a profound, long-standing impact on our culture and social world. We should not merely discard the notion, declare the whole idea to be defunct, or God to be dead. Rather, in the face of the devastating objections to the traditional God hypothesis, we should do what I have indicated: *improve* the thesis so that it overcomes these devastating objections (while retaining as much of what is of value in the traditional thesis as possible). This serves at least two purposes (there are others as we shall see).

First, it holds out the hope of keeping alive an awareness of ideas and problems at a fundamental level in our culture. As I shall indicate below (and as I have argued

⁹ It may be objected that there is nothing unique about my proposed solution to the so-called “problem of evil”. I have already acknowledged this to be the case. One could imagine God is an all-powerful, all-knowing Being who is utterly monstrous. Or one could imagine God is an all-knowing, all-loving being who has lost control of his creation – the universe – and is thus very far from being omnipotent. What I claim for my proposed solution – the Bisected God – is that it uniquely (a) preserves more of what is of value in the traditional God than any rival proposal, (b) is an intellectually and morally worthy notion, a *religiously* worthy notion – unlike the traditional notion, (c) is such that there are good grounds for holding that God, in this sense, the Bisected God, does exist, and (d) the thesis that God, in this sense, does exist, is potentially extraordinarily fruitful, for both thought and life. A religious view based on accepting the Bisected God is, on these grounds, far more worthy, intellectually, morally and religiously, than the really very disreputable views of traditional Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

¹⁰ Nietzsche (2006, section 125).

in some detail in Maxwell (2010), abandoning – instead of *improving* – the traditional God hypothesis has had damaging consequences for a range of endeavours and institutions, from science and the humanities to education, ideas about what is of value in existence, and our capacity to solve global problems intelligently, humanely and effectively. If God had been cut decisively in half in the way I am recommending long ago in the seventeenth century, let us say, this might not automatically have cured these ills, but it would have helped.

Secondly, *improving* rather than abandoning the traditional God thesis provides believers with an open road along which they may travel, rather than leaving them stuck in a cul-de-sac. If, in our culture, there are clear indications as to how the God hypothesis can be improved so that it overcomes the devastating objections it faces, and becomes intellectually and morally acceptable – even fruitful – this is something individuals and groups can avail themselves of to learn, to improve their religious ideas and lives. But if our culture does no more than confront one with the stark choice, “hold onto an intellectually and morally bankrupt idea of God, or abandon the whole idea of God altogether”, the chances are that believers will opt for the former choice, since otherwise they must simply abandon their fundamental beliefs. As I have said, the believer is left stuck in a cul-de-sac.

There is another option. It is to cease to take God seriously, soften and sentimentalize Him, shroud Him in metaphor and double-speak, so that nothing that is said is to be taken at face value. As a result, religious belief is turned into something subjective and intangible, beyond the scope of reason and criticism. But this option is perhaps even more intellectually and morally disreputable than that of holding on to traditional Theism.¹¹ Ultimate questions about the nature of the world and the purpose of life deserve to be treated with clarity and intellectual integrity. Doing that enhances the possibility of learning, of improving our ideas and even, perhaps, our lives. This is sabotaged when clarity and transparent content are converted into metaphor and double-speak.

The chief reasons, then, for taking seriously and adopting the conjecture about the nature of God that I have indicated are: (a) it does better justice to what is best in the traditional conception of God than rival conjectures; (b) it is more likely to be true than rival conjectures (so that God, in this sense, does exist); (c) adopting this conjecture focuses attention on our fundamental problem, in thought and life and, as a result, may enable us to help what is of value in life to flourish in the real world rather better than we are doing at present.

I conclude with some remarks about the last point. Elsewhere,¹² I have argued, in great detail, that science, and academic inquiry more generally, are damagingly irrational, in a wholesale, structural way, when judged from the standpoint of helping us make progress towards as good a world as possible. This is sabotaging efforts to create a better world. We urgently need to bring about a revolution in our schools and universities so that they come to seek and promote wisdom, and do not

¹¹This option has been devastatingly criticized by Bartley (1962).

¹²See Maxwell (1984, 2010). For a summary of the argument see Maxwell (2007).

just concern themselves with the acquisition of knowledge. The argument for this academic revolution – in my view absolutely decisive, but as yet largely ignored – is independent of the bisected God conjecture I have put forward here. Nevertheless, adopting this conjecture concerning the nature of God would powerfully reinforce the case for the urgently needed academic revolution. Let me explain.

The argument for the academic revolution begins with science. Scientists and non-scientists alike take for granted that the basic intellectual aim of science is truth, the basic method being to assess theories impartially with respect to evidence. According to this orthodox view, no thesis about the world may be accepted as a part of scientific knowledge independently of evidence, let alone in violation of evidence.

But this orthodox view, which I have called *standard empiricism*, is untenable. In physics, only unified theories are ever accepted even though one can always formulate endlessly many disunified rival theories tailored to fit the facts better, and thus be even more empirically successful. (A unified theory is one that attributes the same laws to all the phenomena to which the theory applies.¹³) This persistent acceptance of unified theories only, in the teeth of endlessly many empirically more successful disunified rivals, means that physics makes a persistent, substantial assumption about the nature of the universe as a part of scientific knowledge: there is some kind of dynamic unity in nature. This assumption is substantial, highly influential and profoundly problematic: it needs, therefore, to be made explicit within physics so that it may be critically assessed, so that rival versions may be considered, in an attempt to improve the assumption that is accepted. Rigour demands that this be done. Thus a substantial thesis about the universe *is* (implicitly) accepted as a part of scientific knowledge, and that suffices to demolish standard empiricism. The basic intellectual aim of science is not truth *as such*; it is rather truth *presupposed to be unified*, or explanatory. In ignoring endlessly many disunified theories empirically more successful than accepted theories, physics presupposes that the universe is, in some way, physically comprehensible (i.e. such that the true physical theory of everything is unified), the aim being the highly problematic one of discovering, in the form of a testable theory, in what way, precisely, the universe *is* physically comprehensible.

In order to give ourselves the best chance of improving the substantial assumption made by physics concerning unity in nature, science needs to represent this assumption in the form of a hierarchy of assumptions, each assumption in the hierarchy becoming less substantial, and more nearly such that its truth is required for science, or the acquisition of knowledge, to be possible at all: see Fig. 1. In this way, a framework of relatively stable assumptions and associated methods (aims and methods), high up in the hierarchy, is created within which much more substantial and problematic assumptions and associated methods can be proposed, revised, and improved. We need, in short, to adopt and put into practice a new conception of

¹³For a detailed exposition and defence of this conception of theoretical unity see Maxwell (1998, ch. 4); (1984, 2nd ed., ch. 14, section 2).

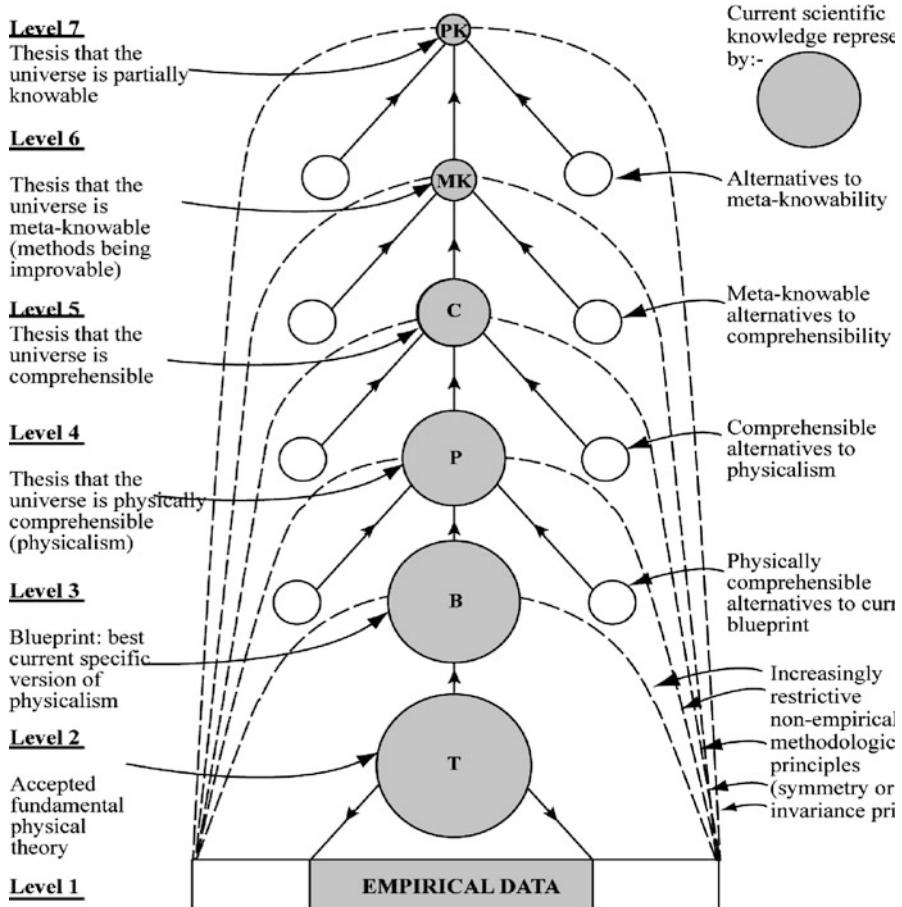


Fig. 1 Aim-oriented empiricism

science, a new kind of science, which improves its aims and methods (low down in the hierarchy) as it proceeds. As we improve our scientific knowledge, we improve our knowledge about how to improve knowledge, the nub of scientific rationality, and the key to the immense intellectual success of science. I have called this view, depicted in Fig. 1, *aim-oriented empiricism*.¹⁴

Aim-oriented empiricism has one startling implication for the bisected God conjecture I have put forward above. Not only does theoretical physics seek to discover the nature of the God-of-power. According to aim-oriented empiricism, physics has already obtained knowledge of the nature of the God-of-power. It is that underlying

¹⁴ For more detailed formulations of this argument against standard and for aim-oriented empiricism, see my 1984, ch. 9, and especially ch. 14 of the 2007 2nd edition. See also my 1998 and 2010, ch. 5.

unity in nature, which determines (along with variable instantaneous states of affairs) how phenomena occur in space and time. Science has already established that the God-of-power exists, when construed in this way, insofar as science can establish anything theoretical at all.¹⁵

This new conception of science has profound implications – I have argued – for all that we do, for all areas of life.¹⁶ For it is not just in physics that the aim (of discovering in what precise way the universe is comprehensible) is profoundly problematic. In life too, all too often, our aims are problematic, either because they are not realizable, or because they are not desirable, or both. Above all, the aim of creating a better world is profoundly problematic, for all sorts of obvious reasons. Here, above all, we need to put into practice an aim-improving methodology generalized from the aim-improving meta-methods of science. In seeking to make progress towards as good a world as possible we need to put into practice the hierarchical *methodology* depicted in Fig. 2, arrived at by generalizing aim-oriented empiricism, depicted in Fig. 1. The proper, basic task of social inquiry and the humanities, I have argued, is to help humanity build something like this aim-improving methodology into all our other institutions besides science, into the fabric of personal, social and global life. We might, as a result, get into social, economic and political life something of the progressive success which is such a striking feature of natural science. Social inquiry, properly construed, on this view, is social *methodology* or social *philosophy* not, primarily, social *science*.

The upshot, I argue, is a new kind of academic inquiry which gives intellectual priority to tackling problems of living, problems of knowledge and technological know-how emerging out of and feeding back into, problems of living (individual, social, global). The basic intellectual aim becomes, not just knowledge, but rather *wisdom* – wisdom being the capacity to realize what is of value in life for oneself and others (thus including knowledge). *Wisdom-inquiry* (as I have called this new kind of inquiry) would be rationally devoted to helping us realize what is of value in life in a way in which knowledge-inquiry (what we have at present) is not.

What does all this have to do with the bisected God conjecture put forward above? Simply this. Once the bisected God conjecture is accepted, it becomes immediately apparent that our fundamental problem is indeed to discover how what is of value can exist and best flourish in the physical universe. This is our fundamental problem in life, and also the fundamental problem of academic inquiry. But a kind of academic inquiry devoted to the pursuit of *knowledge* (as academia is, by and large, at present) is horribly ill-equipped to tackle this problem. Knowledge-inquiry, of that type, leaves out half of the problem – the half concerned with what is of value and how it is to be realized. If academia is to help us improve our ideas about what is of value in life – if it is to help us improve our aims and methods in life, and thus our lives – it is vital that wisdom-inquiry is put into practice, and the kind of aim-improving methodology depicted in Fig. 2. Acknowledging that putting

¹⁵ See my 2010, ch. 5.

¹⁶ See works referred to in note 12.

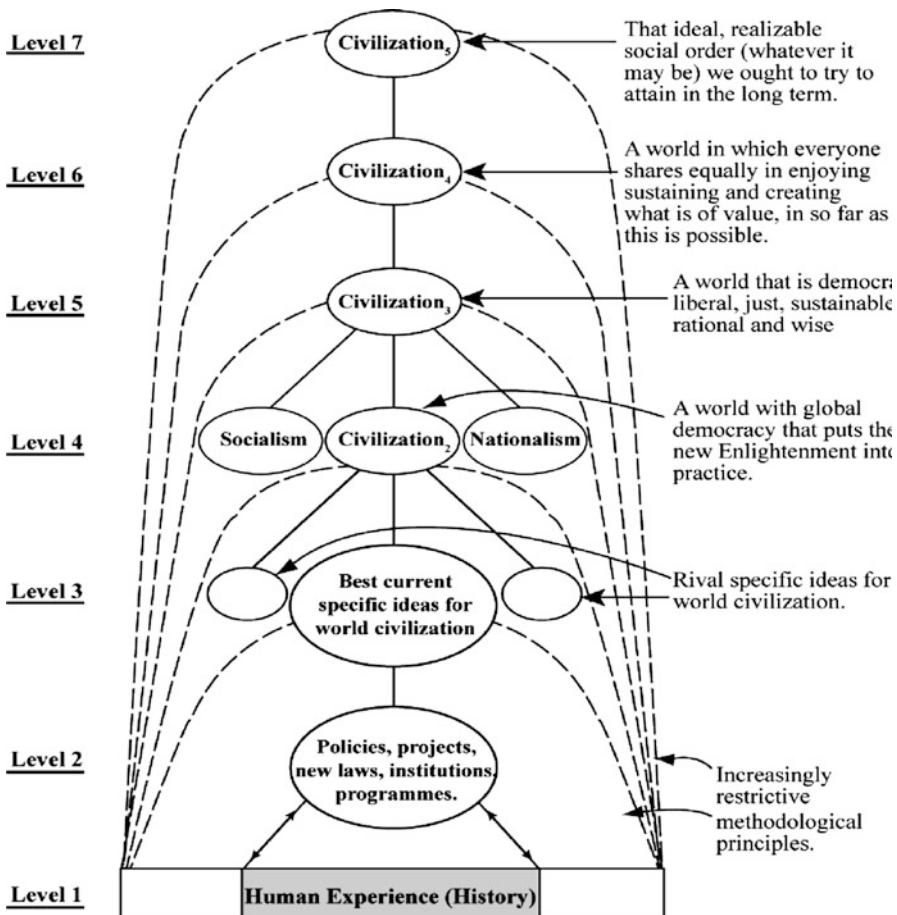


Fig. 2 Hierarchical social methodology generalized from science

the bisected God together *is* our fundamental problem in life gives powerful support to wisdom-inquiry, and thus to the institutional means for humanity to learn how to make progress towards as good a world as possible.

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Part VIII
Ultimate Unity

Introduction to Ultimate Unity

Michael Levine

Each of the papers in this section focuses in different ways on monism—the view that ontologically speaking there is only one thing or one kind of thing—and its significance for a particular model of “God.” The term “God” is being used here generically and does not, for example, refer necessarily to a theistic God, meaning God conceived of as a “person” and as ontologically distinct from or transcendent to creation. Each of the authors argues a case for the religious and practical significance of the monistic views they present. The central question then is whether and in what ways monism is religiously significant.

The religious significance of monism, and its importance in other ways, may depend in part on whether or not the monistic claim is true. It also depends on the thorny issue of just what one means by “religious significance.” Nevertheless, as Goldberg’s essay makes clear, monism in relation to a model of God may be religiously and philosophically significant—it may have personal and social significance—even if it is not true or not strictly true. It may convey insight that is missed when interpreted as a literal truth claim, and may in fact be more important than the literal truth. Fundamentalists may deny it, but the literal truth of religious propositions—as with “truth” generally—is often far less important than what is being non-literally conveyed. It is this alleged significance of “monism” per se that I wish to challenge, or at least query.

As all of the essays in this section illustrate, there are important symbolic aspects of monism that have been taken up by various religious traditions, particularly, though by no means exclusively, in the Vedic traditions, and that play important roles within those traditions. Nevertheless, in contrast to the claims of such traditions, East and West, not only is monism philosophically problematic and no longer widely held by philosophers; the significance of monism as an ontological and philosophical view seems to hold less promise religiously speaking—or so I shall argue—than is explicitly claimed or intimated in these essays. I begin with a brief account of the central claims of each of the essays.

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The Essays

In “God and Ultimate Reality: An Analytical Interpretation of Śaṅkara’s Philosophy,” R. Puligandla’s primary concern is to defend his interpretation of Śaṅkara’s non-dualistic account of Brahman. Those, for example, who view Śaṅkara as a substance philosopher, as one must to interpret his view as strict monism, Puligandla roundly dismisses. “I consider it blasphemy and a mark of sheer stupidity to describe Śaṅkara as a substance-philosopher.” Tone aside, if monism is understood as the view that there exists one thing (perhaps a substance without attributes?) or kind of thing (substance), then it hardly seems outlandish to describe Śaṅkara as a substance philosopher. Consider, for instance, Puligandla’s claim that “Śaṅkara’s philosophy is the most faithful interpretation of the Upaniṣads.... Brahman (*Ātman*), or ultimate (transcendental) reality, is non-dual. This means that nothing can, in principle, exist apart from Brahman; there can be nothing besides Brahman—whatever exists or can exist is Brahman ... everything has its being in Brahman.” Not only is this compatible with some accounts of monism; some would say it exemplifies it.

Puligandla goes on to say that

...Śaṅkara was right to reject every effort to rationally explain *māyā* ... as ignorant, absurd, and doomed to failure[are these Śaṅkara’s words?]; instead, he boldly and honestly admitted the inexplicability of *māyā* and that Brahman is its locus ... while Śaṅkara would have no objections to employing concepts such as substance, attribute, relation, cause, etc. in dealing with phenomena, he would certainly reject the use of these concepts to characterize the non-dual Brahman (*Ātman*).

However, the idea that non-dual Brahman is beyond description or can only be described by the *via negativa* (by means of what Brahman is not) is again compatible with monism, or not clearly incompatible with it—not perhaps as a characterization of what Brahman is, but as a claim about what exists—one thing or kind of thing (substance).

In the same vein in which he dismisses views of Śaṅkara as a substance philosopher, Puligandla also eschews the notion that Śaṅkara’s non-dualism can be seen as a kind of pantheism. “...many philosophers glibly describe Śaṅkara’s Advaita as ‘Pantheism.’ Nothing could be more absurd than this characterization. What does ‘Pantheism’ mean? It means ‘everything is God,’ ‘God’ being understood in the sense of creator, preserver, destroyer, and judge of the world. But in Śaṅkara’s philosophy it is *īśvara* who has these attributes and not Brahman.” Pantheism, however, does not simply mean that everything is God. Such a view is closer to the kind of substance monism that Spinoza espoused. If pantheism is understood as the view that there exists an all-inclusive unity, in some sense, and that this unity is, in some sense, “divine,” then Śaṅkara’s non-dualism (Brahman or reality as such is non-dual) probably is pantheistic.

Such a radical non-dualism (or monism) is counterintuitive in two ways: first, it seems to run up against the plurality and diversity we seem to experience all the time, and second, it faces a severe problem of evil. Puligandla addresses the first issue near the start of his paper: “If Brahman is non-dual reality, besides which

nothing can exist, how is one to account for the undeniable fact of our experience of plurality, the world of phenomena? How and why does the non-dual Brahman appear to us as many[?].... In order to answer questions such as these, Śaṅkara employs the concepts of *māyā* and *adhyāsa*.” He goes on to say that *adhyāsa* is the “superimposing on the formless, nameless non-dual Brahman various forms and names...,” and argues that the kind of superimposing Śaṅkara has in mind is similar to the kind Kant envisions we do with the categories to create phenomena. This makes the idea of *māyā* more intelligible—it is created by the contribution of consciousness—and also explains why the Hindu paths to *moksha* are what they are: they help correct consciousness to lift the veil of *māyā* and permit seeing the true nature of Brahman.

H.P. Owen claimed that “Pantheists are bound to find the fact of evil (and especially moral evil) an enormous embarrassment. It is difficult enough to square this fact with belief in an omnipotent and infinitely loving Creator. It is much more difficult to square it with the view that an evil world is an actual expression of God’s perfect nature.”¹ However, one of the principle problems that Śaṅkara’s absolute non-dualism is supposed to address is the problem of evil. Since there is nothing but Brahman, and Brahman (along with all else he is not) is not evil, all evil (moral and natural) is relegated to *māyā*. None of it is “real.” Brahman’s purity or goodness is retained and evil is explained away as illusory. As a way of resolving the problem of suffering, whether religiously or philosophically, this is on a par with the ideas that God (through Christ) has atoned for the sins of others, will one day atone for such sin, or that all such evil is essential for a greater good and will not be seen as evil after death. Tell it to those who have suffered in the extreme.

The religious significance that Puligandla sees for his interpretation of Śaṅkara’s non-dualism is intimated in the following: “With the elimination of mental modifications, all phenomena vanish away, leaving pure, objectless consciousness as the ultimate residuum. And what better characterization of consciousness can there be than ‘void’?” Even if sense can be made of “pure, objectless consciousness as the ultimate residuum” and “void,” why is it “the pinnacle of human achievement—*summum bonum*—for Śaṅkara” as Puligandla claims? Perhaps Śaṅkara’s answer is like Aquinas’, though for Brahman instead of God: to reach pure, objectless consciousness is to know Brahman, and there is no higher good than this.

In “The World as the Body of God: Rāmānuja on What is Ultimately Real,” Sucharita Adluri explains how Rāmānuja’s “unity of the differenced,” or what J.J. Lipner calls “qualified non-dualism”² addresses both the problems of the apparent reality of the plural world as well as evil, while maintaining the essential unity, “oneness,” and goodness of Brahman. “[T]he God Viṣṇu, encompasses the world of matter along with a plurality of individual souls. Viṣṇu’s relationship to the universe is similar to the association between a soul and a body. As a result, there is nothing that exists outside of this differenced unity comprised of Viṣṇu, individual souls, and matter.”

¹ Owen (1971, p. 72).

² Lipner (1984, 1985).

Brahman remains the “infinite, perfect, impersonal, absolute principle … the source and sustenance of all creation,” but, in contrast to Śaṅkara, a kind of reality is also granted to the world of appearance—including suffering. “Whereas other Vedānta philosophers dismiss the manifest universe of individual souls and matter as mere illusion, Rāmānuja recognizes creation as the auspicious manifestation (*vibhūti*) of Viṣṇu and sees this as a justification for the ‘realness’ of the world. The empirical world, which is the Supreme Being, is real, and our experience of it is real” (pp. 4–5).

As Adluri explains it, “Rāmānuja was reluctant to dismiss individual experience … as illusions … Thus, while maintaining the basic Vedānta premise that … (Brahman/Viṣṇu) is the material cause and instrumental cause of creation, Rāmānuja offers a unique perspective on this Infinite Being’s relationship to the world as one of soul to body.... Because of His very direct connection to the universe, Viṣṇu’s divinity comes to be susceptible to the vicissitudes of finite being such as karma… [T]he qualities of creation such as change, old age, and death, must necessarily affect Viṣṇu Himself. Therefore, it is problematic to hold that the Infinite Being, Viṣṇu, can be the material cause in such a direct originative way.... Rāmānuja’s response … is to conceive the world as the Supreme Being’s body. Viṣṇu, as the soul of creation, is the controller of His body, the world, yet He is unaffected by the deficiencies of finite being such as change, as these limitations are characteristics of His body only” (pp. 3, 5–6).

Thus, Rāmānuja constructs an account of the relation between Brahman and the world that is purposefully built to avoid associating the suggestion that qualified non-dualism either subjects Brahman to karma or makes Brahman casually responsible for evil. Adluri explains further how Rāmānuja’s account is supposed to work:

[I]t is the karmic accumulation of the individual souls themselves that dictates their circumstances in life, absolving Viṣṇu of the charge of cruelty and partiality in bringing forth a world with its prevalent evil, misery, and suffering. The soul-body paradigm allows Rāmānuja to identify the world as the Supreme Being, since He ensouls the world … identity between the infinite and finite being is also satisfied without sacrificing the perfection of the Supreme Being’s association with the world of karma (pp. 11–12).

It would be an enormous contribution to Vedic monism if Rāmānuja were successful in this attempt to avoid the two most apparent difficulties with Śaṅkara’s non-dualism. Whether he does or not is of course another question—one that Adluri is unconcerned with. This is unfortunate since whether Rāmānuja’s system adequately addresses Śaṅkara’s difficulties remains fundamental. Does the soul-body paradigm allow Rāmānuja to identify the world as the Supreme Being “without sacrificing the perfection of the Supreme Being’s association with the world of karma?” According to Rāmānuja “the substance that is the controller and supporter must also be a conscious being” (7). If so, why doesn’t that controller and supporter bear responsibility for “the karmic accumulation of the individual souls … that dictates their circumstances in life,” and accounts for evil and misery? After all, it is Viṣṇu who brought forth the world. Much the same question is asked in connection with theism and any view of God as creator and so capable of intentional action.

Śaṅkara’s and Rāmānuja’s profoundly different metaphysical assumptions lead to equally different conceptions of salvific knowledge—the realization that Brahman is Atman—and what the state of “release” entails. As Adluri describes it, according

to Rāmānuja, “When the embodied soul realizes that Viṣṇu is the ground of being and sees itself as entirely dependent on Him, liberation is achieved. Even after liberation, the individual soul continues to exist in this state of subservience to Viṣṇu ... no longer ... within the cycle of birth and rebirth, the soul rests in its natural state in blissful contemplation of its relation as an accessory to Viṣṇu.” (11) Śaṅkara on the other hand presumably denies any distinction between individual souls and Brahman since Brahman is all that exists. There could be no “contemplation of its [a liberated soul’s] relation as an accessory to Viṣṇu.”

In “Ardhanārīśvara: An Androgynous Model Of God,” Ellen Goldberg argues that through its representation of the union of spirit and matter, Ardhanārīśvara, “the half-male, half-female form of the great Hindu god Śiva ... attests to the philosophical ideal of [advaita] nonduality [or monism]. Masculine and feminine are not viewed as separate dimensions of the divine, rather they identify the belief in god as the absolute union (*yoga*) of god and goddess.” (1) Unconcerned with the literal truth of the representation, Goldberg focuses on articulating the religious and philosophical significance of the representation itself.

It is, for example, a representation and insight that (nearly) eschews any basis for the prevalence of patriarchy present in others religious traditions since the masculine and feminine are intrinsic and insolubly linked in the monistic nature of the divine. I say “nearly” because even here, as Goldberg notes, the feminine is depicted on the left hand side—a backhanded relegation to an inferior position. “The pairing of the benign and the terrific aspects of deity from among a vast range of homologous references are cast in anthropomorphic idiom as male and female to illustrate the enduring philosophical belief in a single, undivided principle that embraces all existent entities.” (3) Nevertheless, Goldberg notes that “even though androgynous models of god in Indian tradition represent the feminine as half the body of god, they are still the expression of male orthodox discourse.” (6)

Goldberg sees monism as the ideal behind the representation of Ardhanārīśvara. This is understandable given the Vedic emphasis on nonduality. But this “undivided” and all embracing principle might also be seen as fundamentally pantheistic—meaning one could place the emphasis on the all-embracing unity rather than ontological nonduality.

Despite the monistic and pantheistic ideas that seem to be at the core of Ardhanārīśvara representations, Goldberg claims that tradition interprets this God theistically. “In her creative capacity she dominates Śiva as spirit. Śakti has always been understood as energy, power, creativity, and female strength in Indian tradition. One interpretation understands this as inferior ... while another reading of the same narrative simultaneously exhibits her role as empowering ... tradition recognizes both readings as theistic interpretations of a reality that claims points beyond it” (Goldberg 2002). (7) While the theistic, monistic and pantheistic strands associated with Ardhanārīśvara are not easily separated (and why even try?), it is clear that the theism associated with this god is quite different from Western theism which maintains both God as transcendent and ontologically distinct from the world.

What then is the significance of such a representation? Goldberg conjectures: “Ardhanārīśvara offers a model of god for the purpose of spiritual practice called *sādhanā* ... the god and goddess are regarded as inclusive, inseparable, and nondual.

They represent ... the evolution and dissolution of consciousness through a praxis-oriented philosophical tradition." (7) Furthermore, "[The] equanimity of dia-metrical polarities or contrary cognitive conceptual and intuitive notions represented by Ardhanārīśvara ... is not only common among the various schools of Indian religion and philosophy, but is also considered the goal of self-realization" (pp. 3–4).

What is meant by "equanimity" here? Goldberg is claiming that what is represented in this androgynous model of god points the way towards the self-realization of one's nature which in turn involves overcoming the illusion of duality necessary for enlightenment. Talk about the need to get in touch in touch with one's "feminine side, and vice versa!" "The image of Ardhanārīśvara speaks directly to the fragmentation and alienation that comes with the fact that a type of false consciousness arising from notions of subject-object duality is inscribed on every human consciousness. Ardhanārīśvara provides a subtle model of reality and ... esoteric guide for overcoming the fragmentation and alienation that human beings feel." (5) As we will see, this alleged overcoming of alienation and fragmentation has been cited as one of the principle attractions of a monistic worldview.

In 1720 John Toland wrote the *Pantheisticon: or The Form of Celebrating the Socratic-Society* in Latin. He (possibly) coined the term "pantheist" and used it as a synonym for "Spinozist." In "How Spinozistic Was Toland's Pantheism?," Edwin Curley examines Toland's account of pantheism and whether he is right to associate it with Spinoza's views. The essay offers insights not just into the relation between Toland and Spinoza, but also into notions of pantheism.

Although pantheism has often been equated with atheism, Curley distinguishes between the two. "[T]he pantheist insists that even if there is no god in the sense in which the major monotheistic religions typically conceive of God, still, in some important sense there is a god." Toland, he claims is not always clear about the distinction.

If Toland is interpreted as claiming (i) a strict identification between God and the world (God is the world), then his view is not Spinozistic. If, on the other hand, Toland is interpreted as saying that (ii) God is to be equated with a force or divine principle or power immanent in the world—an all-inclusive divine Unity—then this may be seen as at least loosely consistent with Spinoza's view. Although both views are present at one time or another in Toland's various writings, at least in his *Pantheisticon*, Toland seems less concerned with the metaphysics of monism, the issue of strict identification, or even accurately expositing Spinoza, than with the implications of conceiving of the world as an all-inclusive divine unity (or God). If so, then it is (ii) that most closely represents his views.

It is also the grounds on which he is able to claim an affinity with Spinoza. Spinoza's account of *natura naturata* (that which is *not* identified with God by Spinoza) may suffice for a kind of pantheism. Curley says,

... to the extent that Toland understands pantheism to be the idea that the universe is God, his pantheism is one Spinoza would have rejected. But.... Sometimes he says that God is "the force and energy of the whole," or that God is what animates the universe. When he uses this language, his conception of pantheism might be better captured by the formula that God is not identical with the universe, but immanent in it. That's something Spinoza clearly held: E I P18 affirms that God is the immanent cause of all things.

It is unlikely that this sort of immanence, apart from further explanation, would satisfy either Toland's notion of pantheism or that of pantheists in general. Curley, however, does go on to hypothesize that the pantheistic notion of God's immanence might be compatible and explained in terms of Spinoza's metaphysics. He says that according to Spinoza,

[T]he power of individual finite things is part of the infinite power of God *or* Nature.... God is, or has, an infinite power of acting which finds expression in infinitely many finite things, whose individual powers are contained in his power. This is the sense in which God is the immanent cause of all things. To the extent that Toland thinks of pantheism in this way, as involving the presence in particular finite things of a power which is part of the power of the whole of Nature, I think he articulates a genuinely spinozistic form of pantheism.

What is crucial (normative) to pantheism in my view is the idea that there exists a unity that is in some sense divine. This idea is at times present in what Toland says. "In a Word, every Thing in the Earth is organic ... this justifies my Answer to a German Inn-Keeper, who impertinently importuned me to tell him, what Countryman I was? The Sun is my Father, the Earth my Mother, the World's my country, and all Men are my relations."³

Another affinity with Spinoza is that Toland rejected the idea of eternal damnation as necessary to salvation. Curley says, "It's this willingness to allow others to disagree—an indifference of temper, not of opinion—which constitutes the indifference Toland recommends in all religious disputes. To the extent that he gives us any clues to the content of his pantheism in this work, it is in relation to that indifference." There is a link here to Spinoza's equanimity in matters of religious difference, though how it connects with the metaphysical views of either Toland or Spinoza's monism is unclear. Perhaps this "live and let live" attitude is grounded instead (or also) in Spinoza's subjection to religious discrimination and intolerance. In 1656 the Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam excommunicated him. This "indifference in temper" (not in opinion) is particularly central to the pantheistic ethos espoused in the work of those writers and poets that have at times been associated with pantheism (Emerson; Walt Whitman, D.H. Lawrence, and Robinson Jeffers). It is an attitude that despite protestations is antithetical to orthodox theistic traditions even today (though of course not to all orthodox theists). They remain discriminatory, sexist, all too often violent and generally insistent on others living in accordance with what their God instructs them to do (hence no gay marriage, abortion, euthanasia etc).⁴

Even so, there remain differences between Toland's pantheism and Spinoza's views. One is about the nature of God. In a way reminiscent of Leibniz, Toland thought that God was providential, and in fact insured that everything that occurred was somehow for the best. Curley says that "Toland ... conceives of God as a teleological agent. God is a force or energy which always 'tends towards the best end'; 'the best reason and most perfect order regulate(s) all things in the Universe.' This is very unspinozistic." The idea that God acts purposely is more theistic than pantheistic. While it may be assuring to think of the "force" as always tending "towards the best," depending on just how it is interpreted, it seems an ad hoc and problematic characterization of pantheism. It should not for example, be interpreted

³ Toland (1976) (reprint 1751), pp. 32-33.

⁴ See Pataki (2007).

as excluding or explaining away the moral evil present in the world as Sankara's system allegedly does under some interpretations.

Toland is here also attributing consciousness and foresight to God much as in theism. This introduces a host of problems associated with theism—not the least of which is the problem of evil. In a sense, Toland can be seen as suggesting that evil is illusory—at least when seen in the context of the bigger picture. There seems to be a similarity here as well with Spinoza for whom the perception of evil is ultimately a failure to see things as necessary and from God's point of view—that is *sub species aeternitatis* (“under the aspect of eternity”). There are similarities here with Nagarjuna and perhaps with Sankara, though Puligandla would likely disagree. It is questionable, however, whether pantheism per se need be saddled with any view that denies the reality of evil as such—that is not just “real” as experienced from our finite perspective, but real.

At times Toland's description of pantheism sounds closer to Ramanuja's views than Spinoza's. Curley quotes Toland as saying that “Strabo [the Greek geographer and historian] affirms … that Moses was a Pantheist … for he presents him as teaching that there is no Divinity distinct from matter and the fabric of this world, and that Nature itself, or the Universe, is the one and supreme God, whose parts we may call individual Creatures, and the whole, if you wish, the Creator.” Toland here equates God with Nature, and both with Spinozism, in way at least reminiscent of Ramanuja's account of the relation between the Creator and the individual.

Curley does not discuss whether the various possible formulations of Spinoza's and Toland's views that surface in his essay are more or less significant to pantheism, nor does he discuss how any of these variations might relate to practices associated with them. The relation between theory and practice—the difference that monism makes religiously or practically speaking—is, unfortunately in my view, a focus in only one of the essays.

Monism and Pantheism

Let me return, then, to the ways monism may be religiously and philosophically significant. What difference might monism make?⁵

In an essay in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (1925–1926)* J.A. Smith claims

“...the problem of the One and the Many ... is so ancient that I am glad to be able to quote unchallengeable evidence that it is still modern, still alive, still troubling and urgent ... if a man's decided Monism or decided Pluralism is the sincere and genuine expression of his life ... it is the best evidence not only of what the rest of his opinions are, but also of what are his interests, his concerns, his feelings, sentiments, emotions, his desires and aspirations, his aims, purposes and volitions.⁶

⁵ See Levine (1994), section 2.3.

⁶ Smith 1925–1926, pp. 7–8. Smith quotes William James, *Pragmatism*: “I suspect ... that in but few of you has this problem occasioned sleepless nights ... I myself have come, by long brooding over it, to consider it the most central of all philosophical problems ... I mean by this that if you know whether a man is a decided monist or a decided pluralist, you perhaps know more about the rest of his opinions that if you give him any other name ending in ist.”

While it is perhaps plausible to make such a claim about a person being a Republican or Democrat, what could be behind such an odd claim with regard to monism?

Although, like Spinoza, some pantheists may also be monists, and monism may even be essential to some versions of pantheism (like Spinoza's), pantheists are generally not monists. Like most people they are pluralists. They believe, plausibly, that there are many things and kinds of things and many different kinds of value; they just think all of them are unified in some way which is divine in some sense. Even in Spinoza's case, explaining his pantheism in terms of his substance monism glosses the far more significant, pantheistically speaking, evaluative implications he sees as entailed by monism for his pantheistic metaphysic.

Unity as "unity of substance" is the usual meaning of the few monistic pantheists, who are explicit about their monism or sense of Unity (i.e. Spinoza is the exception not the rule). Although Spinoza's monistic view that there can be only one infinite substance (i.e. God) is clear, its relevance to Unity is not—at least not in *Ethics I*. The implications of substance monism, and its significance particularly for human happiness, is the subject of *the Ethics* in its entirety.

Most pantheists are not explicit about their notions of Unity or substance, and their idea of Unity is more difficult to discern than that of substance. The pantheists idea of substance, *if any*, is just what is philosophically current. Spinoza notwithstanding, pantheists are not usually monists. Lao Tzu, Hegel, probably Plotinus, and certainly Walt Whitman, Robinson Jeffers, etc. were not monists.

For example, Aristotle considered God to be something that is a substance in a "primary" way and also the primary kind of substance. Noting that this is a controversial interpretation of Aristotle's view on God, Hamlyn says,

... one kind of substance—that which is exemplified in God and perhaps only in God ... is said to be substance primarily. If this is his [Aristotle's] view, it follows that there is a sense in which by studying God one studies the primary kind of substance, and by studying substance one studies the primary kind of entity—so that in God one finds the best view of what it is to be an entity. Aristotle could thus say (*Metaphysics E (6).1*) that theology and the science of being-*qua*-being can be identified with each other⁷ (p. 38).

Given this view of God and substance there is a rationale for attempting to interpret Unity in terms of substance. God is seen as the primary substance and kind of entity—the only one that provides its own reason for existence, and is capable of independent existence (i.e. depends on nothing else for existence). So God, as a substance, is ontologically basic. (Descartes and Spinoza hold views similar to these.) If, like Spinoza, one also believes that there is, or can be, only one substance or God, then interpreting Unity in terms of substance may be attractive. Given such monistic beliefs, along with Aristotle's idea of God as the primary substance, grounding Unity in these ontological features seems natural—even though the question of why these features are relevant to Unity remains. The reason they appear relevant in this case is not primarily because there is only one substance, but because

⁷Hamlyn (1984, p. 38).

that substance is identified as God. Yet this suggests that in such cases Unity is not finally explained in terms of substance monism, but in terms of the nature of that one substance which is God.

Barring adherence to a radical “appearance/reality distinction” (A/R), a reliance on the monistic one/one kind distinction to claim Unity in virtue of substance₂ (substance as “kind”) instead of substance₁ (substance as “concrete individual thing”) is not useful. If we are inclined to admit a plurality of substances₁, then we are similarly inclined to admit a plurality of substances₂. Not everything appears to be made of the same thing anymore than everything appears to be one thing. One must accept A/R to claim that the things we ordinarily regard as distinct substances, or kinds of substances, are not really distinct.

There is no reason to dismiss all versions of A/R out of hand. For one thing, mind/body dualism may rest upon such a distinction, and not all dualisms are vestiges of an unacceptable cartesianism. In fact, it is materialist analyses of mind, rather than dualist ones that usually rely upon A/R. Surely our thoughts *appear* to be something fundamentally different than brain states. Yet reductive materialists have claimed that thoughts *are* strictly identical to brain states. Nevertheless, the particular type of A/R that must be accepted to maintain that what we regard as substances₁ or₂ are not what we take them to be is a deep and pervasive application of the distinction. Ordinary phenomenological criteria of individuation would have to be taken as completely different from, and in conflict with, criteria of individuation based upon metaphysical ontological rationale. The acceptance of this pervasive type of A/R rests on a criterion of individuation that is part of prior metaphysical presuppositions.

In their most plausible forms, theories that rely on A/R (e.g. Śāṅkara) do not conflict with ordinary accounts of the phenomenological content of experience. Experience of the phenomenal world cannot, in any straightforward way, count as evidence against these theories. Because such theories maintain that they accord with ordinary views concerning the phenomenological content of experience, they can suppose that whatever occurs in terms of that experience cannot count against their theories. This is *why* these theories, though they include A/R, are *prima facie* the most plausible. Nevertheless, even in systems that rely on a strong A/R distinction, Unity (or the significance of monism) generally is ascribed and explained on evaluative grounds, not on the basis of an obtuse monism.

Whether or not substance monism is ontologically necessary for Unity or some other kind of religious significance, an explanation of its relevance requires something extra-ontological to be cited. The same is true of any factual ground for Unity. Delineating metaphysical or modal properties of a substance, or anything else, does not make its significance obvious. So what if everything is made from one self-subsistent immutable substance? So what if everything is really a single organism when considered macrocosmically? Why would this be religiously rather than merely metaphysically significant? What is the evaluative or religious significance of natural features of the totality that pantheism claims is central to Unity? Because value must be partly constitutive of Unity or figure in an explanation of the religious/philosophical relevance of monism, it must be explained in evaluative terms.

Without it one is only left with this or that fact as a basis for positing such significance, but no adequate account of the relevance of the basis, and so no account of, for example, pantheistic Unity itself. Unable to read your comment here.

This has implications for theism with its insistence on the radical ontological differentiation between God and the world. If these remarks about unity in the logical and ontological senses as they relate to monism and pantheism are correct, then, similarly, the differentiation between God and the world insisted upon by theism should be inconsequential in and of itself. Its significance must be explained in terms that show why the differentiation is of consequence, and not by citing further facts (e.g., about how things are constituted). Theism attempts to do just this in terms of doctrines of creation, sin, and salvation. Perhaps the relevance of substance to Unity can be explained analogously. If so, Unity will not be accounted for by substance or other ontological or logical notions. It will be explained partly by what there is, but also in terms of connections among things and their value.

The discussion thus far has focused on trying to determine a rational significance for monism—something that would make it religiously significant and important. It might be that this is the wrong place to look. Religious views must be emotionally and not merely intellectually convincing. Religion is grounded in feeling and emotion more than it is in rational argument. As elsewhere, it is the emotions (needs and desires) that are the basis of—that generate—beliefs rather than the other way around. If so, we should look for what the emotional significance of monism (or pantheism) might be. This takes us back to William James. Arthur Lovejoy says,

...pantheistic pathos. That it should afford so many people a peculiar satisfaction to say that All is One is, as William James once remarked, a rather puzzling thing. What is there more beautiful or more venerable about the numeral one than about any other number? ... [W]hen a monistic philosophy declares, or suggests, that one is oneself a part of the universal Oneness, a whole complex of obscure emotional responses is released ... psychologically the force of the monistic pathos is in some degree intelligible ... It affords ... a welcome sense of freedom, arising from a triumph over, or an absolution from, the troublesome cleavages and disjunctions of things.⁸

If so, then the religious and practical significance of a monistic metaphysic requires an extra-philosophical explanation. It requires a psychological and functional explanation. What needs does such a view fulfill and what role do such beliefs play in one's psychic economy? Those who look to find its meaning and importance in terms of an account of monism itself—or only in terms of monism, are missing the point.⁹

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God and Ultimate Reality: An Analytical Interpretation of Śaṅkara's Philosophy

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Let me state at the very outset that many thinkers—ancient, modern and contemporary—far more erudite and immensely more competent than I, have reflected upon the teaching of Śaṅkara and propounded insightful and interesting interpretations of his philosophy. And it is obvious that several volumes could be written under the title of this paper. My task here, however, is far humbler and much less ambitious. I propose to concentrate on a few difficult and controversial points in Śaṅkara's philosophy and suggest interpretations, which will simultaneously withstand rational scrutiny and be in full harmony with the spirit and goal of his thought. If I am even modestly successful in this objective, my efforts will have been amply rewarded.

It is my considered judgment that Śaṅkara's philosophy is the most faithful interpretation of the Upaniṣads, in the sense that his version remains closest to the texts themselves, and is therefore fully consistent with the main theme of the teachings of the Upaniṣadic sages. What is the main focus of the Upaniṣadic teaching? It may be expressed as follows: Brahman (Ātman), or ultimate (transcendental) reality, is non-dual. This means that nothing can, in principle, exist apart from Brahman; there can be nothing besides Brahman—whatever exists or can exist is Brahman. In a word, Brahman is existence, actual as well as potential. That Brahman is the sole reality is what is precisely conveyed by such aphorisms as *tad ekam, advitīyam* (one who has no second), and so on.

The following questions immediately arise: if Brahman is the non-dual reality—besides which nothing can exist—how is one to account for the undeniable fact of our experience of plurality, the world of phenomena? How and why does the non-dual Brahman appear to us as many—the variety and multiplicity of phenomena, external as well as internal? Does the non-dual Brahman undergo some change resulting in the world of phenomena? Or, does the non-dual Brahman only appear

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to us as many, without really undergoing any change? In order to answer questions such as these, Śaṅkara employs the concepts of *māyā* and *adhyāsa*. In this context, *māyā* is to be understood in the sense of the power of Brahman manifesting itself as the world of phenomena, as well as ignorance (*avidyā*). I am fully aware that the terms *māyā* and *avidyā* are given additional meanings by some thinkers, but those meanings are derivative and therefore are not relevant to this paper. Rather, my concern here is with their primary meanings, set forth above. *Adhyāsa* is superimposing on the formless, nameless, non-dual Brahman; various forms and names which logically imply judgments of attribution and relation. First, I shall deal with this superimposition.

To the best of my understanding, no thinker in the West—until Kant—had even remotely hinted at the concept of *adhyāsa* (or suggested anything vaguely similar to it). What was the reason for this? I submit it was because the concept of *adhyāsa* can only arise from a certain presupposition; it cannot be found in a tradition where that presupposition is absent (or whose dominant presuppositions are the contraries of it). The dominant presupposition in the Western tradition—by and large, and particularly since Aristotle—is realism, the view that there independently exists a world constituted of certain entities, each possessing certain properties and standing in certain relations to others. But, in sharp contrast, Śaṅkara belongs to a tradition whose distinguishing traits are: (i) obsession with the fact that we are conscious beings, and (ii) uncompromising non-dualism. Therefore, if the non-dual Brahman is formless and nameless, one wonders how it is that we experience variety and multiplicity, and produce knowledge of it. Śaṅkara's answer is *adhyāsa*.

Presently, I am not at all worried whether this is exactly how Śaṅkara arrived at the concept of *adhyāsa*; rather, what I am concerned with—and quite seriously so—is whether or not this way of looking at the place of *adhyāsa* in Śaṅkara's philosophy is plausible, reasonable, and is in full accord with his thought. Here is not the proper place to present a dogmatic defense or a fierce refutation of Śaṅkara's philosophy; rather, the task is to look at his philosophy from an analytic standpoint. Thus, I present the following thesis: that reality is formless, nameless and non-dual is a necessary condition for the arising of the concept of *adhyāsa*; where this condition is not fulfilled, the concept of *adhyāsa* cannot arise. But then, one might ask, how did Kant come about something that at least in some respects is similar to *adhyāsa*? The answer is that Kant asked the question, "How is the experience of *objects* possible?" Note carefully that this question can only be asked by a thinker who calls into question the reigning presuppositions of his tradition, and through laborious inquiry realizes the distinction between appearance and reality, between the phenomenal and noumenal. This distinction parallels the Advaitic distinction between the non-dual Brahman and the world of phenomena (appearances). Thus, it is clear that Kant's discovery of something similar, at least in some respects to *adhyāsa*, does not contradict my thesis—if anything, it confirms it. Do not misunderstand me; I am not saying that Kant's noumena and Śaṅkara's Brahman are identical, nor am I claiming that the motive force behind their philosophies is the same. What I am calling attention to is that, whatever the differences between Śaṅkara and Kant, they both assert a distinction between how things appear to us

and what they are in themselves, and that such a distinction is a necessary condition for *adhyāsa*—the contribution of the human mind in the enterprise of knowledge.

I shall digress now in order to make another observation, as a matter of comparison between Śaṅkara and Kant. This observation pertains to a central aspect of both their philosophies. We all know that for Kant, the transcendental unity of apperception, which I take to be none other than pure, objectless consciousness—*Ātman*—is a postulate of pure reason to account for the fact of our experience of objects. In other words, the transcendental unity of apperception is a necessary condition for the possibility of our experience of objects, and our experience of objects is a fact. If so, it is indeed paradoxical to say that the transcendental unity of apperception is merely a postulate of reason. The point here is simply this: how can something be a fact unless its necessary condition is also a fact? It is a logical howler to claim just P from the premise “If P, then Q” without also claiming Q; “Q is a necessary condition for P” means: if not-Q, then not-P. Put directly, Kant cannot consistently claim on the one hand the fact of our experience of objects and hold on the other that the transcendental unity of apperception is merely a postulate of pure reason. It is of no avail to reply that the claim is a postulate; that leaves open the question of the existence (facticity) of the transcendental unity of apperception. For if it does not exist, there cannot be the fact of our experience of objects; that is, something cannot be without the fulfillment of its necessary conditions. Here, then, is the difference between Śaṅkara and Kant: what for the latter is merely a postulate of reason is for the former the absolute, unconditioned, non-dual reality; that is, for Śaṅkara, if the existence of anything at all is certain—beyond any doubt—it is *Ātman* (Brahman).

How does one account for this vast and pivotal difference? The answer, as I see it, lays in the fact that Śaṅkara's tradition—Upaniṣadic—is first and foremost a phenomenological tradition, *par excellence*. What do I mean by this? I mean that the Upaniṣadic seers and Śaṅkara are not primarily concerned with metaphysics, understood in the sense of constructing abstract intellectual systems that aim to describe through categories what a given thinker construes to be reality; rather, they are primarily phenomenological ontologists (fundamental ontologists, if you prefer this term). This means that the central truth of Upaniṣadic teaching is that the ultimate, transcendental, non-dual reality is objectless consciousness cannot be established through the construction of some subtle and elaborate metaphysical system. Rather, it is certified by direct phenomenological inquiry. It is precisely this phenomenological inquiry that is missing in Kant's philosophy (or, for that matter, in the entire Western tradition). Is it any wonder, then, that for Kant man has only sensible but not intellectual intuition, which is possessed only by God? This in turn means that, according to Kant, man can know neither the transcendental unity of apperception nor the noumenal. It is worth remembering here that for Kant “noumena” is a limiting concept, and therefore only regulative but not constitutive.

In contrast, for Śaṅkara, *Ātman* (Brahman) is to be known phenomenologically and existentially, thus, authentically. It is not to be known abstractly as a metaphysical conclusion flowing from equally metaphysical premises, say, as an Aristotelian substance, Parmenides' “the One,” or a Whiteheadian process tied up with the primordial and consequential natures of God, and so on. This observation stems from the

distinction between epistemic (dualistic) and non-epistemic (non-dualistic) modes of knowing, a distinction central to Śaṅkara's philosophy. Now, however, I want to return to *adhyāsa*.

The main point I wish to make here is that the concept of *adhyāsa* is a profound epistemological insight. It has quite extraordinary and most interesting implications. Let us start with a statement of the principle of *adhyāsa*: the knowledge we produce of the phenomenal world—the world of our senses and intellect—is the result of our superimpositional activities, which are dependent upon the function of our psycho-physiological constitution. It follows from this proposition that beings constituted differently engage in different kinds of superimpositional (*ashyāsaic*) activity, and consequently produce different systems of knowledge of the world(s) of their experience. Each kind of beings is capable of a certain range of perceptions and conceptions; and at any given time, a given kind of beings actualize only a part of their potential range of perceptions and conceptions. This systematic articulation of the superimpositional activities, and the various principles and presuppositions on which these activities are based—theorizing and experimenting—is none other than the articulation of a categorial framework (which is perceptual-conceptual). I am sure you are aware that the notions of categorial framework and categorial knowledge (and its relative character) have in recent years been in wide currency in Western philosophical circles, and continue to receive increasing recognition and support.¹ However, I am not hereby implying that Śaṅkara needs support from the West (or, for that matter, anywhere else). Even if philosophers in the West who now support this insight reject it sometime in the future, their rejection cannot be based upon any demonstrable grounds, but can only be due to extra-intellectual reasons. Someone may now feel provoked to ask, “Are you claiming the principle of *adhyāsa* is irrefutable?” My answer is a resounding “Yes,” and I exhort the questioner to ponder as to what it takes to refute it. He or she will discover that any attempt to refute the principle of *adhyāsa* presupposes it. There can be no *logical-rational* way out of it, although there certainly are ways to transcend it—the most important of them being the phenomenological, via the cessation of mental modifications. It is to be emphasized, however, that the fact that there is such a way of transcending *adhyāsa* can itself be *logically* demonstrated; superimposition is inextricably bound up with mental modifications—that is, mental modifications are a necessary condition for superimposition, and it follows from this that where there are no mental modifications, there can be no superimposition—and *Ātman* (Brahman) as pure objectless consciousness is attained upon the cessation of mental modifications. It is worth noting here that it is believed in the Western tradition, without any critical and experimental investigation, that mental modifications cannot be brought to a cessation. No wonder, Kant, along with other Western philosophers, held that man is devoid of what he termed “intellectual intuition,” the capacity to know how things are in themselves.

¹ For a thorough and excellent discussion of the concept of categorical framework, see Körner (1970).

In this context, two comments are in order: (1) Kant teaches that God alone has intellectual intuition; and since man does not have this intuition, there is a radical distinction (gulf) between man and God, for Kant and the Western tradition in general. In keen contrast, for Śaṅkara and Upaniṣadic tradition in general, man is fully capable of experience and knowledge of Brahman (*Ātman*). Consequently, the attainment of this knowledge, along with the proclamation “I am Brahman” is the pinnacle of human achievement—summum bonum—for Śaṅkara, while such a claim is blasphemous in the West. (2) It is noteworthy that while he teaches that the noumenal is wholly unknowable to man, Kant nevertheless goes on to talk about the noumenal in the plural—as witness, “Noumena.” But on what grounds is Kant entitled to speak of the noumenal in the plural? They seem to be the following: since in the domain of phenomena (appearances) we can correctly talk in terms of plurality—variety of phenomena—Kant thinks that corresponding to each phenomenon there is a noumenon, and since there is undeniably a plurality of phenomena, there must be a domain of plurality of noumena. But these grounds are highly questionable and crumble upon closer examination. Thus, if one cannot, in principle, know what a given thing (say, X) is in itself, and what another thing (say, Y) is in itself, how can one talk about two things-in-themselves? How is one to distinguish numerically between one thing-in-itself and another thing-in-itself? They can only be so distinguished if they are spatio-temporal entities (which means they will necessarily have properties); but spatio-temporal locations and attributes can only be had by phenomena. Therefore, it is simply absurd to talk about things-in-themselves (rigorously speaking, the very concept of *thing* belongs in the domain of phenomena, of plurality). It is clear, then, that the noumenal is simply devoid of things, that is, devoid of plurality. In a word, the noumenal is non-dual, which is precisely the teaching of the Upaniṣads and Śaṅkara.

I come now to a consideration of *māyā* and *avidyā*. For my present purposes, there is no need to draw any fine distinction between *māyā* and *avidyā*. I shall, therefore, treat the two concepts as essentially synonymous. What this means is that the questions concerning *māyā* and *avidyā* are essentially the same. Thus the question, “Why does the non-dual Brahman appear as many?” is the same as “Why is there *māyā*?”. Similarly, the question “Is Brahman the locus of *māyā*? ” is the same as “Is Brahman the locus of *avidyā*? ” As such, when I ask myself questions about *māyā*, I am simultaneously addressing questions about *avidyā*.

What are the vexing questions in regard to *māyā*? They are: What is the origin and basis of *māyā*? When does *māyā* arise? It is well-known that, according to Śaṅkara, *māyā*—the phenomenal world constituted of plurality of objects and selves—and *avidyā*, being neither real nor unreal, are inexplicable (*anirvachaniya*). However, some of his followers, not satisfied with the Ācārya’s position, went on to advance their own explanations of *māyā*. Therefore, there arose not only the two prominent schools of *Bhāmati* and *Vivarana* and their adherents, but also a number of thinkers, each of whom proposed his own explanation of *māyā*. It is not my purpose in this work to discuss any of the post-Śaṅkara interpretations and explanations of *māyā*, *avidyā*, and the being of the phenomenal world. Rather, what I wish to do is defend Śaṅkara’s claim that *māyā* is inexplicable in any sense of “explicable.” Any genuine

explanation must distinguish between the explanandum and the explanans; in the present context, the explanandum is the fact of the existence of *māyā*, *avidyā* and the phenomenal world. Assume that one has explained *māyā* through Īśvara, but then one has to explain Īśvara; let us further assume that one has explained Īśvara through something else, say, X. But now X has to be explained, and so on. The point here is that no matter how far we go explaining one after the other, there is always something left yet to be explained. Thus, this way of explaining can only lead us down the path of infinite regress, which means that there can, in principle, be no terminus to the chain of explanations. Another way to respond is to take up the question in the form, “Why does the non-dual Brahman appear to us as many?” One might answer by saying such appearance is due to *māyā*, the power of Brahman by which Brahman is concealed and projected as the world of forms—phenomena. But one can go on to ask why the power of Brahman is such that it would veil Brahman and project the world of phenomena. This question concerns Brahman itself, for the power has no existence apart from Brahman. And what explanation can one offer to this inquiry? Since Brahman is existence and there can, in principle, be nothing other than Brahman, no explanans are seemingly available to explain the explanandum, the obscuring of Brahman and projection of the world.

The most one can say is that Brahman so willed Its power. But this does not terminate questioning, for one can now quite sensibly ask, “Why did Brahman so will Its power?” I can easily imagine a crowd of dogmatic metaphysicians shouting in unison, “Because Brahman has a plan.” We have now reached a point where the reply is not worthy of serious consideration, for it is indistinguishable from the theological dogmas of Christians and other theists. The upshot of all this is that demands for explanations are sensible only where there is a plurality. And in regard to Brahman—the non-dual reality, formless, nameless and seamless—any demand for an explanation can only arise out of a grave error. This error consists of thinking Brahman is one among many objects (phenomena), and with respect to the world of phenomena—the domain of *māyā*—we genuinely explain one phenomenon by other phenomena, mistakenly thinking *māyā* can be similarly explained, as the power of Brahman, which conceals itself and projects the world. The point here, then, is that *māyā*, as is clear from its root-meaning, pertains to the measurable, the thinkable, the categorizable; but not to Brahman itself—the immeasurable, the unthinkable and the uncategorizable. That *māyā* cannot be explained from the standpoint of any categorial framework—perceptual-conceptual—only goes to show that Brahman cannot be known through any categorial framework. Put differently, *māyā* is at once the measure of the knowable (the world of phenomena) and the unknowability of Brahman through anything belonging in the province of *māyā*. It should be emphasized that, because *māyā* cannot be explained, it points to the limitations of epistemic ways of knowing Brahman but not to any limitations of Brahman itself. In doing so, this fact also serves to make us realize that Brahman is to be known through non-epistemic, non-dualistic ways of knowing. Yes, *māyā* is indeed inexplicable, but the fact of its inexplicability should awaken us to the non-epistemic ways of knowing Brahman. This is the positive function of the inexplicability of *māyā*.

It is of the utmost importance to realize the experience of *māyā*, as well as the demands to explain *māyā*, can only arise from within the domain of *māyā*.

The reason for this is that *māyā* totally disappears in the experience of Brahman, and there is nothing to be explained; therefore, the demand for explication also disappears. What happens to *māyā* in the experience of Brahman? *Māyā* is simply absorbed in Brahman. Where else can it go? Nowhere else, for there can be no anywhere else. This is the meaning of the teaching that Brahman is the locus of *māyā*; *māyā* has its origin as well as its cessation in Brahman.

I shall now analogically illustrate—with a few remarks on Sāṅkhya and modern cosmology—the difficulties which are, in principle, insurmountable in explaining *māyā*. In the Sāṅkhya system, *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* are two ultimates, radically different from each other. And, according to Sāṅkhya, prior to its evolution, *prakṛti* exists in a state of dynamic equilibrium among the three *guṇas*, and any disturbance of this state of equilibrium triggers the evolution of the *prakṛti*—resulting in space, time, matter, mind, etc. But what disturbs the state of dynamic equilibrium and triggers the evolution of *prakṛti*, resulting in space, time, matter, mind, etc.? Sāṅkhya, being thoroughly atheistic in its original formulation, is not entitled to appeal to God; nor can it claim *puruṣa* triggered the evolution of *prakṛti*, for if on their own terms *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* are radically and absolutely different from each other, no relation whatsoever can obtain between them. Thus, Sāṅkhya is stuck and should admit that the evolution of *prakṛti* is inexplicable.

Turning to modern cosmology, we are told that with the Big Bang of the primordial Black Hole, the world of phenomena came into being; that is, prior to the Big Bang, there was neither space nor time nor matter and so on. But the question is: What caused the Big Bang? It is interesting to note that in their writing cosmologists deal with the situation *after* the Big Bang but not *prior* to the event. However, in order to explain the Big Bang, one needs to know the conditions prior to it, and there seems to be no way of knowing the conditions prior to the Big Bang. Thus, it seems we cannot know these conditions (if they exist at all); for our concepts, laws, and theories apply only to the world brought about by the Big Bang but not to anything prior to the event itself. In fact, none of our precepts and concepts—categorial frameworks—can enable us to penetrate the primordial Black Hole. That is, we can, in principle, have absolutely no idea as to the conditions inside the primordial Black Hole prior to the Big Bang. Some cosmologists say whatever caused the Big Bang is the result (effect) of quantum fluctuations within the Black Hole itself. The point of examining these observations is to show that explaining how and why the Big Bang took place is similar to explaining how and why the non-dual Brahman became many. One cannot answer the latter question by appealing to something other than the non-dual Brahman, for there can, in principle, be nothing besides Brahman. *Māyā*, then, is like the modern cosmologist's Big Bang, and the modern cosmologist cannot explain (the cause of) the Big Bang any more than anyone can explain (the cause of) *māyā*. Note, however, whatever caused the Big Bang must be within the primordial Black Hole itself, just as whatever brought about the phenomenal world must be within Brahman itself. It is at this point that one begins to see how *satkāryavāda* has an edge over *asatkāryavāda*, despite Nāgārjuna's devastating critique of both. Why does Śaṅkara subscribe to *satkāryavāda*? I suggest the reason is that *satkāryavāda* is a logical consequence of the central Upaniśadic teaching; namely, reality is non-dual Brahman—that without a second. This means everything has its being in Brahman,

including *māyā*, *avidyā*, and *adhyāsa* (yes, even *Īśvara*). Thus, for example, if Brahman lacked intelligence (whatever that means), one cannot come across in the world a single manifestation of intelligence (for there is nothing else than Brahman to which the observed intelligence can be traced).

Thus, regarding the question whether Brahman is the locus of *māyā*, I answer with an emphatic “Yes,” for it cannot be located anywhere else. That *māyā* is not explicable does not mean that *māyā* has being apart from Brahman. The inexplicability of *māyā* cannot be overcome by hoping to find an explication of it; rather, it can only be overcome by transcending all those modes of being only within which there is an initial experience of *māyā*, and therewith the demand to explain it. Attempts to explicate *māyā* by bringing in *Īśvara*, by tracing it to the individual *jīva*, or by some clever device will not do. Such attempts only result in dogmatic metaphysical systems and theologies, which cannot bear thorough rational scrutiny, the tool of *māyā*. Moreover, such attempts can render one blind to the intrinsic and essential limitations of epistemic—dualistic, *māyāic* ways of knowing Brahman; therefore, there is a need for non-epistemic, non-dualistic, transcendental—ways of knowing Brahman. All of these considerations clearly lead to the conclusion that Śaṅkara was right to reject every effort to rationally explain *māyā*, including the one involving *Īśvara*—as ignorant, absurd, and doomed to failure; instead, he boldly and honestly admitted the inexplicability of *māyā* and that Brahman is its locus.

Before concluding, let me add a few further remarks on Śaṅkara’s philosophy. Many philosophers, Western as well as Indian, classified Śaṅkara as a substance-philosopher. I point out that such a classification is wholly mistaken; for while Śaṅkara would have no objections to employing concepts such as substance, attribute, relation, cause, etc., in dealing with phenomena, he would certainly reject the use of these concepts to characterize the non-dual Brahman (*Ātman*). Have we not been repeatedly told in the Upaniṣads that the non-dual Brahman is formless and nameless? If so, how can anyone think that Brahman is a substance? Worse yet, how can anyone think that Śaṅkara is so lacking in intelligence as to mistakenly think that Brahman is a substance? Certainly, there are passages in the Upaniṣads which talk of Brahman as unchanging, but one must not forget that the same passages also tell us that Brahman is unborn, uncreated, undying, immortal and eternal. How then, is one to understand “unchanging” here? I submit that the import of “unchanging” is to emphasize the non-dual Brahman as transcendental, in contrast to the ever-changing world of phenomena. Thus, “unchanging” does not mean that Brahman is an Aristotelian or Nyāyā-Vaiśeṣika substance. Otherwise, how is one to understand the Upaniṣadic teaching that one can only say what Brahman is not, but not what Brahman is? Further, how is one to make sense of the *Nāsadīya-sūkta*? Moreover, if something is a substance, it must, in principle, be capable of having attributes; and since Brahman cannot have any attributes, it follows that it is not a substance. And yes, I consider it blasphemy and a mark of sheer stupidity to describe Śaṅkara as a substance-philosopher.

If Brahman were substance, and since *Ātman* is identical with Brahman, *Ātman* too would be a substance. But upon the cessation of mental modifications, one discovers that *Ātman* is *no-thing* and hence is neither a substance nor a process nor an attribute nor an *entity* of any kind. *Ātman*, being *no-thing*, is formless and nameless. And this is as it should be, for otherwise, *Ātman* and Brahman cannot be identical.

It is most interesting to note that Vijñānavāda Buddhism proclaims that ultimate reality is of the essence of consciousness. The Vijñānavādins are quite familiar with Nāgārjuna's negative dialectic and his teaching of *śūnyatā* (Emptiness, Void). But the question is: is one to accept the claim that ultimate reality (*nirvāṇa*) is *śūnyatā* (void) purely on intellectual, dialectical grounds? Or, is there a way of experientially certifying this claim? According to Vijñānavādins, there is indeed a way to do it, and it is my contention that it is none other than the way of the Upaniṣads and Śaṅkara. With the elimination of mental modifications, all phenomena vanish away, leaving pure, objectless consciousness as the ultimate residuum. And what better characterization of consciousness can there be than "void"? Yes, *Ātman* (non-dual Brahman) is indeed the void: formless, nameless, and attributeless. Nāgārjuna, despite his scathing critique of *satkāryavāda*, elliptically acknowledges its ultimate validity when he says emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is also fullness; I understand this to mean that emptiness, like the non-dual Brahman of Śaṅkara, is the ground of all phenomena—of all existence. For there can be nothing apart from the emptiness, just as there can be nothing apart from the non-dual Brahman.

Finally, many philosophers glibly describe Śaṅkara's Advaita as "Pantheism." Nothing could be more absurd than this characterization. What does "Pantheism" mean? It means "everything is God," "God" being understood in the sense of creator, preserver, destroyer, and judge of the world. But in Śaṅkara's philosophy it is Īśvara who has these attributes and not Brahman. Could one then describe Śaṅkara's philosophy as "Pan Īśvarasim"? No, that would be positively misleading, for Īśvara is only a secondary reality, a māyāic product. Therefore, the only correct description of Śaṅkara's teaching is "Pan Brahmanism," for have we not heard it reiterated in the Upaniṣads, "All this is Brahman"? I should immediately point out, however, that the phrase "Pan Brahmanism" is redundant; for, if Brahman is the non-dual, all-encompassing reality, what is the point of the prefix "Pan"? None whatsoever. Thus, the most apt characterization of Śaṅkara's philosophy is "Brahmanism," pure and simple. Western religio-philosophical tradition revolves around God, whereas the non-dual Brahman is the hub of Upaniṣadic teaching and Śaṅkara's philosophy. As such, all earnest followers and admirers of Śaṅkara should summarily reject any and every attempt to describe the Ācārya's teaching as "Pantheism."

To conclude, Śaṅkara is the shining spokesman of the ancient and luminous Upaniṣadic tradition. His brilliant systematization of the Upaniṣadic teaching simultaneously does justice to the profound rationality and sublime spirituality of the hoary seers. That people continue to gather in every part of the world—as we have here for inspired consideration of his philosophy—is in itself a ringing testimony to his eternal relevance.

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The World as the Body of God: Rāmānuja on What is Ultimately Real

Sucharita Adluri

Vedānta is one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy. It is a philosophical and exegetical system based on the Upaniṣads (600–300 BCE), texts that are the final sections of the revelatory scripture of the Brahmanical tradition, the Veda.¹ The Upaniṣads, which are the culmination of the Vedic tradition, had a strong deistic tenor, as they posit an infinite, perfect, impersonal, absolute principle, Brahman, as the source and sustenance of all creation. While, several philosophical schools of Vedānta maintained this view of the ultimate reality as an impersonal absolute, others such as the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta of Rāmānuja, identify this infinite Brahman of the Upaniṣads with the deity Viṣṇu. Consequently in his philosophical writings, Rāmānuja utilizes the term ‘Brahman’ and ‘Viṣṇu’ interchangeably to denote the Supreme Being.

This Being in Vedānta philosophy is the supreme cause that itself comes to exist as the effect (world). Known as the theory of *satkāryavāda*, it states that creation does not arise out of non-existence, but is present in some potential form, associated

A few sections of this paper appear in *Scriptural Innovation in Medieval South India: the Śrīvaiṣṇava Articulation of Vedānta*. PhD Dissertation. University of Pennsylvania. 2009. Also, the following abbreviations are used here:

- BhGBh *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja with the Tātparyacandrikā of Vedānta Deśika*. ed. U. Virarāghavācārya. Madras: Ubhaya Vedanta Granthamala. 1972.
- ŚBh *Śrībhāṣya of Rāmānuja with the Śrutaprakāśikā of Sudarśanasūri*. ed. U. Virarāghavācārya. Madras: Ubhaya Vedanta Granthamala. 1967.
- VS *Rāmānuja's Vedārthaśamgraha*. Trans. van Buitenen. Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute (1956).

¹ The Upaniṣads are also known as Vedānta or the end of the Veda and are to be distinguished from the philosophical tradition that arose from their exegesis. Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta is also referred to as theistic Vedānta. Patrick Olivelle's translation of the *Early Upaniṣads* are lucid and accessible.

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with Brahman, prior to creation. As such, cause and effect are not different. However, the exact nature of the world's *association* with Brahman prior to creation and then as the manifest universe, is a point of contention among the various types of Vedānta philosophies.²

Prior to Rāmānuja, Vedānta philosophies explain the relationship of Brahman to the created world in a couple of different ways. Some affirm the reality of Brahman alone and view the created world as an illusion, a mere projection of Brahman.³ Others posit the created world as either a manifestation of Brahman due to the effect of adjuncts such as ignorance or as Brahman itself, in its essential nature, existing as the created.⁴ Neither of these existing interpretations of Brahman's relation to the world appealed to Rāmānuja. According to him, all these interpretations in some way subject the perfect, infinite being to impermanence, change, and other defilements such as karma.

As a member of the theistic Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, in medieval South India that is steeped in traditions of worship and devotion to the supreme deity, Viṣṇu, Rāmānuja identifies the Brahman of the Upaniṣads with the god of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, Viṣṇu. Vedānta perspectives of the world as an illusion or that it is an imperfect manifestation of Brahman ran contrary to Rāmānuja's religious proclivities. For him the world was real, a positive emanation of Brahman/Viṣṇu and though the world could be a source of bondage, it could also offer a means to liberation, through the worship of Viṣṇu. Overall, Rāmānuja was reluctant to dismiss individual experience, religion, and ritual as illusions that keep one bound to the cycle of birth and rebirth. Thus, while maintaining the basic Vedānta premise that a Supreme Being (Brahman/Viṣṇu) is the material cause and instrumental cause of creation, Rāmānuja offers a unique perspective on this Infinite Being's relationship to the world as one of soul to body.⁵

Rāmānuja's earliest interpretation of the Upaniṣads is found in the *Vedārthasamgraha*.⁶ In this work, Rāmānuja does not analyze specific Upaniṣad texts, but provides a comprehensive theology of the contents of the various Upaniṣads as a whole. The *Śrībhāṣya* is his most well-known work and it is a commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtras*, which is a summary text of the doctrines of the Upaniṣads.

²In addition to Viśiṣṭādvaita, other well-known schools of Vedānta philosophy are Advaita Vedānta (non-dualism) of Śaṅkara (eighth century CE); Aupādhika Bhedābheda Vedānta (identity-in-difference) of Bhāskara (tenth century CE); Svābhāvika Bhedābheda Vedānta (identity-in-difference due to Brahman's way of being) of Yādava Prakāśa (~eleventh century CE) Dvaita Vedānta (dualism) of Madhvā (thirteenth century CE). For more on these philosophies, see Bartley (2002), Dasgupta (1991), vol. I–IV, Lott (1980), and Oberhammer and Prakāśa (1997).

³Advaita Vedānta.

⁴Aupādhika Bhedābheda and Svābhāvika Bhedābheda.

⁵For the influence of other Hindu scriptural traditions on Rāmānuja's concept of the soul-body, see Lott (1976). For a comparison of Christian and Hindu understandings of originative causality, see Lipner (1978). Additionally, Anne Hunt Overzee (1992) has explored the symbol of the divine body in the theologies of Rāmānuja and Teilhard de Chardin.

⁶Carman (1974: 50–52).

Due to its axiomatic nature, the *Vedānta Sūtras* could be interpreted to support different types of Vedānta. In contrast to the *Vedārthaśamgraha*, the *Śrībhāṣya* is limited by the structure of the *Vedānta Sūtras* and a long tradition of interpretation.⁷ Rāmānuja's last Vedānta exposition, the *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* is his commentary on the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavadgītā*. Due to the devotional character of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Rāmānuja's commentary stresses the personal, emotional relationship between god and devotee rather than the establishment of a coherent ontological framework that refutes rival Vedānta systems of thought.⁸ Though all of Rāmānuja's expositions address doctrines of his theology, different aspects of his philosophy are stressed in these different works.

Faithful to the Vedānta concept of *satkāryavāda*, Rāmānuja envisions Brahman/Viṣṇu, as both the supreme material and instrumental cause of creation; material causality promulgates Brahman's substantive connection to the universe and His instrumental causality affirms the Infinite Being's agency in world creation. Hence, there is only one entity from which creation derives and it is only one entity that is responsible for activating the creative process. Whereas other Vedānta philosophers dismiss the manifest universe of individual souls and matter as mere illusion, Rāmānuja recognizes creation as the auspicious manifestation (*vibhūti*) of Viṣṇu and sees this as a justification for the 'realness' of the world.⁹ The empirical world, which is the Supreme Being, is real, and our experience of it is real. It has been noted that,

Rāmānuja in particular took seriously the many scriptural images and utterances which seemed naturally to imply that finite being emerges from or issues out of Brahman (Viṣṇu), its permanent ground or substratum and the fund into which it is reabsorbed in dissolution.¹⁰ Philosophically-theologically, this meant that the 'creational gap', i.e., the ontological chasm between infinite and finite being, represented by the *ex-nihilo* of the *creatio* doctrine was eschewed, and that instead an existential 'umbilical cord', i.e., a continuous existential relation between the originative cause (Viṣṇu) and the finite order was posited.¹¹

This aspect of Rāmānuja's method called 'participative' theology highlights the immanence of Viṣṇu within creation through His substantive role as the material cause.¹² Since Viṣṇu as the originative cause *is* creation, the world cannot be an illusion.

From this participative theological perspective, however, because of His very direct connection to the universe, Viṣṇu's divinity comes to be susceptible to the vicissitudes of finite being such as karma.¹³ If creation is a part of Viṣṇu, as Rāmānuja

⁷ Ibid., 52–56.

⁸ Ibid., 60–62.

⁹ Carman (1974: 140–146). For a history of the concept of *vibhūti* in other Hindu traditions, see Oberhammer (2000).

¹⁰ Cornelia Dimmit's *Classical Hindu Mythology* offers a helpful section on the cyclical view of periods of creation followed by periods of dissolution.

¹¹ Lipner (1986: 83).

¹² Ibid., 84.

¹³ Karma denotes actions and consequences of actions which can accumulate over different life-times.

argues, then the qualities of creation such as change, old age, and death, must necessarily affect Viṣṇu Himself. Therefore, it is problematic to hold that the Infinite Being, Viṣṇu, can be the material cause in such a direct originative way as Rāmānuja does.

Rāmānuja's response to this predicament of Viṣṇu's direct material relation with the world is to conceive the world as the Supreme Being's body. Viṣṇu, as the soul of creation, is the controller of His body, the world, yet He is unaffected by the deficiencies of finite being such as change, as these limitations are characteristics of His body only. This 'partitive' theological perspective of Viṣṇu's association with the universe expresses the relation in terms of mode (world) and mode-possessor (Viṣṇu) association, and balances the 'participative' aspect of Rāmānuja's theological methodology.¹⁴ Viewed from these two perspectives, Viṣṇu can remain the material cause (participative view), but He does not suffer the constraints of the empirical realm, as the world is His body (partitive view).

The partitive perspective underscores the point of view that the world does not arise from a part of Viṣṇu, but rather from that part, which exists in a soul-body relationship with Viṣṇu. In this way, the soul-body paradigm conveys a direct connection between finite and Infinite Being, while it maintains the distinctness between the two. Hence, Rāmānuja's Vedānta is termed Viśiṣṭādvaita, unity of the differentiated or the one-ness of individual souls and matter with Brahman. Since the body can denote, by extension, the soul, the world is by extension Viṣṇu as it forms His body. All words such as 'tree', 'animal', and so on, denote these respective entities, but also signify Viṣṇu as He is ultimately the soul of all these beings.

When Rāmānuja affirms that the universe is the body of Viṣṇu, he takes the term 'body' to mean something quite specific:

the soul-body relationship means the inseparable relationship between the supporter and the supported, the controller and the controlled, the lord and the subordinate. A soul is that which entirely supports, controls, and is the lord. A body is that which is entirely supported, controlled, is the subordinate, and is inseparable from the former.¹⁵

Elsewhere in the *Śrībhāṣya*, Rāmānuja adds that the substance that is the controller and supporter must also be a conscious being.¹⁶ According to Rāmānuja, Viṣṇu meets all the criteria that define an entity as the soul of another. Both matter and individual souls are supported and controlled entities existing as inseparable accessories of Viṣṇu. Though the separation of soul from the body is possible in our empirical sense (if the concept of a soul is accepted), in Rāmānuja's view Viṣṇu and the world can never be separated. The significance of conceiving the relation between Viṣṇu and the world as one of soul with its body highlights its complete indissoluble dependence, while maintaining the distinction between the two.

In line with the Hindu conception of the universe as alternating between periods of creation and dissolution, Rāmānuja provides a detailed explanation of how this

¹⁴ Lipner (1986: 85).

¹⁵ VS 76.

¹⁶ ŚBh 2.1.9.

soul-body connection remains unchanged during even cosmological progression or regression. In his discussion of the mechanics of world creation and dissolution, Rāmānuja utilizes the concept of the condition or state of Viṣṇu (*avasthā*) to articulate the inseparable nature of the relation. Manifest and unmanifest creation are viewed simply as changes in the state or condition of Viṣṇu, specifically in that part of Him that is analogous to His body. This allows Rāmānuja to posit a continuous indissoluble relationship between Viṣṇu and the world regardless of the stage of cosmological development.

Even after world dissolution, matter and individual souls exist as the body of Viṣṇu, though in their subtle and unmanifest states. This Rāmānuja calls the causal state of Viṣṇu (*kāraṇāvasthā*). After creation, when only the body of Viṣṇu manifests as the plurality of the universe, it is referred to as the effected state (*kāryāvasthā*) of Viṣṇu. The whole complex of Viṣṇu and His modes is denoted as a single entity and cause and effect are *manifest and unmanifest* conditions of the modes of the one Viṣṇu. As Rāmānuja notes,

...the reality which is the phenomenal world composed of myriad sentient (individual souls) and insentient entities (matter) in their subtle and gross state is a mode (of Viṣṇu).¹⁷

From this standpoint, there is nothing outside of Viṣṇu as all existence is a mode of Viṣṇu Himself. Through the processes of creation and dissolution, a differentiated Viṣṇu remains the supporter and the root of all existence. Though the modes undergo change, Viṣṇu's infinite being is unsullied by matter and the karma that is accrued by the individual souls. Thus, what Rāmānuja considers identity between the cause (Viṣṇu) and effect (universe) are only changes in the condition of certain modes (matter and individual selves) of Viṣṇu that are identifiable as cause and effect (the manifest world).

In addition to Viṣṇu's role as the supreme material cause, He is also understood to be the efficient or instrumental cause of creation. Viṣṇu brings forth manifest creation in divine sport (*līlā*). As Rāmānuja states in the *Śrībhāṣya*, this is analogous to a great ruler, who sees no need to display his valor or sovereignty when he engages in a game or sport.¹⁸ In this scenario of cosmic play, the human condition is dependent on a being's accumulation of karma. Viṣṇu does not choose the kind of life one ends up leading. Rather, one's life path is dependent on karma alone. Viṣṇu merely makes it possible for the individual soul and matter to interact in a way that is already dictated by one's karma.

In the *Vedārthasamgraha*, Rāmānuja utilizes the following passages from a scripture that is of great importance to him, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, to illustrate what he conceives of as the relation between the Supreme Being and the world.¹⁹

...He is beyond the matter of all beings, beyond mutations, and
beyond the faults of the constituents of matter etc.

¹⁷ VS 66.

¹⁸ ŚBh 2.1.33.

¹⁹ For the importance of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* for Rāmānuja's theology see my dissertation, *Scriptural Innovation in Medieval South India: the Śrīvaishnava Articulation of Vedānta*.

He is beyond all concealment; He is the soul of everything;
everything between heaven and earth is encompassed by Him²⁰ VP 6.5.83

He is Lord, encompassing individual and aggregate existence,
encompassing manifest and unmanifest existence, Lord of all,
all pervasive, all knowing, and He is called the Supreme Soul²¹ VP 6.5.86

Viṣṇu being thus manifest matter and unmanifest matter,
individual souls... sports like a playful boy... VP 1.2.18

These verses that Rāmānuja employs as scriptural support for his theology, demonstrate that though Viṣṇu is distinct and different from anything material, He is the soul and inner controller of all objects and sentient beings. He is the soul of the universe in its subtle state and manifest state and their dependence on Him is inseparable and eternal. He is not only the material cause of creation but He is also the efficient cause as it is through His agency that creation proceeds.

Given this model of reality, what is the purpose of the individual soul? According to Rāmānuja, the soul exists either in its embodied form when it interacts with matter and is born into the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsāra*), or transcends transmigration through devotion to Viṣṇu. However, even in a liberated state the individual soul always remains as a mode of Viṣṇu.

Rāmānuja states that in its essential or true nature, when liberated, the individual soul is said to be

devoid of the differences, of distinctive myriad forms such as gods²², men and so on, which are a result of the evolution of matter.... Once these differences of form such as gods, which are a result of the workings of karma, are removed, the soul's essential individuality is indescribable, known only by itself²³ and can only be defined as of the nature of consciousness. And this essential nature is common to all individual souls.²⁴

The description of the essential nature of all individual souls, outlined by Rāmānuja as indescribable, self-knowing, and so on, speaks of the souls in a more direct sense than in relation to Viṣṇu, as we examined earlier, although that relationship cannot be denied or trivialized. The soul takes on different physical forms due to karma and these forms occlude the true recognition of the soul's relationship to Viṣṇu. The physical form a soul acquires depends on its storehouse of karma which has accumulated over many life-times.

The escape from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth, according to Rāmānuja, is by supreme, undivided devotion (*bhakti*) to Viṣṇu. Undivided devotion, a requisite for final release, is to be understood as meditation in the form of worship, "of

²⁰ VS 110.

²¹ VS 110.

²² In Rāmānuja's theology even the many Hindu gods are subordinate to the Supreme Being, Viṣṇu. Though these divine beings may enjoy certain celestial pleasures, like all other living beings they are susceptible to karma and its effects. As such they circulate within the cycle of birth and rebirth and are not immortal.

²³ Since the individual self's essential nature is consciousness, it is not only aware of objects, but is aware of itself as well.

²⁴ VS 5.

the form of a succession of memories or remembrances (of Viṣṇu), which is unbroken like a stream of oil" (1.1.1–15). This is the only way to attain release. In the *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya*, Rāmānuja's commentary on the seminal Hindu scripture the *Bhagavadgītā*, he interprets the Supreme Being, Kṛṣṇa's (an incarnation of Viṣṇu), advice regarding devotion to the warrior Arjuna as follows:

he attains supreme devotion to Me in the form of experience that makes Me excessively dear (to the devotee). Me--the Lord of all, who creates, maintains, and dissolves creation in sport, who is bereft of even the slightest inkling of evil, who alone possesses a multitude of auspicious attributes that are unlimited and immeasurable.²⁵

When the embodied soul realizes that Viṣṇu is the ground of being and sees itself as entirely dependent on Him, liberation is achieved. Even after liberation, the individual soul continues to exist in this state of subservience to Viṣṇu. Though no longer circulating within the cycle of birth and rebirth, the soul rests in its natural state in blissful contemplation of its relation as an accessory to Viṣṇu.

Rāmānuja's theology of ultimate reality as a unity-of-the-differenced provides a comprehensive ontological framework that allows a unique and direct existential relationship between the Supreme Being, Viṣṇu, and the world that comprises His body. It accommodates the Vedānta concept that a Supreme Reality as source and support of the manifest world and that this Supreme Being is also the instrumental cause, as He wills creation as a divine sport. However, it is the karmic accumulation of the individual souls themselves that dictates their circumstances in life, absolving Viṣṇu of the charge of cruelty and partiality in bringing forth a world with its prevalent evil, misery, and suffering. The soul-body paradigm allows Rāmānuja to identify the world as the Supreme Being, since He ensouls the world. The Vedānta requisite of material identity between the infinite and finite being is also satisfied without sacrificing the perfection of the Supreme Being's association with the world of karma.

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Ardhanārīśvara: An Androgynous Model of God

Ellen Goldberg

Introduction

Ardhanārīśvara is the half-male, half-female form of the great Hindu god Śiva.¹ In Indian tradition this form (*mūrtī, rūpā, pratimā*) represents the ultimate union of spirit (*puruṣa, Śiva*) and matter (*prakṛti, divine power, Śakti*). The sacred image of Ardhanārīśvara is universal in the pan-Indian context and abroad, from Kashmir and Nepal in the north, to Tamil Nadu in the south, though variations in its iconography can be seen over time and place.² The image of Ardhanārīśvara attests to the philosophical ideal of nonduality known as *advaita*. Masculine and feminine are not viewed as separate dimensions of the divine, rather they identify the belief in god as the absolute union (*yoga*) of god and goddess (or god/dess³).

The name “Ardhanārīśvara” literally means “lord (*iśvara*) who is half (*ardha*) woman (*nārī*).” Ardhanārīśvara, as a syncretic or composite form, not only emphasizes the union of male and female but also the union of their principle cults—Śaivism and Śaktism. Hence it is critical that we look at several aspects of

¹ There is evidence from South India that suggests this image also has roots in the traditions of the great Goddess known as Devī. See Adiceam (1968), Kalidos (1993) and Kandasamy (1994).

² See Goldberg (2002a, b) for a detailed typology of 14 representative images of Ardhanārīśvara from various chronological periods and sites in India. Also see Adiceam 1968.

³ Christian feminist theologians, such as Schüssler Fiorenza 1984 and Radford Reuther 1983, protest exclusive masculine symbolism to represent the vision of God. They argue that rendering the image of God as male provides justification for the oppression, exploitation and marginalization of women in Christianity. Some Christian feminists have proposed that the gender inclusiveness of “God/dess,” a term used by Reuther, offers a first step in the struggle against the exclusion and devaluation of women in the Church.

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Ardhanārīśvara in this chapter to fully understand the philosophical and historical presuppositions inherent in a dual-gendered or androgynous model of the divine in Indian tradition.

Background

Although the earliest iconographic images of Ardhanārīśvara date from the Scytho-Kuṣāṇa period (mid-first century C.E), R. Nagaswamy claims *ardhanārī* (half woman) images have their roots in early Vedic literature. Vedic *ṛsis* (poets and sages) who represent Hindu *noumena* primarily in visual terms recognized the dual or two-fold nature of “god” in Indian tradition as early as the *Kṛṣṇa-Yajur Veda*, where Agni, the god of fire, is identified as both “the power that burns” as well as the “power that gives life and illumination” (2002: 2). In other words, both the terrible and the benign sides of god are invoked in the early Vedic hymns testifying to and providing evidence not only of an early *ardhanārī* form but also the view that the universe is composed of the union of these two principles. Thus Nagaswamy’s argument that the syncretic form of *ardhanārī* based on a compound image of Agnā-Viṣṇu (also known as Rudra-Viṣṇu⁴), where Rudra is portrayed as having two bodies—a life giving body identified as feminine and creative, and a terrific or destructive body portrayed as masculine, is persuasive.

Dual deities (*dvidevatya*) in *ardhanārī* form are a recurring feature of early Vedic literature. Jan Gonda (1975) examines several Vedic deities whose names are formed by dual compounds (*devata dvandvas*) including Agni-Soma and Mitrā-Varuṇa. He claims they represent a persistent motif constituting what he refers to as an “intimately connected couple, a (two-sided) unity, acting conjointly”—in other words, the *ardhanārī* form (7). In addition to the gods mentioned by Nagaswamy and Gonda, Dyāva-Pr̥thivī, the *Rg Veda* sky-earth god who generates the universe by dividing into two distinct halves, is amongst the earliest of the Indo-Aryan motifs of androgynous or *ardhanārī* deities. This dual deity or *dvidevatya* unites the spatial domains of heaven and earth in a half-male half-female syncretic form thereby providing a prototype for the classification of dual deities that Gonda claims could even precede the Vedic period. The prototype Gonda refers to further references the gendered marital relations of “man and woman” as “husband and wife.” Thus the relations between the realms of heaven and earth proceed from the prototypical husband-wife *ardhanārī* theme. We see that dual deities or *dvidevatya* are not only normative in early Vedic thought they also affect what Gonda refers to as the “pair system,” that is to say, a system of functional and complementary correspondences or homologies that is impressed upon the religious, philosophical, and linguistic imagination as a “fundamental unit” or “two-sided” androgyne figure (Gonda 1975: 17).

⁴ Viṣṇu also appears to Śiva as the Mohinī, the (female) enchantress.

Viśvarūpa, the Asura Bull-Cow who appears as an androgynous self-generating principle in the *Rg Veda* (3.38.4), is another example of a dual-deity or *dvidevatya*. So, too, is Puruṣa, the cosmic man who creates the universe in the *Puruṣa-sūkta* by gesturing to the androgynous principle of dividing and splitting (*Rg Veda* 10.90). In a later Vedic text, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.4.3–1.4.4) we find a single body (*ātman*) shaped like a man (*puruṣa*) who procreates the universe by dividing into two halves, male/husband (*patī*) and female/wife (*patnī*). Not surprisingly, even the *Laws of Manu* (1.32) recall this generative narrative model. If we follow Doris Meth Srinivasan's (1997) thesis that Rudra is identified with Puruṣa in the *Kauśītaki* (6.1–6.9) and *Satapatha Brāhmaṇas* (6.1.3.17), we begin to see clearly how the seeds of Śiva's androgynous motif are strategically placed preparing, as Srinivasan says, “an overall understanding of the advent of the śaiva Ardhanārīśvara concept and form” (57).

In *purāṇic* literature, Ardhanārīśvara becomes the quintessential androgyne. Here, Śiva is seen variously paired in iconic (for example, anthropomorphic) and aniconic (for example, *yoni-liṅgam*) representations alongside a female principle or *sakti* (power) typically identified as Pārvatī, Umā, or Gaurī. So, too, in Hari-Hara images (the pairing of Śiva and Viṣṇu) Viṣṇu stands side-by-side with Śiva in the place held on the left by the benign or life affirming female-*sakti* role. Both Ardhanārīśvara and Hari-Hara trace their iconographic origins to the early Kuṣāṇa and Gupta periods.⁵ Thus we see a sacred tradition of dual or composite deities modeled on the *ardhanārī* (half-female) form intricately woven into the complex mythological, philosophical, and iconographical religious traditions of India dating as far back as the early Vedic period.

Theological and Philosophical Considerations

Ardhanārīśvara reflects the underlying theological and philosophical presupposition of *advaita* or nonduality (also referred to as monism). That is, the systematic insistence on the identity (*advaita*) of the absolute (Śiva, pure consciousness) and the phenomenal world (Śakti, primal energy or matter personified as the goddess or *devī*) through the methodology of seeing (*dṛṣṭi*). In text and context, Śiva does not exist without Śakti (or Viṣṇu, for that matter), nor does Śakti exist without Śiva. We can trace the uninterrupted continuity of and adherence to the nondual *ardhanārī* form within Indian tradition from the Vedic age to the present. The pairing of the benign and the terrific aspects of deity from among a vast range of homologous references are cast in anthropomorphic idiom as male and female to illustrate the enduring philosophical belief in a single, undivided principle that embraces all existent entities.⁶

⁵ For studies of Hari-Hara see Bhattacharyya (1953) and Kalidos (1993).

⁶ For an excellent study of *advaita* see Timalsina (2009).

We encounter a complex system of language composed of formulaic devices derived from the “pair system” referred to by Gonda that attest to the ideals and conventions of *advaita*. For example, in Indian iconography Ardhanārīśvara is depicted by the central defining feature of a bipolar body divided along a medial axis or *brahmaśūtra* that runs from the crown of the head to the tip of the toes (see Fig. 1). This vertical line of measurement divides the single body on all *ardhanārī* images into male/right and female/left. Besides the *brahmaśūtra* and corresponding anatomical features including full female breast on the left side—the defining diagnostic indicator of the feminine half—and an ithyphallic feature (*ūrdhvareta*) on the right male side particularly on North Indian images dating from the Kuṣāṇa period onwards, each half carries emblems that further identify the deity in gendered terms as right-half male and left-half female. Among those identifying diagnostic features, trident (*triśūla*), club (*gadā*), axe (*parasu*), noose (*pāśa*), skull (*kapāla*), serpent (*nāga*), drum (*ḍamarū*), and prayer beads (*akṣamālā*) are typically indicated on the right Śiva side, whereas female earrings, white lotus (*nilotpala*), stringed musical instrument (*vīnā*), water pot, and mirror (*darpaṇa*) adorn the left Śakti side. Additional diagnostic features are described in the various canons of Indian iconography.⁷

What is clear is that these diagnostic indicators, derived from the various canons of Indian iconography, religion and philosophy, inscribe a model of god that shows the doctrine of the inseparable union of male and female or the two eternal principles called *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. Stated in theistic terms, Śiva and Śakti are recast in the figure of Ardhanārīśvara as the cosmic forces of spirit or pure consciousness and nature. Śakti is portrayed as the dynamic-kinetic pole, the giver of life and the active principle of the universe from which all movement (*karma, samsāra*) arises. Śiva is the imperturbable, static pole (*akarma, nirvāṇa*) into which Śakti is ultimately absorbed in the higher stages of *yoga* (wholeness). Thus, it is often said in Indian philosophy that without Śakti, Śiva is merely a lifeless corpse (*śava*⁸). It also explains why we read in the *Saundaryalaharī*, (1:1) ascribed to the monist philosopher Śaṅkara (c. 788–821), that without Śakti, Śiva is incapable of creation, movement and is devoid of life. In this context, Śiva is subordinate to Śakti in her emanation or causal role.⁹ But in the traditions of *yoga*, the roles are reversed and Śiva as cessation or quiescence (*nirodha*) is dominant.

Consequently, we see that the equanimity of diametrical polarities or contrary cognitive conceptual and intuitive notions represented by Ardhanārīśvara or the *ardhanārī* form is not only common among the various schools of Indian religion and philosophy, but is also considered the goal of self-realization. The central theme of sacred marriage (*hieros gamos* or hierogamy) between Śiva and Pārvatī offers a distinct model for divine-human relations, with the clear message that one’s own

⁷ See Kramrisch (1922, 1924), Banerjea (1956), Adiceam (1968), Rao (1968), Krishnamurthi and Ramachandran (1960), Kandasamy (1994) and Goldberg (2002a, b).

⁸ śivah śaktivīnah śavah (Śiva is a corpse without Śakti).

⁹ Note that creation in Indian thought is not *ex nihilo*.

experience of wholeness (*yoga* or an inner hierogamy) is the goal of human knowledge and self-realization (*ātma-vidya*). The philosophical presupposition of absolute congruity (*advaita*) between male and female is further described in terms of a vast complex of correspondences or system of pairs that are formulated on the basis of female and male, but by extension include human and divine, *karma* (action) and *akarma* (inaction), *samsāra* (the wheel of rebirth) and *nirvāṇa* (enlightenment), left and right, active and passive, theory and praxis, evolution (birth) and devolution (*yoga*), matter and spirit—thus duality in any form whatsoever is considered illusion (*māyā*) and/or ignorance (*avidyā*). In Indian iconography we see the female-Pārvatī half of Ardhanārīśvara holding a mirror (*darpaṇa*) in her left hand as a symbol of this realization and her insight (*prajñā*) into the non-dual state of consciousness. The appropriateness of the mirror as both a reflective and visionary symbol (*vimarṣa*) of the *buddhi* or intellect becomes quite clear in the philosophical and praxis-oriented (*sādhanā*) traditions of *yoga* (Goldberg 2002a).

Yoga

Broadly speaking, the practice of *yoga* aims at self-knowledge (*ātma vidyā*) or the realization that ultimate reality is one (*advaita*). In this model, Śiva represents the dissolution of the universe or the end of cognitive ignorance (*vidyā*), whereas Śakti is the life-giving, creative pole through which this realization is attained. Here *yoga* is understood as both the realization of knowledge (*jñāna*, *bodhi*, *prajñā*), as well as the disciplinary means to attain it called *sādhanā*. The goal of the adept is to merge his or her “self” (*ātman*, *śakti*) with Śiva-Śakti in a state of complete quiescence (*nirodha*) represented in Indian iconography as the form and figure of Ardhanārīśvara.

We also must stress that images of Ardhanārīśvara are neither “mortal” nor “human” but, rather, represent a model or cosmic blueprint of what is potentially possible for the human practitioner to realize in the context of *yoga sādhanā* (spiritual practice). Ardhanārīśvara is not simply a “picture” of ultimate reality. The image is used in the spiritual traditions of *yoga* to encode and explain subtle processes that are going on in the higher states of *yogic* realization (Goldberg 2002a, b). As such, the image of Ardhanārīśvara provides *yogins* and *yoginīs* with a detailed chart outlining the evolutionary and experiential cosmic processes of *yoga*. This helps the *yogin* and *yoginī* understand the esoteric (inner) dynamics of spiritual transformation. It is an applied philosophy providing a step-by-step theory of creation, as well as conveying the adept’s passage from form to formlessness (nonduality or *advaita*).

The image of Ardhanārīśvara speaks directly to the fragmentation and alienation that comes with the fact that a type of false consciousness arising from notions of subject-object duality is inscribed on every human consciousness. Ardhanārīśvara provides a subtle model of reality and thus an inner or esoteric guide for overcoming the fragmentation and alienation that human beings feel.

Many cultures have developed approaches to the problem of suffering (*duhkha*) and alienation—Ardhanārīśvara is just one approach or model among many (Goldberg 2002a, b). Thus we see that in traditions of Śaiva *yoga* the body of the adept is conceived as a living model of the divine image of Ardhanārīśvara. The great *yogis* and *yoginīs* understood all too well that our bodies affect our experience of the world. If the adept is to attain some kind of all-pervading unity or realization of the nonduality of Śiva-Śakti, this cannot be accomplished “except from within a bodily experience of the world” (Miller 2009: 11). In the higher states of *yoga* referred to as *sabīja* and *nirbīja samādhi*, the adept witnesses (*darśana*) matter (Śakti) and consciousness (Śiva) in union (Ardhanārīśvara, *yoga*) directly in the central nervous system through a parallel physiology or subtle network of energy-infused channels (*nāḍīs*) and centers (*cakras*) within the human body. Energy or the five vital breaths (*udāna, prāṇa, samāna, apāna*, and *vyāna*), variously referred to in *yoga* as *prāṇa*, Śakti, and *kūṇḍalinī*, circulates in the *yoga* body through an intricate system of 72,000 *nāḍīs* (channels). Three main *nāḍīs*—the *idā* (left), the *piṅgalā* (right), and the *suṣumṇā* (or central channel that runs along the interior of the spinal column)—are key to understanding this esoteric (inner) physiology and are depicted in subtle form by the image of Ardhanārīśvara.¹⁰ With the assistance of advanced *yoga* techniques adept practitioners attempt to stimulate, harness, and unite the flow of vital energy (Śakti) from the left and right channels located at the base of the spine (*brahmādvāra*) and raise it forcefully (*hathayoga*) through the central channel and the six primary *cakras* into the cranial vault located in the crown of the head (*sahasrāra cakra*) or brain. Through this process, the adept *yogi* or *yoginī* becomes aware of deeper and more penetrating levels of non-dual consciousness. It is this realization, or what we could call the binding (*yoga*) of Śiva (consciousness, *puruṣa*) and Śakti (matter, energy, *prakṛti*) that is said to occur over-and-over again in the lived bodies of self-actualized adepts. This “binding” or unifying process identifies the underlying assumption behind numerous homologies and meditation practices in *yoga* literature between the body of the adept (microcosm) and the ideal of universal nonduality (macrocosm)—or Ardhanārīśvara—and reinforces the innate naturalness, that is to say, physicality or materiality of cognitive non-duality in schools of Indian philosophy.

Although speculative systems of Indian metaphysics no doubt pose a great challenge to modern philosophy in the West, they nevertheless illuminate a powerful indigenous paradigm of healing and self-realization, past and present, within Indian traditions. *Yogis* and *yoginīs* perform rigorous somatic techniques that include postures (*āsanas*), withdrawing the senses (*pratyahara*), arresting the breath (*prāṇāyāma*), *mantras*, and so on, as ways to cultivate and open the vital energy channels in the body. As a result, the adept experiences himself or herself directly as Ardhanārīśvara. That is, they recognize the innate nature of the non-dual mind appearing as Śiva and Śakti.

¹⁰The medial channel corresponds to the *brahmaśūtra* or line of demarcation on all Ardhanārīśvara images marking the right and left halves of the body into male and female.

Yogic techniques offer empirical evidence that neural patterns can be influenced voluntarily. Heart rate, blood pressure and rhythmic breathing are affected by muscular activity. Brain-body or mind-body interaction is well documented. *Yoga* recognizes this, but as we see cognitive science is beginning to as well. Thus in time we might even see that cognitive science finds ways of quantifying the internal processes of self-realization experienced as the non-dual *ardhanārī* form in Indian religion and philosophy.

Challenges

One problem with any binary or androgynous model, even if its intended purpose is to depict an inherent wholeness or *yoga*, is that each half in the paired equation arouses critical and ambivalent associations that often become the repository of less valued cultural constructions. This is particularly evident with the placement of the female on the left side on almost all images of Ardhanārīśvara. This typically signifies a site of less-valued association (Kalidos 1993; Goldberg 2002a, b). Also, it is usually the male-identified god and not the woman-identified goddess who becomes the divine androgyne. We see in Indian thought that an explicit androgynization or feminization must occur in order for human creation to unfold. Through a process of “creative inversion”—to borrow a phrase from Gerta Lerner—in which the male god projects the female aspect and her unique role as child bearer, man/god becomes the “mother-father” of all creation (Lerner 1986). Thus, in Tamil poetry Śiva is referred to by the epithet *ammaiyappar*, meaning “mother-father.” Even though Nagaswamy points out that Viṣṇu (a male god) appears female in the form of Hari-Hara, the creative and life affirming halves of the dual deity is still accorded the left side which, as Kalidos affirms, is typically associated with “something low,” “weakness,” “not worth of being accorded a commendable status,” “frailty,” and “baseness and degradation” (Kalidos 1993: 287).

Thus we see that even though androgynous models of god in Indian tradition represent the feminine as half the body of god, they are still the expression of male orthodox discourse. This does not dismiss or eradicate the primary role Śakti assumes as half of Śiva’s body, even though her form is idealized by the sacred iconographic conventions of Indian patriarchy. It is possible and plausible to argue that very few religious or philosophical traditions have given the feminine side of god as much recognition as Hinduism, but an androcentric interpretation of androgyny cannot be a liberating symbol for women (or for men, for that matter) if the gender restrictions simply reify patriarchal norms and legitimate oppressive female designations that are of lesser value (for example, left side female). Thus the role of Śakti raises an essential gender critique and requires reinterpretation.

As such, the story of Śakti/Pārvatī can also be read in non-normative ways. Her resistance to normative gender roles in Indian literature displays enormous emancipatory potential and disrupts or realigns the symbol of Ardhanārīśvara in new and empowering ways. For example, as Pārvatī, she shows herself to be an active agent

fashioning her own narrative within constructed social norms. Her story can be told as a agent of change, reason, resistance, freedom, creativity, and strength. By reclaiming the roles assigned to her by (male) orthodoxy and realigning them for her own struggle to attain freedom or *yoga*, Pārvatī is recast as an active agent of her own making. In her creative capacity she dominates Śiva as spirit. Śakti has always been understood as energy, power, creativity, and female strength in Indian tradition. One interpretation understands this as inferior (the so-called ‘left’ hand), while another reading of the same narrative simultaneously exhibits her role as empowering (for example, we see several examples of reversed images of Ardhanārī with the female breast on the right in South India, see Kalidos 1993). In the end tradition recognizes both readings as theistic interpretations of a reality that claims points beyond it (Goldberg 2002a, b).

Conclusion

In this essay, we have shown that Ardhanārīśvara, the androgynous form of the Śiva and Śakti, traces its origins to earlier *ardhanārī* forms found in early Vedic literature. In addition, Ardhanārīśvara is a powerful image in the living traditions of *yoga*. Here Ardhanārīśvara offers a model of god for the purpose of spiritual practice called *sādhanā*. In this tradition, the god and goddess are regarded as inclusive, inseparable, and nondual. They represent in homologous and formulaic language the evolution and dissolution of consciousness through a praxis-oriented philosophical tradition.

We also stated that Śiva and Śakti are the ultimate cause of creation and destruction. In essence they are held to be nondual by Indian tradition. We suggested that all polarities are fundamentally portrayed by the form and figure of Ardhanārīśvara to be in a state of equanimity. Thus the basic teaching is one of complementarity. The mapping that Ardhanārīśvara provides of the universe is inscribed within the mind-body of each practitioner of *yoga* and can be realized through a vast system of adept spiritual practices. Though Ardhanārīśvara is symbolic, it nonetheless uses the language fluent within Indian systems and accessible within the initiatory communities of living *yogins* and *yoginīs* to describe a nondual model of god.

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How Spinozistic Was Toland's Pantheism?

Edwin Curley

I don't claim any special expertise on John Toland. I am, primarily, a student of Spinoza. When I began my research for this paper, I knew only what all good Spinozists must know: that Toland was a key figure in the deist movement of the eighteenth century, that he was influenced by Spinoza, and that he was one of the means by which Spinozistic ideas were spread in the Enlightenment. I knew he was credited with having introduced the term "pantheism" into English, that he took Spinoza to be a pantheist, and that his writings on pantheism helped fix the meaning that term has for us today. And since, in the past, I have resisted interpreting Spinoza as a pantheist, in what I take to be the most common sense of the term, I thought it might be worth asking what, exactly, Toland meant by it, and with what right he associated it with the philosophy of Spinoza. I'll begin by surveying some of the main sources for Toland's conception of pantheism, and then ask whether the views he ascribes to Spinoza accord with what I believe to be Spinoza's position on the nature of God and his relation to the universe.

The general idea of pantheism seems to be on Toland's mind as early as the *Letters to Serena*, where he professes to be rejecting Spinoza's views. He never uses the term "pantheism" in that work, and does not present Spinoza's philosophy in a way which makes it clearly exemplify the religious position for which he was later to use that term. But in Letter IV he writes that

Spinoza ... acknowledges no Being separate or different from the Substance of the Universe, no Being to give it Motion, to continue or to preserve it, if it has none of its own. He builds on all the common Notions about local Motion, without ever showing any Cause of it; being not willing to allow the Impulse of a presiding Deity, and unable ... to produce a better, or as good a Reason. Yet he was of [the] opinion that Matter was naturally inactive.¹

¹ Toland (1704, p. 143).

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That last claim – that Spinoza thought matter was naturally inactive – seems to me so blatantly false that I wonder whether Toland is entirely serious in making it.² It also seems to me unclear that Spinoza doesn't give at least as good an account of the cause of motion as Toland does. But for our purposes the important point is this: saying that there is no deity separate from the universe, no creator who could impart motion to an inherently inert collection of material objects, is not in itself pantheism. That much might simply be atheism. And though some people equate pantheism with atheism, or regard pantheism as a form of atheism, it seems better to treat them as distinct religious positions: the pantheist insists that even if there is no god in the sense in which the major monotheistic religions typically conceive of God, still, in some important sense there is a god; the atheist, as I shall use that term, denies that there is a god in any meaningful sense.

In the *Letters to Serena* Toland comes closest to identifying Spinoza's philosophy as pantheistic when he compares it with certain Stoic and Platonistic views. In Letter V he writes that

Those philosophers who were the least superstitious, and who look'd most narrowly into the Nature of things, have taught that all Matter was animated, as well every Particle of Air, or Water, or Wood, or Iron, or Stone, as a Man, a Brute, or the whole Mass together. (*ibid.*, p. 209)

Toland suggests that they were led to this view because they uncritically accepted the view of others that matter is essentially inactive. But finding from experience that every particle of matter is in motion, they inferred that there must be some animating cause of motion, intimately joined to matter, and inseparable from it. On the Stoic version of this theory, according to Toland, the animating force was an infinitely subtle, material, world soul, co-extensive with matter, and infused through all its parts. Toland does not attempt to explain how a material world soul could animate bodies if matter itself is essentially inactive, and he does not identify this Stoic view with Spinoza's. He seems rather to think Spinoza's view is closer to certain Platonistic theories, which held that the world soul was a pure, immaterial Spirit, possessing "a degree of Thought, or a direct Perception without any Reflection."³ The immateriality of this spirit is supposed to be what enables it to initiate motion. He represents Spinoza as differing from the Platonists in adding understanding and "reflex acts" to the thought which the Platonists see as permeating the universe. On this reading of Spinoza, he would seem not to be a materialist, since he would recognize the existence of an immaterial world spirit.

Toland's description of these Stoic and Platonistic positions does not explicitly represent them as identifying the universe (or the world soul which animates it) with

² In support of this claim, Toland proceeds to cite the two axioms on motion which immediately follow the Scholium to *Ethics* II Prop. 13. But though he quotes the first axiom correctly (*omnia corpora moventur vel quiescent*), he grossly misquotes the second, reading *omnia corpora absolute jam moveri, jam quiescere possunt*, for Spinoza's *unumquodque corpus jam tardius, jam celerius moveretur* (Cf. Gebhardt 1925, vol. II, p. 97).

³ Toland (1704, p. 210). It's not clear to me that the Stoic theory of the world soul and Plato's theory are as different as Toland suggests. In Cicero's dialogue *De natura deorum* the Stoic Balbus invokes Plato's doctrine that all spontaneous motion resides only in the soul as part of his argument that the world must be an animate being. (Cicero 1933, II, xii, pp. 153–155).

God. But he must have known that some of the philosophers whose views he describes did make that identification,⁴ and presumably he expected many of his readers to know that. If we add in that identification, then Toland would be ascribing to Spinoza a view which conforms to at least some of his later definitions of pantheism.

Toland first used the term “pantheist” in a pamphlet he published in 1705, *Socinianism Truly Stated* – a pamphlet with a very long subtitle: *Being an example of fair dealing in all theological controversies, to which is prefixt indifference in disputes: recommended by a pantheist to an orthodox friend.*⁵ In this very short work – only a dozen pages – Toland is mainly concerned to state the principles of the Socinians, and divide them into three classes: those the Socinians affirm and consider necessary for salvation, like the existence of God; those they reject and consider unnecessary for salvation, but regard as opinions about which they must take a side, like the doctrine of the trinity; and those they reject and consider unnecessary for salvation, but on which they agree to differ with their fellow Christians, like the doctrine of eternal damnation.

It’s this willingness to allow others to disagree – an indifference of temper, not of opinion – which constitutes the indifference Toland recommends in all religious disputes. To the extent that he gives us any clues to the content of his pantheism in this work, it is in relation to that indifference. The pamphlet is written as a letter to an anonymous friend, whom Toland represents as an orthodox Christian. Previously, Toland says, he has communicated to his friend “in confidence” the pantheists’ system of philosophy. Apparently pantheism is a position whose philosophical principles are not to be discussed in public. So as Stephen Daniel has put it, in this work Toland “merely hints at [the] metaphysical connotations [of the term].”⁶ All he says about the pantheists’ system is that when his friend previously learned its tenets, he agreed that a complete disinterest in engaging in religious disputes was a necessary consequence of pantheism. So whatever the pantheists’ metaphysical principles are, they must be ones which might plausibly justify being unconcerned with religious disputes. But if we try to be more specific about the pantheists’ system than that, what we say will be very speculative.

A work which offers us much more to go on is Toland’s *Origines judaicae*,⁷ which purports to show that Moses was a pantheist. That’s a very unspinozistic

⁴ In Toland (1709), immediately after making his claim that Moses was a pantheist (p. 117), he quotes a passage from Cicero’s dialogue, *De natura deorum*, in which the representative of stoicism, Balbus, says that “the sower and planter and begetter, so to speak, of all the things that nature governs, their trainer and nourisher, is the world; the world gives nutriment and sustenance to all its limbs, as it were, or parts.” (Cicero 1933, II, lxxvi, pp. 204–205. Rackham’s Latin text varies slightly from Toland’s.)

⁵ The original of this short pamphlet is apparently very rare (see Champion 1998), but it is now available online. See Toland (1705). I’m indebted to Champion for helping me to locate it.

⁶ See Daniel (1997, pp. 303–312). Similarly Israel (2001, p. 611n): in *Socinianism Truly Stated* Toland uses the term *pantheism* “in a philosophically non-specific sense.”

⁷ See Toland (1709). So far as I know, this work has not yet been translated into English. The translations from it which follow are mine. Page references will be given in the text.

reading of Moses: Spinoza's own interpretation of Mosaic theology in Ch. II of the *Theological-Political Treatise* certainly does not attribute any such philosophical conception of God to Moses. It seems to me also a pretty implausible reading of Moses. But I'm not concerned here with either the Spinozistic character of Toland's interpretation of Moses or its plausibility. What I'm concerned with is what this labeling implies about Moses' theological views.

Toland begins his discussion of Moses' alleged pantheism by reporting the account the Greek geographer and historian Strabo gives of the religious history of the Jews in Book XVI of his *Geography*.⁸ First Toland paraphrases Strabo, saying:

Strabo affirms, without hesitation, that Moses was a Pantheist, or, as we might now say, a Spinozist, for he presents him as teaching that there is no Divinity distinct from matter and the fabric of this world, and that Nature itself, or the Universe, is the one and supreme God, whose parts we may call individual Creatures, and the whole, if you wish, the Creator. (p. 117)

This clearly equates pantheism with Spinozism, and Spinozism with the identification of God with Nature, or the world, or the universe, conceived, it seems, as the totality of material things. The relation of God to individual beings in Nature is presented as that of a whole to its parts. Readers of Toland who recall Spinoza's well-known use of the phrase *Deus sive Natura* might think there is nothing problematic about this. Later I shall argue that it's quite problematic. But for now I concentrate on developing Toland's concept of pantheism.

Shortly after this brief paraphrase of Strabo's account of Mosaic theology Toland gives an extended quotation, in Greek, from the *Geography*, which he then translates into Latin. This passage contains virtually everything Strabo says about the early history of the Jewish people. The part most relevant for us proceeds as follows:

Moses was a Priest of the Egyptians, who held a certain part of that Region; since he could scarcely bear certain things which were publicly established there, he emigrated; and a great many people who worshipped the Divinity went with him. For he said, and taught, that *the Egyptians were wrong to represent the Divinity as like Serpents and Cattle; so were the Libyans and the Greeks, who portrayed the Gods in human form.* GOD IS THAT ONE THING WHICH ENCOMPASSES US ALL, INCLUDING THE EARTH AND THE SEA, WHAT WE CALL HEAVEN, AND THE WORLD, AND THE NATURE OF ALL THINGS.⁹

Given this passage, Toland's paraphrase of Strabo seems fair enough, though Toland does add some ideas that are at least not explicit in Strabo, such as the materialistic commitment which pantheism is now defined as having. It's unclear from Strabo what sources he's relying on for this account of the reasons for the Jews' exodus from Egypt, or for his attribution of pantheistic beliefs to Moses. His source is surely not the Hebrew Bible, though he does suggest an explanation for the fact that the Bible tells a different story: Moses and his first followers embraced this highly philosophical religion, which rejected popular Egyptian and Greek

⁸Strabo's *Geography* seems to have occupied him for much of the last half of his life, which lasted from 64/63 B.C.E. to about 23 C.E.

⁹The passage Toland is reproducing here is from Strabo (1917–1949, XVI, xxxv, p. 283).

Polytheism; but later on superstitious men were appointed to the priesthood, and the Jewish religion became corrupted. The Bible as we now have it misrepresents the philosophical pantheism of Moses and the early Jews, because the transmission of the sacred texts was in the hands of priests who were not only superstitious, but also unscrupulous.

Toland's fullest discussion of pantheism comes in the *Pantheisticon*, published near the end of his life. By this stage he is presenting pantheism as a quasi-religious movement, which is supposed to meet regularly in small groups for convivial discussions of philosophical issues, discussions which are a cross between a religious ceremony and the banquet in Plato's *Symposium*. The group now has commitments which extend far beyond the comparatively simple idea that God is in some way to be identified with Nature. The pantheists assert the infinity, eternity, immovability, and incorruptibility of the Universe.¹⁰ It is intelligent in a way far superior to that of our intellect, with which it has only a slight likeness. Its constituent parts are all constantly in motion, though its 'integrant' parts are always the same. The pantheists are also materialists, who hold that God produces innumerable species of things, whose form is determined by the disposition of the parts in the individual bodies (p. 7/16); that all things are made from the composition, separation and varying mixture of certain very simple bodies, which are de facto indivisible, and infinite in number and kind. Each composite body has in it particles of every species of simple body (p. 11/21), the nature of the composite body being a function of the proportions of the different elements of which it is composed (p. 9/18–19).

All this makes Toland's natural philosophy look like a form of atomism, though he is in fact anxious to distance himself from Epicurus (pp. 5/14, 10/20), and rejects such characteristic features of Epicurean atomism as the void and the downward descent of atoms (p. 10/20). In an infinite universe, he argues, it does not make sense to talk about a highest or lowest point, or a middle or last point.

Much of the *Pantheisticon* is devoted to spelling out the details of the pantheists' natural philosophy. And much of this natural philosophy has little to do with Spinoza. Toland's pantheists are committed to Copernican astronomy, which Spinoza no doubt would have accepted, but never actually discusses. (p. 21/34) They also hold that no species ever perishes, because the seeds of each kind of thing, from which it might be reconstituted, are always present in every kind of thing. (p. 17/28) This is one of many topics in the pantheistic system which Spinoza never expressed any view about. The complex pantheism of this late work of Toland's is a far cry from anything which might simply equate pantheism with Spinozism. Perhaps this is why Spinoza's name is not so much as mentioned in this work.

Still, the central religious message of the earlier works remains. The God whom Toland is still willing to call "the creator and ruler of all" (p. 8/17) is described as being "not separated from the Universe itself, except by reason alone" (p. 8/18). The reader is invited to call this God, if he pleases, "the Mind and Soul of the Universe."

¹⁰ Toland (1720, p. 6) (p. 15 in the English translation of 1751). Subsequent pages references to this work will be given in the text, with the pagination of the Latin text given first, followed by the pagination of the English translation.

But Toland also uses language to describe this God which I have not found him using in the earlier works: God is “the force and energy of the Whole” (*Vis ... et energia Totius*). And Toland conceives God as acting purposively: this force or energy always “tends towards the best end” (*ad optimum finem semper tendens*); “the best reason and most perfect order regulate(s) all things in the Universe.”¹¹

I pass now to the second part of my paper: how Spinozistic was Toland’s pantheism? to what extent does Spinoza’s system provide a model for pantheism as Toland understands it? In trying to answer this question I will set aside the elaborate philosophy of nature of the *Pantheisticon*, and concentrate on what is more or less common to Toland’s conception of pantheism in the major works where he discusses it.

Earlier I said that in the past I’ve resisted interpreting Spinoza as a pantheist, in the sense I think that term generally has. What sense did I think the term “pantheism” most commonly has in modern English? According to the OED, pantheism is the

belief or philosophical theory that God is immanent in or identical with the universe; the doctrine that God is everything and everything is God

In questioning Spinoza’s pantheism I’ve focused on that part of this definition which says that a pantheist is someone who holds that God is identical with the universe. I assume that by “the universe” the OED means something like the totality of finite things.¹² I did not think Spinoza identified God with the universe, conceived as the totality of finite things.

Why not? After all, Spinoza is famous for having used the expression *Deus sive Natura*.¹³ In seventeenth century Latin *sive* commonly indicates some kind of identification of the second disjunct with the first. Doesn’t that settle the question? No. When Spinoza first uses that famous phrase in Part IV the *Ethics*, he has previously made a distinction, in Part I, between *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. When he made that distinction, he made it clear that it is *Natura naturans* which he identifies God with, not *Natura naturata*, or some combination of *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. Here’s the Scholium where he explains the distinction between these concepts:

By *Natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, i.e. ...God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause.

¹¹ Toland (1720, p. 7/16). The passage quoted continues in a way which clearly suggests that Toland has Spinoza in mind: “in which there are infinite Worlds, distinguished from one another, as the other parts by their peculiar Attributes, although, with regard to the Whole, there are no Parts really separate.”

¹² For the record, the most relevant definition given in the OED says that the universe is: “The whole of created or existing things regarded collectively; all things (including the earth, the heavens, and all the phenomena of space) considered as constituting a systematic whole, esp. as created or existing by Divine power; the whole world or creation; the cosmos.”

¹³ See, for example, the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics*: “that eternal and infinite being which we call God or Nature acts from the same necessity from which it exists” (Gebhardt 1925, Vol. II, p. 206).

But by *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature, or from any of God's attributes, i.e., all the modes of God's attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.

Since individual finite things are “modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way” (E IP25C), they must belong to *natura naturata*. But if each individual finite thing is part of *natura naturata*, it seems to follow that the totality of such things must also belong to *natura naturata*.¹⁴ Since it's *natura naturans* which Spinoza identifies with “God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause,” God is not, in the *Ethics*, identified with the whole of nature.

Another reason for questioning whether Spinoza's God should be identified with the totality of finite things is that this would seem to make the relation of mode to substance one of part to whole. But Spinoza explicitly denies that the mode-substance relation is a part-whole relation. Substance is indivisible (E IP13). It cannot be divided into parts. So the relation of mode to substance cannot be a part-whole relation.

The temptation to interpret Spinoza as identifying God with the whole of Nature is nonetheless strong. Van Velthuysen raised this as an objection to Spinoza in Letter 42.

What room can there be for a last judgment, or what expectation of reward or punishment, when one ascribes everything to fate and maintains that all things emanate from God by an inevitable necessity – or rather, when one maintains that this whole universe is God? For I fear that our author is not very far from that opinion. At least there's not much difference between maintaining that everything emanates necessarily from God's nature and maintaining that the Universe itself is God. (Gebhardt 1925, Vol. IV, p. 208)

Now I don't think Spinoza ever actually says that all things *emanate* from God by an inevitable necessity. But that proposition seems an acceptable paraphrase of E I P16:

From the necessity of the divine nature infinite things – that is, whatever can fall under an infinite intellect – must follow in infinite ways.

When Spinoza responds to this comment in Letter 43, he does not object to Van Velthuysen's ascribing to him the view that all things emanate necessarily from God's nature. Instead he complains about the inference Van Velthuysen draws from it:

I do not ask here and now why it is the same thing, or not much different, to maintain that all things emanate necessarily from God's nature and that the universe itself is God. But I should like you to note what he quickly adds, no less hatefully... (Gebhardt 1925, vol. IV, p. 223)

¹⁴ I say “belong to” rather than “constitutes,” because I take it that in addition to the totality of finite things *natura naturata* will also include the infinite modes. Spinoza seems to refer to the totality of finite things in the Scholium to E IIL7 (Gebhardt 1925, vol. II, p. 102) when he writes that “the whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, i.e., all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual.” This individual is often assumed to be the *facies totius universi* referred to in Letter 64 (Gebhardt 1925, vol. IV, p. 278). But I think that is a mistake. The *facies totius universi* is given as an example of a mediate infinite mode. But I do not see how an infinite mode, which is supposed to follow from the absolute nature of one of the divine attributes, could be entirely constituted by a collection of objects none of which follows from the absolute nature of any attribute. So I incline to interpret the *facies totius universi* not as the whole of nature itself, but as certain general features of the whole of nature, viz. those in which certain laws of extended nature are ‘inscribed,’ to use the language of TdIE §101.

Spinoza goes on to complain about another view Van Velthuysen ascribes to him, which needn't concern us here. What's relevant for our purposes is that what he complains about is the legitimacy of the inference from the proposition all things emanate necessarily from God to the proposition that the universe is God. It seems that he accepts the first proposition, but not the second. He rejects the idea that the universe itself is God.

My conclusion at this point, then, is that to the extent that Toland understands pantheism to be the idea that the universe is God, his pantheism is one Spinoza would have rejected. But I don't think that's the end of the story. As we've seen, sometimes Toland defines pantheism that way, and sometimes he doesn't. Pantheism always means, for him, a view which holds that God is not separate from the universe. But he doesn't always say that God *is* the universe. Sometimes he says that God is "the force and energy of the whole," or that God is what animates the universe. When he uses this language, his conception of pantheism might be better captured by the formula that God is not identical with the universe, but immanent in it. That's something Spinoza clearly held: E I P18 affirms that God is the immanent cause of all things. The problem is to explain exactly what this means for Spinoza. I think the following answer is implicit in the interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics which I have offered, in various works, but never tried to articulate till now.¹⁵

I start with the proposition that the power of God is to be identified with the power of Nature, which in turn is to be identified with the universal laws and rules of Nature. That he would make the first identification seems clear from the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics* (cited above, n. 13). That he would make the second appears from the Preface to Part III:

Nothing happens in Nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, for Nature is always the same, and everywhere its virtue and power of acting are the same, that is, the laws and rules of nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form into others, are everywhere and always the same. And therefore, there must always be one and the same way of understanding the nature of things, of whatever kind, namely, the laws and rules of Nature (Gebhardt 1926, Vol. II, p. 138).

The second proposition is that the power of individual finite things is part of the infinite power of God *or* Nature. As Spinoza puts it in E IVP4D:

The power by which singular things, and consequently man, conserves his being, is the very power of God, *or* Nature (by IP24C), not insofar as it is infinite, but insofar as it can be explained by the actual essence of man (by IIIP7). Therefore, the power of man, insofar as it can be explained by his actual essence, is part of the infinite power of God, *or* Nature, that is (by IP34), of his [God's] essence (E IVP4D).

What this means, I think, is that each individual in Nature has a certain power to preserve his being, and to strive to increase his power of action. That power is defined by a law of nature, deducible from the fundamental laws of nature, which determines how a thing with that particular internal constitution will act on other

¹⁵In this portion of my paper I'm indebted to Steve Nadler, who challenged me to give an explanation of God's immanence, and to Minna Koivuniemi, with whom I had useful conversations about the concept of an individual essence in Spinoza.

things, and react to their actions on it. The law of nature which governs the operations of this particular thing, and which constitutes its power, is a part of the infinite power of God, in the sense that, being deducible from the fundamental laws of nature, it is contained within those laws. So it's not that God *is* the totality of individual finite things in Nature. Rather God *is*, or has, an infinite power of acting which finds expression in infinitely many finite things, whose individual powers are contained in his power. This is the sense in which God is the immanent cause of all things. To the extent that Toland thinks of pantheism in this way, as involving the presence in particular finite things of a power which is part of the power of the whole of Nature, I think he articulates a genuinely spinozistic form of pantheism.

But there are two other aspects of Toland's late conception of pantheism which deserve our attention, which tend to complicate the picture. First, Toland still conceives of God as a teleological agent. God is a force or energy which always "tends towards the best end"; "the best reason and most perfect order regulate(s) all things in the Universe." This is very unspinozistic.¹⁶ Second, although late Toland doesn't identify God with the universe, he does say that God is "not separated from the Universe, except by reason alone." I take this to be a way of saying that the distinction between God and the universe is a distinction of reason, not a real distinction: that is, although we can distinguish conceptually between God and the universe, neither God nor the universe can exist without the other. This is a genuinely spinozistic feature of Toland's pantheism. That the universe cannot exist without God, is clear enough. Spinoza holds that all finite things exist in and are conceived through the one substance. And that God cannot exist without the universe is also clear. That's a consequence of the fact that all things follow *necessarily* from the divine nature. Unlike the God of traditional theism, God does not create the world by an act of free will at some point in time. He creates necessarily and for eternity.

To sum up: in his earliest works, Toland seems to define pantheism in a rather crude way, as involving an identification of God with the universe which is not spinozistic; but in his latest work he is operating with a more sophisticated conception of pantheism, a more nearly spinozistic conception, which makes God a force acting everywhere in the universe, and acting necessarily. Because this force acts necessarily, it can be distinguished from the world it produces only by reason. All this is good spinozistic doctrine. What is, even in Toland's late conception of pantheism, quite unspinozistic is his conception of God as a teleological agent.

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¹⁶Cf. the rejection of divine teleology in the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*, Gebhardt (1925, Vol. II, pp. 78–79).

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Suggested Readings: Ultimate Unity

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Part IX
Divine Multiplicity

Introduction to Divine Multiplicity

George I. Mavrodes

Most “Westerners,” when the topic of religion comes up, will probably think first of the big three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But these three religions do not by any means constitute the whole religious picture of the world. There are millions of people whose religious life is lived out in the thought and practice of revering multiple gods. In this section of the book we have included three papers that deal with religions that involve divine multiplicity. I also discuss a fourth paper on this topic which is included in the volume under the Process Theology section where it also belongs.

I have written a general paper on this topic called “Polytheism” which could not be republished here for a technical reason, but which is another resource on the topic of divine multiplicity for your reference.¹ It is an attempt to explore the concept of polytheism, and the ways in which polytheism might be related to its common contrasts, which are atheism and monotheism. I also try to explore and clarify the various ways in which a person might relate to one or another of these “isms.” I suggest that there are several different senses in which a single person might plausibly be said to “be” a polytheist, or a monotheist, or, for that matter, an atheist. And so I say of myself that I am, in one sense, a monotheist, and in another sense I am a polytheist. As you read the other papers, you might ask yourself whether my analysis is helpful in your own thinking about the topic.

Two of the papers in this volume deal with two different African religions, each associated with a particular ethnic community. And each of these authors appeals to a different twentieth century philosopher or theologian to supply an illuminating model for understanding the African religion.

¹ In *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, edited by Thomas D. Senor, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

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Monica A. Coleman's paper, "From Models of God to a Model of Gods," the paper about divine multiplicity included in the Process Theology section, deals with traditional Yoruba religion which, she says, "can be described as the worship of a supreme deity ... under various forces or deities..." There are many of the latter "sub-deities," with ten or so being of more importance than the others.

This might be thought of as a combination of monotheism (the supreme deity) and polytheism (the various sub-deities). But I think that Coleman thinks that is not a useful suggestion. She suggests "Communotheism" and a "divine communalism." Perhaps this is something like thinking that there are the sub-deities who "have genders, stories, geographical and natural associations ... characteristics, herbs, personalities, and devotees." And then the supreme deity is constituted by this community of sub-deity. She cites several Yoruba writers who appeal to a model like this one, including one who suggests that it might be compared with the Christian idea of the Holy Trinity.

Coleman's own favorite model is one she gets from the work of a twentieth century western philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead was probably not thinking at all about Yoruba religion, but he suggested that God might be thought to have two distinct (but related) natures. Roughly, the primordial nature of God is what God is entirely independently of his interaction with the world. His consequent nature is what he becomes as he receives into himself whatever transpires in the world.

Jawanza Eric Clark's paper, "The Great Ancestor," treats the divine multiplicity of a different ethnic group, the Akan people of Ghana. But his description of Akan divine multiplicity makes it seem very much like that of the Yoruba described by Coleman. In fact, he cites the same African scholar, Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, to whom Coleman refers. And again there is a strong emphasis on the communitarian aspect of the religion. The living Akans, the ancestral Akans who have passed through death but who continue to live on as "the Ancestors," and the Great Ancestor constitute a single, interacting, community.

The Great Ancestor, however, plays a distinctive role. He seems not to be one of the ancestors, even the greatest one. He is, rather, the community. Or perhaps the relation that binds the community together.

Paul Tillich, a twentieth century philosophical theologian, famously said that God is not a being. He is, rather, Being itself, or the Ground of Being. And so Clark refers to "the Akan belief that God is not only relational, but is relation itself."

The second paper in this section is "Nature, Impersonality, and Absence in the Theology of Highest Clarity Daoism," by James Miller. Daoism is one of the major religious traditions of China. Highest Clarity Daoism is a version of Daoism that was prominent for about a 1,000 years of Chinese history, surviving until the fourteenth century. And Miller says that some elements of Highest Clarity Daoism survive in contemporary Chinese Daoism.

According to Miller, the religion involves a number of "perfected persons," human beings who have become celestial gods. So, a view involving divine multiplicity. But one with a strange feature. The transmutation of humans into gods is thought to be, not a supernatural affair, but a thoroughly natural process. And the

resulting gods are not supernatural beings. They are purely natural. There are no supernatural beings or events at all.

There seems to be here an idea that there is a single, comprehensive set of natural laws that govern everything that exists, everything that happens. Living human beings, perfected persons who have become gods, and everything else in the world exist and act in accordance with that set of laws. And so the gods do not act in what we might think of as “personal” ways. They have nothing spontaneous about them, nothing idiosyncratic, nothing unexpected, etc. So Miller suggests that the gods of Higher Clarity Daoism can best be understood as constituting a sort of celestial bureaucracy. Each one does his job strictly in accord with the standard regulations and protocols for that office, and any other god in that position would act in that same way. And so the proper way for living humans to interact with these gods is to approach them as bureaucrats, playing out a completely specified role in the specified way.

This is a surprising way, it seems to me, for a religion to function. But perhaps that is really the story of Highest Clarity Daoism. I wonder if there is any other view of divine multiplicity that has this feature.

In the section’s last paper, “Toward a New Model of the Hindu Pantheon,” Rita M. Gross directs our attention to a really major polytheistic religion, one with millions of adherents, mostly (but by no means entirely) in India. And in this essay she is concerned primarily with the topic of the gender of the divinities in the pantheon, particularly with the role of the feminine divinities, and the way in which that role has been widely misrepresented by western scholars (for more on gender in the Hindu pantheon, see also Ellen Goldberg’s essay in the Ultimate Unity section of this volume).

She argues vigorously that the goddesses, the feminine divinities, are as prominent and important in the Hindu religion as are their masculine counterparts, and she explores the ways this has been obscured in many scholarly accounts of the religion, especially by westerners.

A version of this topic, the gender of divinities, has recently been cropping up in connection with monotheistic religion. The “big three” monotheistic religions I mentioned earlier—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all have a long tradition of thinking, and talking, about God in masculine terms. They commonly use the masculine form of personal pronouns, etc. And there have recently been some vigorous challenges to this practice, at least within Christianity. And so some Christian scholars now say that, of course, God really doesn’t have any gender, masculine or feminine. God is a spirit, God has no body, etc. And so there are attempts (sometimes a little awkward) to find replacements for the pronouns, etc.

This problem would seem to be much more difficult to handle in Hinduism. At least if this scholar is correct, the genders really are important, probably irreplaceable, in the Hindu religion. But then there would seem to be a really serious problem about what it is about the divinities that gives them their different genders. To use a little of her own terminology, what makes the gals in the pantheon different from the guys?

Of course, if the divinities are not thought of as being pure spirits, if they are embodied in quasi-human bodies, then this problem might have a ready solution. But is that how we should think of the Hindu pantheon?

And now, two final observations for this introduction. I suggest them as things that might be useful to keep in mind as you read, and think about, the religions discussed here.

The first picks up something I mentioned earlier. And that is that the distinction between the monotheisms and beliefs in divine multiplicity may not be as sharp as it initially seems to be—simply the contrast between one and many. For there are monotheisms that seem to include an element of multiplicity—e.g., Christianity with its puzzling idea of the divine trinity—and views of divine multiplicity—such as the African religions included in this volume—that seem to posit some sort of unity composed of a large number of individual divine entities.

The other observation is that the study of religion involves an important distinction, a distinction between the view of the religion that one gets “from the inside,” and the “outsider’s view.”

Religions characteristically involve some idea of what reality is like, what is the truth about the context in which human life is lived, etc. There are claims about the gods, about impersonal ultimates, about human destiny beyond death, etc.

Religions also characteristically call on people to “give their heart” to the religion, to orient their lives around the realities that the religion claims to recognize, etc. There is a call there, a challenge, a demand to live in a certain way. The people who respond to the call of a particular religion (even if imperfectly) are the insiders of that religion, its adherents and practitioners. But it is also possible to study that religion from the outside, without responding to that call, without making that commitment. And that study might indeed result in a valuable description of the religion.

One can learn a lot about a religion from the outside. But maybe not everything. Or at least not everything about some religions. If a religion really does embody and express some genuine truth, then it may be that such a truth is not readily available, or recognizable, apart from the commitment. Maybe, indeed, there are religions that represent a truth that is not accessible at all without committing one’s heart. So the study of religion may be a project rife with surprises, and perhaps it is also not without some real dangers.

The Great Ancestor: An African Conception of God

Jawanza Eric Clark

The Akan of Ghana, West Africa often refer to God as Nana Nyame, God the Great Ancestor. This description of God, reflective of a traditional African worldview, belies conventional Western religious categories, specifically the oppositional categorization implicit in the terms monotheism and polytheism. God as Great Ancestor defies classical Western theism and the construction of God as a sovereign, often authoritarian, Supreme Being that exists apart from His creation. Such a construction of the divine highlights the need for new categories, idioms, and terminology that can more accurately discern specifically African ways of knowing and being such as A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya's notion of communotheism, or God as community. While a superficial understanding of God as the Great Ancestor seemingly evinces qualities akin to the classical Western notion of God, a deeper understanding reveals the way in which this God exhibits characteristics of a traditional African paradigm, a worldview that has respect for plurality, mystery, and the relational nature of God and existence itself.

For the Akan, the only theological absolute is that God is mystery. God is ultimately unknowable, yet African people, in their acknowledgement of human finitude, yearn to know and be in relation to this mystery; thus the African realizes that everything we say about God is mediated through the prism that is the human being. Religion then is a human enterprise, and theology, the study of God, is symbolic and unashamedly anthropocentric. The Akan conception of God as the Great Ancestor evinces this anthropocentrism and yet conveys a relational epistemology and ontology so fundamental to African ways of knowing and being. Ancestor, like the terms mother, father, sister, or brother, is a relational title. A Mother possesses the title mother because she lives and functions in relation to her child/ren. Her identity and reason for being, her purpose, is derived from this relationship. Likewise,

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an ancestor exists only in relationship to descendants. Without living human beings, the ancestors have no value, no purpose. Ancestors exist in relation to visible human beings, who depend upon their counsel, guidance, and protection. By referring to God as the Great Ancestor, the Akan show that God is not only relational, but God is relation itself, and that the human need for community, interdependence, and kinship are a part of the fabric of existence and indeed an aspect of divinity itself. In this essay, I hope to explore this particular expression of African theism. Through an examination of proverbs, a myth of creation, and an explication of the role of the ancestors, I argue that the Akan understand God as mysterious, relational, and ontologically related to humanity. In so doing, I aim to show that traditional Western religious categories are inadequate for accurately discerning and conveying the African theological perspective.

The richest sources for theological and philosophical inquiry and explication in virtually all indigenous West African cultures are proverbs and myths. John S. Mbiti says, “It is in proverbs that we find the remains of the oldest forms of African religious and philosophical wisdom” (Gyekye 1987). The Yoruba say a proverb is the horse of a conversation: when the conversation lags, a proverb revives it: proverbs and conversation follow each other” (Burton 1969). The significance of proverbs in African culture convey the importance placed on dialogue and the idea that truth is the product of discourse or relational exchange. Truth is a communal rather than an individualistic pursuit, and proverbs provide a primary source for acquiring religious knowledge. For example, the Akan say, “Every person is a child of God; no one is a child of the Earth.” And “if you want to talk to Nyame (God), say it the winds.” The latter proverb provides insight into the ephemeral, elusive yet immanent nature of God, and the former conveys the belief that humans’ are ontologically related to the divine. Together they reveal insight into the complexity of African notions of divinity and the way in which God is radically immanent yet also distant and mysterious.

Similarly, myths provide cultural context and posit theological knowledge of African conceptions of divinity and divinity’s relationship to humanity. One of the creation myths of the Akan is the myth of separation. It tells of an old woman who was pounding fufu (an indigenous Akan food) one day in such a loud and boisterous manner that she eventually hits the nose of Nyame (God) with her pestle. Such disruption results in Nyame ascending into the sky so as not to be disturbed by the woman’s cacophonous tasks (Gyekye 1987). Ghanaian philosopher, Kwame Gyekye, interprets this myth as suggesting that originally God was intended to be very close to or a part of our world, but that the myth “presents the notion of transcendence, a notion that entails the rejection of pantheism, which is the idea that equates God (Onyame) with the sum of all things” (1987, 15).

While I agree that the myth coheres with the Western notion of transcendence, I argue that it also shows deference for the mysterious nature of God. The myth conveys the way in which distance was created between God and humans which speaks to the African understanding that God is infinite and human beings are finite creatures. Humans are separated from God; there is a great distance between the two. God is, in a sense, unknowable. The myth of separation, however, should not

be interpreted as a myth of a fall. Within this worldview, human beings are not blameworthy nor should they be eternally punished for God's act of separation. The old woman pounding fufu was performing a task necessary for human survival; thus her act was not an 'original sin' but simply an expression of the very humanity that highlights the difference between God and us. This myth is a symbolic acknowledgement of human finitude and God's infinity and mystery. There are many things about God and God's nature that we, humans, will never know. Nyame's act of distancing himself from the old woman symbolizes the distance that exists between God and our ability to absolutely know God. The Akan show respect for Nyame's mystery in practice by rarely addressing Him directly. Much more time and energy is consumed with propitiations to ancestors and lesser divinities, categories of spiritual agents that both comprise God and serve distinct functions within the reality of God. And yet, for the Akan, it is clear that even that which we can know about God is deciphered through our human faculties; thus, our understanding of God is just that, **our** understanding of God. It is a human appropriation of God. The myth teaches us to acknowledge and respect the mystery of God and admit religion's anthropocentric nature. For the African, this means religion is unashamedly a human enterprise and must be pragmatic and practically beneficial since the only God we know is the God we can know, the God that relates to and is concerned about us.

Paul Tillich, a German philosophical theologian, spoke of God and God's relationship to humanity in similar terms. For Tillich, revelation is the unveiling of the mystery of God in the subjective experience of some specific group or individual. There is no revelation 'in general.' "Revelation is invariably revelation for someone in a concrete situation of concern;" consequently there is always a subjective quality to revelation (Tillich 1951). It is not absolute nor purely objective. According to Tillich, "revelation always is a subjective and an objective event in strict interdependence. Someone is grasped by the manifestation of the mystery; this is the subjective side of the event. Something occurs through which the mystery of revelation grasps someone; this is the objective side. These two sides cannot be separated. The objective occurrence and the subjective reception belong to the whole event of revelation" (1951, 111). Tillich's theology is sensitive to the dialectical tension that exists between the objective event, the miracle, and the subjective, human reception and interpretation of the miracle. His theology echoes the African belief that when it comes to the divine, practitioners see, understand, and come to know only that which they are capable of seeing, understanding, and knowing. Efforts to avoid this inevitable subjectivity and rely on some presumed objective source, whether a sacred book, object, or person, are futile endeavors within this African orientation.

Gyekye argues that the Akan myth of separation points away from a pantheistic conception of God. God is not simply the universe, but the universe is a part of God. The Akan say, "If you want to talk to Nyame, say it to the winds." This God is at once elusive, intangible and invisible, yet present everywhere. In fact, the Akan believe we exist within the reality of God. God, like the wind, is in us and simultaneously always all around us. Such a conception, while not pantheistic, does point towards a panentheistic understanding of the divine. Again Tillich is helpful because

his theology is one of the few among Western theologians that affirms human subjectivity and acknowledges religion as primarily a human enterprise while simultaneously affirming the objective miraculous and mysterious. His theology perhaps comes closest to providing categories useful in discerning the African religious perspective. Tillich's claim is that God is not a being, but the ground of all being. God is being-itself, that which enables being, essence and existence (1951, 235). For Tillich, humans are creatures and are a part of God but at the same time are alienated from God and thus have to ask the question of being. Why am I here? What is my purpose? What do I exist to do? These are questions that can only be answered by Being-itself; as a result, Tillich argues philosophical questions demand theological answers. The question of being demands a response from Being-itself. In African terms, God is the animating force that makes life possible, the one who answers the question of life purpose. According to Akan anthropology, the ancestor symbolizes actualized human potential, a realized life purpose. One can only ascend to the ancestral realm upon fulfillment of his/her human destiny. And that destiny, that purpose, comes directly from God prior to birth; thus, Nana Nyame, God the Great Ancestor, is a personification of divinity's responsibility to provide purpose and meaning to human life. Philosophical questions demand theological answers.

I began with an explication of Africans' respect for God's mystery to make the point that the construction of God as the Great Ancestor is clearly symbolic. The Great Ancestor personifies the concern God has for human achievement. The Akan have many names for God. No one name exhausts what God is; therefore, God is not referred to exclusively as the Great Ancestor but this title shows the way in which Africans' acknowledge the anthropocentric nature of theology and the relational character of God. No title more clearly shows the value or importance God places on human fulfillment. This anthropomorphic representation of God, however, also strangely reveals the Akan belief that God is not only relational, but is relation itself.

As I have stated elsewhere, the relationship the ancestors have to the living, visible community evinces a relational ontology and epistemology. The ancestors are spiritual extensions of one's living parents. They are a part of one's kith and kin. And just as parents expect obedience, respect, and a certain amount of attention from their children, so do the ancestors by extension. They behave therefore in a parental manner; thus, the notion of how to be a parent becomes cemented in the consciousness of people for generations. The ancestors are the norm for and definition of parental authority. They punish disrespect and disobedience as a living parent would (Akrong). These beings maintain their social connection to the living and foster relationships based on reciprocal obligations. Social relationships between living human beings depend upon reciprocity and this principle of reciprocity extends to those disembodied human beings who continue to seek nurturance and respect from the living even in the ancestral world. In this way, the ancestors help convey the belief that kinship bonds are eternal and everlasting. Parental, familial bonds not only transcend death but also can be enhanced and strengthened by death (Clark 2012).

In exchange for respect and due diligence in the performance of specific rites of propitiation and communion, the ancestors are themselves obligated to then offer

protection and well-being to those earthly children that obediently comply with their wishes. This protection is invoked through the pouring of libations and the making of sacrifices. Ancestral blessings are sought to protect one against the forces of “witchcraft,” professional and business-related misfortune, and bodily illness. The ancestors can similarly cause misfortune and bodily illness if they **feel** violated (Akrong). It is said that they participate in the experience of human emotion and register disrespect, and respect, in the same way that a living, visible human being might (Clark, 94).

Within Akan culture, ancestors are the norm and establish the basis through which indigenous African religions, particularly among the Akan of Ghana, are maintained and discerned. They are fully realized, complete, and thoroughly accomplished human beings; consequently, they are idealized expressions of what the human being is fundamentally. As the norm, the ancestors provide the lenses through which humans beings relate to God. By referring to God as the Great Ancestor, the Akan show the way in which relationality and reciprocity are a part of the substance of God. Abraham Akrong, an African theologian, argues:

The ancestors are the origin and foundation of the community and also the mediators of the divine vitality that comes to the individual through the cycles of generational life. They are the roots and sources of the relationships that define the identity of the community. The ancestors are the source of life of the community and custodians of its moral ideas. The ancestors in the life of the African stand for fertility, security, prosperity, social and moral obligations, protection and well-being....Precisely because of the preeminence of the ancestral symbol as the source of life and wholeness, the Akans refer to God as the great ancestor of the human race—“Nana Nyame” (57)

As I indicated in my work, Indigenous Black Theology, Akrong goes further to describe God, the Great Ancestor, as “a community of relations who gives identity to the whole of creation through different levels of relationship” (58). God is appropriately called Father, a loving parent, but this term can never be used exclusively for “Father” does not exhaust the multiplicity of relationships encompassed within the Being of God and evinced in human social relationships on Earth. God is father, mother, sibling, cousin, aunt, uncle, friend, confidante, nature, and all these agents conjoined. God is “the community of relations” that establishes and maintains communal, human existence. The ancestors, the original parents, are constitutive of what these communal relations are and prescribe the way in which they are maintained and flourish. As idealized, complete human beings, the ancestors determine and define how human identity is constructed and how social ties are sustained. They set the standard for human relating, bonding, and social interaction. It is with an eye toward the ancestors that each stage of human life is defined and roles are structured. They literally create the family, and God is understood only through the interpretive lens that they establish. As custodians of tradition, the ancestors enforce moral obligations thereby defining that which is moral. They are, in effect, the authors of existence for they write the meaning and the goal of life into the customs and mores of African society. Speaking of God, Abraham Akrong asserts, “Creation is the only source of knowledge of God. Through creation, human beings have glimpses of the nature and the reality of God” (58). The human aspect of this

creation, however, is most ideally glimpsed by looking at the ancestors, who are the most exemplary of all of God's creation. The dead are not dead, but they, in fact, hold together society and even humanity's relationship to, and understanding of, God (Clark, 99).

This community of relations includes visible human beings and invisible ancestors, but the godhead also includes other lesser deities, or divinities, which are related to one another. For this reason, some African scholars believe the simple duality between Western notions of monotheism and polytheism are insufficient categories with which to explain African theism. A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya speaks of African ideas about God as communitarian divinity. "Divine Communalism is the position that the Divine is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and ontologically equal while at the same time distinct from one another by their personhood and functions (Ogbonnaya 1994)." God is relation. Ogbonnaya argued that many first generation Western trained African scholars sought to defend African religions against the pejorative label of polytheism by insisting that these religions are in fact monotheistic. Ogbonnaya makes clear, however, that this is only partially true and perhaps does more to distort and obfuscate than clarify the African understanding of God. He argues the problem lies with the inherent limitations of the categories themselves. "For this we need another term: a word like *communotheism*, a community of gods (1994, 23)." Community, in the African sense, will reflect better the affirmation of both the One and the Many, and the relationship of the many to the one, than the categories monotheism and polytheism. The noun *communotheism* asserts forthrightly the claim that divinity is communal.

Finally, Akan theism embodies plurality and mystery, yet it also defines humans as ontologically related to the divine. The Akan say "If Onyame should die, I will die, but since Onyame does not die, I will not die." Also, "every person is a child of God; no one is a child of the Earth." So while God is mysterious and in some sense distant, and is comprised of multiple spiritual beings that form a divine community, Africans also believe that human beings possess a spark of divinity and are therefore ontologically and metaphysically related to God. This spark of divinity is called the *Kra*, which is sometimes translated to Western audiences as soul, but it is more akin to the human's roadmap, that aspect of a person that comes directly from God and embodies his/her God-given purpose, his/her reason for being (Gyekye 1987). If the human being fulfills her purpose, this spark meets metaphysical completion in the ancestral realm after death. As such it is that aspect of the human being that cannot die, since it is a part of God and God does not die. Similarly, the fact that all human beings possess a *Kra* proves that we are children of God, meaning we are creations of God sent here to fulfill a purpose given to us by God. Thus, "every person is a child of God; no one is a child of the Earth." While affirming the mysterious, communal nature of the divine, the Akan are also able to hold in tension and make clear that human beings are ontologically related to the divine. Human beings are a part of the family of God. It is therefore fitting that "Nana" means "grandfather" in ordinary social contexts yet also refers to God as the Great Ancestor, "Nana Nyame." Such a title is an appropriate symbol to convey the Akan belief that God parents each of us to the fulfillment of our individual destinies.

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Nature, Impersonality, and Absence in the Theology of Highest Clarity Daoism

James Miller

The Way of Highest Clarity (Shangqing dao 上清道) flourished for a 1,000 years in medieval China from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries. It was a distinct branch of the Daoist religion formed around its own scriptural revelation transmitted under the authority of a lineage of 45 patriarchs. Although it no longer exists in any overt institutional form, its practices were absorbed into the mainstream Daoist traditions that continue to this day. It thus constitutes an important link between the earliest organized religious traditions that emerged in the latter Han (25–220) and the modern forms of Daoism that were developed from the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) onwards.

It originated in a series of revelations from a variety of “perfected persons,” former human beings who had been transfigured into powerful celestial gods. The revelations from these gods were written down in texts which describe lush celestial paradises inhabited by a vast panoply of divine personages served by “jade maidens” and “lads,” and who lived a life of sumptuous luxury and ease. The texts also explain that the way to this Heaven of Highest Clarity consists in repeating the process by which these perfected beings were revealed in the first place: namely, by mentally visualizing their descent from heaven and their entry into the body of the individual. This can occur at the specific times and places when the vast and obscure operations of the cosmos make this contact possible.

Through this process of visualization, the transformative powers of the gods are once again revealed, and the body of the adept is transfigured into the same type of perfected being who revealed these celestial worlds in the first place. The adept’s body then avoids death completely and, while still alive but in a transfigured state, ascends to heaven in broad daylight, leaving behind no earthly token. Those who do

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not manage to achieve this transfiguration die but, through the intervention of perfected beings, may be reborn in paradise as “immortals.”¹ Such persons obtain a position within the celestial hierarchy inferior to that of the perfected beings, but nonetheless avoid much of the trauma experienced by those condemned to a post-mortem existence in the underworld. Those unfortunates are tortured, tried and punished by sadistic officials in the three bureaux of heaven, earth and water in order to work off the accumulated guilt of their misdeeds, and they are separated from their friends and family. Such a fate is to be avoided at all costs.²

The Way of Highest Clarity thus regards humans as living in a space between the biological process of earth and the constellated spiritual powers of the heavens. Within the hierarchy of the cosmos, humans rank above the animal world, but below the heavenly world. But because natural law is understood as a law of transformation, Highest Clarity Daoists believe that it is possible to change one’s fundamental nature in an act of cosmic transfiguration and, as it were, metamorphose from one’s earthly status to that of a celestial being. Again it is important to understand that although this involves transcending the ordinary givenness of human life in a literal and metaphorical ascension to the stars, this is not, strictly speaking, a supernatural process, because the heavens are governed by the same laws of nature as every other part of the created order. Bodily ascension, though rare and wondrous, is understood as a wholly natural transformation of the body that is open to anyone who had been initiated into the scriptures and who has the dedication to pursue the methods they detail.

Natural Gods

To understand more precisely how the tradition regarded the celestial realm of gods and spirits as the part of the natural, rather than supernatural, realm, it is necessary to examine the theology of Highest Clarity in more detail. The key point here is that whereas in the Western traditions, the world of gods and heavens is understood as being supernatural, that is to say, beyond the normal operation of the laws of nature, in Highest Clarity Daoism, this is not the case: both gods and humans are subject to the same universal law, the pattern of the Dao. In the classical Abrahamic faiths, the reverse is the case. God is transcendent. Nature exists in the way that it does because of God, whether nature is understood as the divine “Word” of the Torah, the *logos*

¹ The precise meaning of the term immortal (*xian* 仙) is widely contested among different movements and historical periods within the Daoist tradition. In the Highest Clarity texts under discussion in this book, the term has a specific meaning in terms of the ranking of various classes of “immortals” within the celestial realms, and is always considered inferior to the “perfected person” (*zhenren* 真人).

² Unlike the Celestial Masters tradition, which specified in great detail the functioning of the underworld, many Highest Clarity texts do not tend to focus on this, preferring instead to emphasize the benefits of a life in paradise (see Robinet 1984: 1.66). A detailed discussion of the evolution of ideas concerning the afterlife in early medieval China, and their relationship to Buddhist concepts of death and rebirth, can be found in Bokenkamp (2007).

of Johannine theology, or in terms of the natural philosophy of Islamic scholasticism. In Daoism, the opposite is true.

Nature, or to be more precise, human observation of natural processes, provides the template for the theological imagination. Consequently there can be no absolute disjunction between the processes of earth and the processes of the heavens. The gods are significant because they embody the fundamental abstractions of natural processes even better than human beings.³

But the second consequence of this (to Western thought) inverted view of the relationship between theology and nature, is that personality is not a strong feature of Highest Clarity Daoist gods. Although the tradition has many anthropomorphic gods, these gods are not to be explained in terms of their histories and actions, as are the various gods of the Hebrew scriptures or Greek mythology. In the European and West Asian religious traditions what becomes important about the various gods is their (all-too-human) characteristics: gods are important precisely for the personal qualities that they embody. Gods are loving, just, merciful, wise, faithful, jealous, capricious, powerful, or treacherous. In short they are analogous to human beings, and though they may have superhuman powers they retain entirely human personalities. But in Highest Clarity Daoism, my argument is that gods are important not because of their analogy to humans but because of their analogy to nature. In particular, the impersonality and impassivity of nature are the gods' most powerful attributes, and the higher up the pantheon, the more abstract, impassive and inhuman the gods become. Gods are important not because they are loving or kind, but because, as instantiations of the Dao, they are compelled to follow inexorably the fundamental laws or patterns of the cosmos.

To explain this argument requires investigating the connection between religious ritual and natural law in Highest Clarity Daoism. Here it is important to distinguish two distinct religious strains that are evident in the tradition: that of the bureaucratic theological tradition and that of the personal religious encounter. Highest Clarity Daoism combines these two emphases. The initial revelations of gods as described by Yang Xi are often described in intimate terms like that of a marriage. However, as the tradition developed, the influence of the bureaucratic tradition of formal encounters with the gods came to the fore. The Highest Clarity texts discussed in this book clearly imagine ritual encounters with their gods as formal, bureaucratic

³This helps explain why Daoism never developed a strong creation narrative similar to the narratives of Genesis or Gilgamesh. There was no need to explain how the gods created the natural world, because it was impossible to conceive of the gods as existing outside or beyond those natural processes. For this reason many people speak of the Dao, that is to say, the ultimate creative process of the cosmos, as being an immanent, rather than a transcendent process, and offer a sharp contrast with the transcendent deity of the Western traditions. Strictly speaking, however, the language of transcendence and immanence cannot be applied to the Daoist cosmos because such a language automatically implies the possibility of something existing outside or beyond the natural world. Even to say that the Dao is immanent in nature implies necessarily the difference between the Dao and nature, and such a view could never be entertained within the conceptual vocabulary of Daoism.

encounters, rather than personal, intimate unions. Here is a typical example from the *Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center's Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao*:

On the day Spring Begins and the *jia[zi]* and *yi[chou]* days of the first month, in the early morning look to the north. There will be purple, green and white clouds, which are the Three Pure Feathered Clouds of the Supreme Three Pure Ladies. At this time the Three Primes take the eight-bearer chariot, ascending to visit the Supreme Emperor of Heaven. Following them you will see the three-colored clouds. At this time you must visualize in your mind knocking your head to the floor and striking yourself. Visualize in your mind making four double bows, [then] present yourself and beg as follows:

"A certain great-grandson has a degree of love for the Way and its Power and has cultivated the [Way of] the Nine Perfected, purified his five spirits and has also brought about the perception of the Imperial Lord of Heaven. Let it be recorded today that he has had an auspicious encounter with the Three Prime Lords while out on their travels and pleads to be granted the service of a chariot. He prays for the satisfaction of his desires."

If you see the carriages of the Prime Lords three times, then you will ascend to immortality in broad daylight and will have no further need of visual meditation. Whatever [you desire] will be granted. Practicing the Eight [Secret Sayings of the] Dao's words of blessing and obeisance are also like this. This is what is known as the Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao. Only those who possess an immortal register should hear about it (trans. Miller 2008: 201).

There are many interesting elements in this passage that are commented on in detail in the translation, but for the present purposes it is important to focus on the parallels with courtly ritual. The ultimate goal of this encounter is ascending to immortality in broad daylight. This is achieved by being sent a "chariot" of clouds from heaven which will take the adept back into the skies. The chariot is sent after a visual encounter with a high-ranking deity who has the power to send the clouds. It involves submitting before him, making a petition couched in formal court language and having the details of the encounter officially recorded. Many passages in the Highest Clarity Daoist texts evoke similar courtly themes to this. Daoist adepts present petitions to the gods as one might do to an emperor. The gods are addressed respectfully by their titles, as one might address an official from whom one sought a favor. The gods are imagined wearing courtly dress, living in luxurious palaces, waited on by servant boys and girls. Highest Clarity Daoists also symbolize immortality in terms of being ennobled by the court and presented with letters of title to that effect.

From this analysis it might seem more obvious to interpret the heaven of Highest Clarity by analogy with the imperial court, the gods by analogy with emperors, and the religious ritual by analogy with courtly ritual. If all this were true, then it would make more sense to say that the world of Highest Clarity is an eminently human world, a personal and social world, rather than a world of natural law and cosmic forces. In fact this is precisely the stumbling block that many interpreters of Daoism have had to deal with in attempting to see the connection between the natural philosophy of *The Way and Its Power* (*Daode jing* 道德經) and the bureaucratic, legalistic and godly world of Daoist religion. In my analysis, what is at stake in this question is how one understands the gods. If the gods are like human beings, and the religious communications like personal correspondence, then it is indeed difficult to connect Highest Clarity Daoism with the natural philosophy of *The Way and Its Power*. However, it is my argument here that Highest Clarity Daoism is indeed directly linked to the natural philosophy of *The Way and Its Power* through the

Daoist bureaucratic theological tradition and that, as the tradition matured and developed beyond the original revelations in southern China, the gods came to be understood more by analogy with natural forces than human personalities.

This is not to discount the absolutely significant role played by intimate encounters with personal gods, such as those described in the compilation of Highest Clarity revelations, known as *Declarations of the Perfected* (*Zhen'gao* 真告). Clearly such personal encounters aided in the advancing of individual causes with regards to the afterlife and can be understood proximately in social and personal terms. However, my argument here is that an equally important strand of Highest Clarity practices envisages encounters with gods in an impersonal way that is concerned with bringing about the full flourishing of the cosmos. In the practices detailed in the texts in this book, the thoroughly personal and social relationships established between humans and the gods serve an altogether metaphysical and cosmic purpose that transcends the mundane concerns of the living and the dead.⁴

Consider, first of all, the purpose of the ritual, namely being assumed bodily into heaven. This is conceived as an act within the realm of the natural world, though it involves a radical transfiguration of nature, that is to say reconfiguring nature so as to achieve some ultimate transformation. This process of natural transfiguration bears a close connection to the alchemical tradition, which sought physical immortality through the refining and ingestion of natural substances. Note further that ascension is not a reward for moral activity: heaven is not a place where the good are rewarded for their virtuous actions.

Ascension here is granted as a result of engaging and petitioning the gods of heaven who live in the starry sky above to be admitted into their fold. In short the text couches the transfiguration of nature in the form and language of the court. To put it another way, the process of ascension should not be understood as a “natural” metaphor for some transformation within the social realm. That would be a thoroughly modern Durkheimian misreading of what the Highest Clarity adepts envisage they are doing.⁵ Rather, for the Highest Clarity adept, the courtly imagery is the

⁴ Readers who are interested to learn more about the social world of Highest Clarity religion should consult Bokenkamp (2007).

⁵ To explain this concept further it might also be useful to make a distinction between Daoist and Confucian ritual. The ritual of the Confucian court is bound up in the importance of convention. For Confucian ritual theorists, such as Xunzi, what is important about the world of human civilization is its pure conventionality. Humans manage their interactions through language and culture in ways that are wholly arbitrary and independent of their natural forces and inclinations. Xunzi most clearly argued this when he observed that rain falls independently of whether humans pray for it or not. That is to say, the world of religion and ritual are, in his view, absolutely distinct from the laws of nature. In this regard his views are similar to the Deists of early modern Europe who argued that the providence and goodness of deity lies not in the biblical god's intervention in human salvation history, but in his providential ordering of the laws of the universe so as to facilitate the overall flourishing of the human enterprise. In Xunzi's view, therefore, religious and courtly ritual is important not because it influences the heavens to be more disposed to the specific needs of human beings, but because of its effect in knitting together human societies in ways that are, overall, productive. In this regard, his view may be compared to that of Durkheim, for whom the ultimate object of religion is not any putative god or gods but rather society itself.

metaphorical element in this ritual; the deeper reality to which it points is the transfiguration of nature. Nature is not a symbol for some deeper social or spiritual reality; rather the courtly imagery is the symbolic vehicle for the transformation of natural reality.⁶

Thus while Highest Clarity ritual is proximately concerned with the social, legal and political ordering of the conventional world, it also aims towards a higher religiosity. This higher religiosity is based on engaging the seemingly implacable forces of nature that govern the fundamental horizons of human existence, namely the processes of birth and death. And while the ritual formulas for engaging with these processes bear a strong resemblance to the court ritual of the Confucian state, the ultimate goal is clearly Daoist, rather than Confucian, for the whole panoply of ritual is directed towards human interaction with the powers of nature.

Secondly, it is necessary to consider more carefully the courtly way in which the gods are described. Although the description of the gods can be quite detailed—riding chariots, trailing clouds and wearing various brocade vestments—nothing of this description is in any way personal. Rather, it all related to official function: these gods are not personalities but bureaucrats. Similarly the courtly ritual is not a personal encounter but rather a form of official correspondence. Gods are not addressed by their name, nor do they have any personal dwelling or personal characteristics. They are addressed by their title, in their official residence, wearing official vestments, about matters to do with their official function. It matters not in the slightest who they actually are, if indeed these gods have any individuality to them. The only thing that matters is their official capacity.

Here the connection to nature becomes even more evident, for what distinguishes the function of someone in an official capacity and someone in a personal capacity is that the bureaucrat is compelled by his official nature to function in accord with the laws of the bureaucratic system of which he is an element. Without the system he has no official capacity at all; in such a case he would simply be an “ordinary person.” But what gives the bureaucrat his power is that that he is not acting as an “ordinary person” but rather he subsumes his personality within his official function, thus becoming ideally “faceless.”

Highest Clarity adepts do not generally call on the gods by their personal names, or pray to them as one’s “heavenly father,” but address them by their official title: “Imperial Lord” or “Supreme Unity.” Whereas an important element of devotional religions is the intimate encounter between the adept and the god, calling the god by name, seeing his or her face and entering into a relationship based on love, this is precisely the opposite of what this bureaucratic aspect of Highest Clarity religion desires. The last thing that an adept wants is for the gods to exercise their power as a result of personal grace and favor. Should the gods start acting on the basis of whim or individual personality, the universe would become entirely capricious, and the religion would be indistinguishable from popular Chinese religion where people

⁶The supplementary question that this raises is why did the practitioners of Highest Clarity deem it necessary to construct and imagine their ultimate religious goal in these terms? The answer must be sought in the social-historical reality of the world of Highest Clarity practitioners.

pray for good fortune in the gambling house. Yes, the gods are imagined as superhuman beings, but they are largely understood as impersonal, faceless and dispassionate superhuman beings who, unlike the wholly personal Buddhist bodhisattvas, do not operate on the basis of sympathy or compassion with the suffering of mortal humans.

Consider more closely the way in which the adept in this passage prays for the “satisfaction of his desires.” He does not ask the god for mercy or for some kind of special treatment. He simply asks the god to recognize that he has done what is required of him. He has cultivated his person, purified his spirit and visualized the gods. The basis of his request is thus that he is officially qualified and legally entitled to achieve immortality. The purpose of the petition is thus not to beg the god for mercy, but to recognize and validate the legitimacy of the petitioner’s actions. The god has no choice in this matter inasmuch as he is discharging his official function as a celestial bureaucrat. He has to comply with the request because it is made in accordance with what is legally required. But unlike the earthly bureaucrat who is carrying out the law that is the expressed will of the sovereign or, in a democracy, the expressed will of the people, the celestial bureaucrat is carrying out the law of the Dao. This law is not the expression of divine will but simply the law of nature, understood as the economy of cosmic power that governs the transactions between Daoist adepts and the heavens.

This points to another fundamental distinction between Chinese and West Asian theology. In the West Asian theological system, the god of the Bible and the Koran expresses his divine power through his will. In the Torah, the Biblical god chooses to be the god of the Israelites just because he decides to choose them and not others, and issues laws that the Israelites have to comply with in return for being the chosen people. In the Koran, similarly, humans must submit to the divine will as expressed in the revelation to the Prophet precisely because it is the expression of the divine will. There appears, however, to be no such possibility for voluntarism in Highest Clarity Daoist theology.⁷ There is a law, but no lawgiver; and there is a creation, but no creator. Thus in such a system, although gods may have the appearance of humans and may act in ways that bear a formal correspondence to human actions, the underlying principle that governs these gods is not personality or humanity but rather impersonality and the natural law of the cosmic economy.

This “impersonality” does not describe the whole range of human-divine encounters within the Highest Clarity tradition.⁸ Highest Clarity Daoism emerged as a synthesis of southern Chinese spirit-medium religion with Daoist visions of nature and bureaucracy and thus incorporates many different kinds of theological approaches.

⁷ Indeed, if possessing a personal will is a requirement for the definition of godhood, then in Highest Clarity Daoism we are not dealing with gods at all, and the word “theology” cannot apply. However, this strongly personalist and voluntarist reading of deity is not the only way to read gods in general, or the Abrahamic god in particular. The difference, however, is that while voluntarism is a legitimate theological option in West Asian theologies, it is not at all in Highest Clarity Daoist theology.

⁸ For a discussion of Highest Clarity spirituality that more clearly falls within the rubric of intimate spiritual encounters, see Kroll (1996) and Bokenkamp ([1996](#)).

However, in this historical religious synthesis the impersonal bureaucratic tradition played the dominant role, and the intimate encounters of spirit-mediums such as Yang Xi with Highest Clarity goddesses were not spiritual ends in themselves. By the time of the Highest Clarity patriarch Zhu Ziyi's (976–1029) preface to the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto*, the tradition had become firmly located within the impersonal metaphysics of the Dao.

Highest Clarity Daoists thus employ the rich web of courtly ritual and legalistic language in order to address themselves to and effect some transfiguration within, the vital power of the cosmos. To do so requires first of all conceiving of the vital power of the cosmos as functioning according to some law or principle and, secondly, that that principle must contain within itself the notion of correspondence or reciprocity between the human world and the cosmos. The latter principle establishes the possibility of effective engagement with the ultimate forces of the universe—that they are in some way disposed to respond to human activity. The former principle establishes the possibility of some kind of formulaic, systematic engagement with these forces of the cosmos, rather than the *ad hoc* activities of unstructured popular religion.

These two principles form the condition for the possibility of Highest Clarity religious ritual, that is to say, universal formulas for effective correspondence with the divine. Ritual prescribes the basic formula or template for correspondence between the adept and the god, a correspondence conceived as a formal encounter. The formality, or formulaic nature, of ritual is key because it ensures that the personality of the individual and, indeed, the personality of the god are entirely irrelevant to the process of spiritual transformation. Again, this is exactly the opposite of the “personal spirituality” of the modern West, in which the personal beliefs and moral feelings of the individual are key to the successful religious life. But in Highest Clarity Daoism, individual belief and feeling are subsumed under the systematic, equalizing power of ritual formulas.

The Highest Clarity view of “natural ritual” points towards a view of nature not as a collection of objects, but rather as a collection of powers who extended their influence through a variety of pathways or “daos.” To return to the earlier discussion of fluids and solids, Daoists generally hold fluids to be the foundation of nature, which operates according to the binary rhythm of *yin* and *yang*, a view that goes back to the Zhou dynasty *Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi* 周易). The basic principle of *yin* and *yang* is that of an eternal, immutable correspondence, which is exactly the same presupposition for imagining religious rituals as pathways of fluid communication between the various elements of the cosmos. But how exactly are *yin* and *yang* understood as key phases within the fluidity of nature? A treatise on *yin* and *yang* in the *Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic, Simple Questions* (*Huangdi neijing suwen* 黃帝內經素問) helps to explain these categories:

Heaven arose out of the accumulation of *yang*; the earth arose out of the accumulation of *yin*. *Yin* is tranquility, *yang* is agitation; *yang* creates, *yin* stimulates development; *yang* kills, *yin* stores. *Yang* transforms influences, *yin* completes form (Unschuld 1985: 283).

This extract demonstrates that *yin* and *yang* are not understood either as objects, or, indeed, as forces, but as modes of activity. When the text describes *yang* as “agitation,” and *yin* as “tranquility” it means that when considering the dynamics of

action there are always two modes: activity, which means extending influence or power outwards; and tranquility, which means receiving external influences and absorbing them internally. Tranquility here does not mean that nothing is going on; rather it means that no external projection of force is happening. When something is in its *yin* mode it is “completing form,” which means it is absorbing and processing the external influence that it has received.

When a stone is thrown into a pond, the water first exhibits activity as it responds to the stone with waves. This is *yang*. As time passes, however, turbulence subsides and the water gradually returns to its normal state. This is *yin*. Another way of thinking about this is in terms of breathing. *Yang* is exhaling, or expiration; *yin* is in inhaling, or inspiration. The nature of *yang* (expiration) is thus to transform something else, whereas the nature of *yin* (inspiration) is to receive and store form. When *yang* and *yin* are put together then we begin to see nature as a dynamic process in which influence or power is constantly being extended outwards and absorbed internally. The result of this constant processing or exchanging of power is what we call nature, that is, the fluid world of change. Nature is thus conceived as correspondence and transformation, just like the ritual exchanges of bureaucratic Daoism.

Since nature is thus the visible result of the constant dynamic of exchange, this immediately makes it clear why correspondence is so important in the Highest Clarity Daoist world. Without correspondence—the mechanism of extending influence and being influenced—there can be no dynamism; without dynamism, there can be no life. And from this definition it follows that life can only be understood as transformation, the constant exercise of power between correspondent “entities” and the transformation of those “entities” by this process of correspondence.

Furthermore, for the Highest Clarity adept, the significance of nature does not lie in any particular form that it has achieved, that is to say, any particular “entity” but rather in the spaces in between forms, that is to say the channels of influence and media of exchange that make the dynamism of nature possible. In other words, the spaces between things make this correspondence and transformation possible. Without space, there would simply be inert matter, or “dead stuff.” With space, there can be the possibility of correspondence, interaction and transformation.

Absent Nature

Investigating the philosophy of nature in Highest Clarity Daoism thus takes us from the ordinary phenomenal world through the hidden conduits of communication to the heart of the transformative power of the cosmos, to the Way itself. A theme repeated throughout the texts of Highest Clarity is the importance of emptiness, or empty space, as the location of creative transformation. Take, for example, the sermon that the Highest Clarity perfected Zhou Ziyang preached when he received his celestial title:

The [part of] heaven [where there is] nothing is called space. The [part of] the mountain [where there is] nothing is called a grotto. The [part of the] human [body where there is] nothing is called a [grotto] chamber. The empty spaces in the mountains and organs of the body are called grotto courts. The empty spaces in human heads are called grotto chambers.

This is how the perfected take up residence in the heavens, the mountains and human beings. When they enter the place of nothingness, a grain of rice could contain Mt. Penglai and embrace the sixfold harmony [of the cosmos], yet heaven and earth would not be able to contain them (trans. Miller 2008: 152).

This sermon demonstrates that the nature of space and the relationship between nothingness and emptiness constitute the chief pre-occupation of the newly perfected person. Whereas Buddhist metaphysics conceives of emptiness in terms of ontology and psychology, it is clear that this Daoist metaphysical teaching dwells on the existential, locative nature of space. The spaces of the heavens, the mountains and the body are all alike. They partake in the same character of nothingness (*wu* 無) which is precisely what enables them to be places of residence (*chu* 處) for the perfected.

Zhou Ziyang's progress along the Way, therefore, is an encounter with nothingness, which takes place in emptiness. The spaces in the mountains enable him to encounter the teachers who reveal texts to him. The spaces in the body enable him to visualize the gods of his body. The nature of this Daoist nothingness or empty space is that it transcends all place, or as the text puts it, "a grain of rice could contain Mt. Penglai and embrace the six harmonies, yet heaven and earth would not be able to contain it." Empty space is thus a space of connection, enabling the communicative reciprocity between the various dimensions of the universe and consequently the transformation of things.

This understanding of the creative significance of empty space is corroborated in the *Preface to the Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto*. Although the majority of this text can be read as a philosophical reflection on the correlation between the Way and the revelation of scriptures, the opening stanzas begin by considering the significance of absence and nonbeing:

Now, the Way is born from nonbeing, secretly harboring a multitude of numinous powers, which no-one can fathom. Spirits condense in the void, marvelously transforming in myriad ways without bounds. In the darkest depths, there is an essence, serene and stable, which shines out light. This great mystery is infinite, reaching across the void, preserving stillness. This is called the "Great Grotto" (Trans. Miller 2008: 213).

Zhu Ziying, the Highest Clarity patriarch who composed this preface, here defines the Way in terms of three key elements: nonbeing (*wu* 無), emptiness (*xu* 虛) and mystery (*xuan* 玄). It is important to understand these key images. All three refer in some way to the idea of absence that Zhu Ziying holds to be at the center of things.

The concept of the absence of being is familiar throughout Daoism and can be traced back as far as *The Way and Its Power*. Chapter 11 offers the most familiar and fullest description of this nonbeing:

Thirty spokes are united in one hub.
 It is in its [space of] emptiness,
 where the usefulness of the cart is.
 Clay is heated and a pot is made.
 It is in its [space of] emptiness,
 where the usefulness of the pot is.
 Doors and windows are chiseled out.

It is in its [spaces of] emptiness,
where the usefulness of a room is (Moeller 2007: 27).

These images all point to a relationship between the empty space and its enclosing object. The object depends on the empty space for its form and, thereby, its “usefulness.” The insight offered by Hans-Georg Moeller, however, is that this “structural blueprint” depends on the concept of enclosure, something that surrounds the emptiness. This then points us figuratively towards the concept of rotation. The form surrounds, that is, revolves metaphorically and literally around the empty space that it encloses. This concept is clearest in the image of the wheel, with its spoke rotating around an “empty” hub, but it is also true in terms of the pot, which one can imagine being spun on a potter’s wheel and also by extension the walls of the room “rotating” around the empty space.

Moeller is drawing on the insight of the Chinese scholar, Pang Pu 庞朴 (1995), into the genesis of the cosmological term *xuan* 玄 conventionally translated as “mystery” or “darkness.” Pang argues that this term originally referred to a “whirling,” as one can see pictographically in the Chinese character. This came subsequently to mean a “deep or dark mystery” when it was used to describe the downward spiraling of water. Putting these two insights together, we can begin to see that the root image of the Dao is thus something like a downward swirling void, around which things come into being.

Returning to Zhu Ziyang’s metaphysical pronouncements, we can detect this “swirling void” in three dimensions. Firstly, the Dao itself is understood as the ontological predication of being on the swirling void of nonbeing. All the beings that exist depend for the existence on the ontological absence (*wu* 無) on which they are predicated.

Secondly, this ontological absence entails a locative emptiness (*xu* 虛), that is to say, the concrete form of empty spaces throughout the universe. In Highest Clarity Daoism these “empty spaces” are understood as conduits for spiritual powers. Spirits reside in these “vacuums,” which is to say that the hidden powers of the cosmos exercise their transformative capacity in these interstitial spaces, the various “emptinesses” of caverns in nature and cavities in the brain. Without these empty spaces, spiritual transformation and creativity could not take place; there would simply be inert matter.

Thirdly, this relationship between being and nonbeing, between presence and absence, is understood as the “great mystery” (*taixuan* 太玄) or “vast cosmic swirling” of the Dao. This combination of stillness and splendor, darkness and light, is, for Zhu Ziyang, summed up in the term Great Grotto or “Vast Pervasion.” The “vast pervasion” is the one no/thing that unites all forms together: all beings are predicated on the same nonbeing; all presences are predicated on the same absence; all forms are predicated on the same emptiness. Emptiness pervades all beings, uniting them in the one “great mystery,” the abysmal, swirling, metaphysical absence of the Dao itself. This, then, is the hollow root of nature, the empty source in which all beings partake, continuously communicating power and effecting transformation among the myriad creatures of the cosmos.

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Toward a New Model of the Hindu Pantheon: A Report on Twenty-Some Years of Feminist Reflection

Rita M. Gross

One of my favorite unfinished and unpublished manuscripts is titled “The Significance of Gender in the Hindu Pantheon.” This paper represents my return to that manuscript, which has spent more than 15 years in my “to do” pile. Both papers circle around my dissatisfaction based on teaching introductory courses on Hinduism many, many times, with the model of the Hindu pantheon found in most textbooks. My dissatisfaction applies equally to the chapter on Hinduism found in world religions textbooks and to textbooks designed for a first course on Hinduism. Initially my dissatisfaction was due to my stance as a feminist scholar on the lookout for androcentric presentations and interpretations of religious phenomena. Then and now, I find the standard discussion of the Hindu pantheon as consisting of Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi to be incredibly androcentric. But now, I have other reservations as well.

The literature on Hinduism which introduced me to that religion routinely presented a model of the Hindu pantheon that is still very much with us, especially in textbooks used by those who will most likely never again study Hinduism. That model tells students that there are three major Hindu deities—Vishnu, Shiva, and the Goddess, always presented in that order, and almost always with fewer words devoted to the deities further down on the list. My early objections remain. This model gives the impression that male deities are more important and popular than female deities. It also often gives the impression that male deities are normal

The idea that eventually led to this paper is mentioned in “Androcentrism and Androgyny in the Methodology of History of Religions” in Gross (2009) and is reprinted in this volume with my permission. The paper was first written in 1995 and presented at the XVII International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City, 1995. It was published in Gross (1998). This article is not primarily a review of the literature but an attempt to rethink how best to present a complex, difficult, and culturally unfamiliar phenomenon.

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and understandable while goddesses are odd and exotic. And, finally, the two male deities stand out as distinct personalities, while the female deities, who also have distinctive mythologies and iconographies, are lumped together under the generic title “*Devi*” or “the great goddess.” That portrait is incredibly androcentric.

Hinduism is the only major contemporary world religion in which goddess-worship is prominent and normal. In such a religion, it does not seem likely that the female deities would be regarded as an add-on or an after-thought. It is also unlikely that the numerous and varied goddesses would be so generic and so undifferentiated that they could accurately be lumped together under one label. It has long seemed to me that something must be askew in this stereotypical textbook model of the Hindu pantheon.

However, this androcentric interpretation of information from another culture cannot be attributed solely to the androcentric mindset of Western scholars, as was the case with much of the earlier literature on primal traditions such as aboriginal Australia.¹ Western scholars could, with some justification, claim that they were merely reporting faithfully what Hindu informants and texts, told them. Many Hindus share the perception that there are three major sects of devotional Hinduism—Vaishanvite, Shavaite, and Shakta, the latter often being lumped with Tantric sects and presented as exotic and foreign, even to Hindus. Rather than an imposition of Western androcentrism on the information, we seem here to have mutually co-operating androcentrisms—Hindu and Western.

In such a case, some might argue that, while feminists may not like androcentric models, if they accurately reflect a religion’s own self-declared theology, Western feminist scholars are not in a good position to attempt to discredit that model or to configure the data with a less androcentric model of the Hindu pantheon.

Against this argument one could make two counter-arguments. First of all, Western scholars do not simply uncritically accept Hindu claims about Hindu phenomena which do not so closely match Western values. For example, Western scholars of Hinduism do not generally present the Hindu caste system as an inevitable social ideal even when they try to explain it empathetically. And Hindu claims about Hindu origins and history are not taken any more seriously than are the claims put forth by any other sacred history, Western included. So there must be another explanation for Western scholars’ uncritical acceptance of the Hindu model of the pantheon as consisting of Vishnu, Shiva and the Goddess. I would suggest that androcentric Western scholars didn’t see anything unusual or questionable about Hindu androcentric interpretations of the Hindu pantheon because they accord so well with Western pre-conceptions about deity. In the West, it has been many hundreds of years since female deities have been a normal part of the religious imagination. It might not be too surprising that pre-feminist Western scholars of Hinduism so uncritically accepted the model of the Hindu pantheon that they found in the literate, elite level of the tradition.

If the Hindu pantheon were approached as critically as are Hindu explanations of the caste system or Hindu versions of Indian history, something else might emerge. We might discover that, though Hindu androcentric interpretations of Hinduism are

¹ See Gross (2001, pp. 301–310) and Gross (1987, pp. 37–58).

common, they do not reflect Hindu practice any more accurately than Western androcentric interpretations reflect Western practices. Hindus include many passionate goddess worshippers, despite the more well-known male deities. It has been slowly dawning on Western scholars and observers of Hinduism, ever since the beginnings of current Western feminist scholarship, that Hindu goddesses simply are not a poor third in comparison with the male deities in the affections of Hindu people or in the frequency with which they are worshipped. Nor are they all faceless, identical versions of a generic goddess, any more than the male deities are a generic god. Somehow, this theological point gets lost when discussing the anthropomorphic deities; Vishnu and Shiva are never lumped together as a generic god, while very diverse goddesses are frequently reduced to a generic goddess. It would be more accurate to point out that in some versions of Hindu theology, **both** gods and goddesses are declared to be nothing more than diverse names for an underlying reality.

It is also becoming clearer that the goddesses could be overlooked and reduced to a generic goddess because Western scholarship concurred with a certain segment of Hinduism in its preference for texts and elites. Those Hindus who put forth the androcentric model of the Hindu pantheon are an elite and a minority themselves, not necessarily sympathetic to the religious practices of non-elite Hindus. And, given the tremendous bias of Western religions in favor of texts, it is understandable that Western scholars regarded texts, rather than icons and rituals, as the carriers of the normative Hindu tradition. Thus androcentrism, together with a text-elite bias against popular religion, powerfully combine to justify a model of the Hindu pantheon that seriously obscures its goddesses.

By now, I think that the situation I have outlined above would be generally agreed upon by specialists in Hindu studies. But somehow, that understanding has not yet made its way into literature about Hinduism intended for introductory courses and general audiences, nor are these conclusions often made explicit, even in scholarly books on Hindu deities. I think that this neglect is largely due to the casual attitude on the part of the academy towards the correctives offered by feminist scholarship in all fields.

In the remainder of this paper, I will turn my attention to the deconstructive task of a preliminary review of three classes of literature that discuss Hindu deities and then to the reconstructive task of asking whether any more adequate model of the Hindu pantheon can be found.

The Received Portrait

I am particularly concerned about the impressions conveyed in textbooks intended for use in world religions classes because in so many cases, the only information about Hinduism that people will ever learn comes from these textbooks. I am sure many would share my evaluation that the chapters on Indian religions, especially Hinduism, are often the most challenging and least adequate in such textbooks, which usually are not written by scholars with significant South Asian training.

At this time, I have not been able to systematically survey all the major textbook choices on this point; instead I will review two recent choices in our department for

the world religions textbook. Theodore Ludwig's text, *The Sacred Paths: Understanding the World's Religions*, with which I am generally quite satisfied, follows exactly the model that I have outlined above, with all its drawbacks. (Vishnu gets two columns, Shiva a column and a half, and "the great goddess" barely a column. The information is presented in the stereotypical order.) The new choice, William A. Young's *The World's Religions: Worldviews and Contemporary Issues*, with which I am less satisfied in general, is slightly more adequate on this score. Instead of focusing on Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi, he claims he will focus on "gods and their accompanying goddesses." (p. 112) That description is somewhat androcentric, although it is also **one** among other accurate characterizations of Hindu gods and goddesses. Much more problematic is the fact that he doesn't really follow through on presenting this model. The only goddess described individually is Kali. The consorts of the Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, the so-called "Hindu trinity") are named but not described, while each god in the Trimurti, even the largely extinct Brahma, receives at least a paragraph of description. Durga, Radha, and Sita (all of whom are important goddesses) are not even mentioned, though Krishna, Rama, and Ganesh (male deities who are no more important) are described to some extent. Seemingly, Young recognized that the stereotypical androcentric presentations of the Hindu pantheon were inadequate, but was unable to provide a more adequate alternative.

Given these stereotypical portrayals, unless the professor supplements the textbook, and most will not, many students may not even recognize and most probably will not remember that the major theistic alternative to monotheism among world religions views goddesses as normal and important to religious life. To some, this may seem insignificant, but to someone who recognizes how critical introducing the divine feminine into religious discourse is for the development of post-patriarchal Western religions, such omissions and distortions are painful.

Another class of literature involves books designed to introduce students to Hinduism in a more in-depth fashion in a semester-long course. In 1980, I surveyed some of the options most widely used at the time: Zaehner's *Hinduism*, Troy Wilson Organ's *Hinduism*, Hopkin's very widely used *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, and also the older classics, Basham's *The Wonder That Was India*, Zimmer's *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Danielou's *Hindu Polytheism*, even Eliot's three volume *Hinduism and Buddhism*. That literature more than warranted my description of the standard androcentric model of the Hindu pantheon presented earlier.

What has happened in the few surveys of Hinduism that have been issued in the intervening years? By and large, though the "Vishnu, Shiva, Devi" model hovers in the background, it is put forth much less forcefully. Goddesses are much more frequently discussed, not only in special sections devoted to them but in the overall narrative about Hinduism in general. Both of these tendencies lean toward less androcentric organizations of the Hindu pantheon. But, in many cases, the question of how the Hindu pantheon hangs together at all is also avoided. As a result, non-specialists consulting these books to gain some general overview of Hindu theism might come away with no clear impression about the relationships and interactions between the many gods and goddesses.

To illustrate these generalizations, I will point to two newer surveys of Hinduism, by David Kinsley and David Knipe, each part of an important series of textbooks on

major world religions, and also mention Klaus Klostermaier's large work, *A Survey of Hinduism*.

David Kinsley is well known for his work on Hindu goddesses, so one would expect his textbook not to be androcentric but to highlight information on goddesses. In the first edition of his text, one of two examples given of worship in the Hindu tradition was a description of "common worship of the Goddess" (pp. 123–128). The second edition added a chapter on "Sacred Female Imagery and Women's Religious Experience in Hinduism," which, in my view actually makes the book more, not less, androcentric. I have never been convinced that the way to overcome androcentric interpretations is to add a separate chapter on goddesses and women. Information about goddesses and women should not be an "add-on," but an integral part of our understanding of the overall situation. When discussing the pantheon, Kinsley only mentions the common "Vishnu, Shiva, Devi" model a few times in passing, so briefly that someone who does not know its prominence in earlier literature would not realize that this is one of the most prevalent conventional models of the Hindu pantheon. He also does not attempt to solve the problem of how better to picture the pantheon as a whole, nor is it easy to discern the nature of Hindu deities or their role in Hindu religious life from this book alone.

David Knipe's book does not turn on the "Vishnu, Shiva, Devi" model either, though, like Kinsley, he makes oblique references to it. For the most part, when gods enter the narrative about Hinduism, so do goddesses, though Vishnu and Shiva are named while the phrase "regional and pan-Indian goddesses" most commonly denotes the presence of goddesses in his narrative. The commendable feature of this technique is that gods and goddesses are discussed together as deities in theistic and devotional Hinduism, rather than artificially separated by gender, as they are in most other accounts. Knipe's book, like Kinsley's, seems to be suspicious of the familiar "Vishnu, Shiva, Devi" model but unwilling to offer an alternative. It is also difficult to obtain a clear picture of the Hindu deities or their role in Hindu religious life from this book alone.

Klaus Klostermaier's book, in contrast, relies rather heavily on the more familiar model of the Hindu pantheon. A chapter on "The Many Gods and the One God of Hinduism" surveys Shiva, Vishnu, and Shakti (in that order) and is followed by five chapters on the path of devotion (*bhaktimarga*). The initial chapter on *bhaktimarga* explains that Hindus generally understand that the many gods and goddesses somehow merge into unity without conflict, and also explains the theory of devotion. The next three chapters are devoted to Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi, in that order. (The fifth chapter on *bhaktimarga* is concerned with the Tamil gods.) However, despite the conventional organization, Klostermaier's discussions of goddesses display none of the diminutive, trivializing tendencies found in many works that use that model. The goddess is not the last deity discussed; all the chapters are of equal length; information about goddesses is not confined only to the chapter on the goddess. And, given that this is a very large book, there is, in fact, a great deal of information about goddesses in this book. Additionally, this book gives the reader more coherent and graspable picture of the whole pantheon and of Hindu theism in general.

Finally, a complete survey of the literature would consider the pros and cons of the many new books specifically on Hindu goddesses, but such a survey is far beyond the scope of this paper. Probably the single biggest difference between literature on

Hindu theism before and after the rise of feminist scholarship is the large list of books on Hindu goddesses published in the last 15 years.² Surely the size of that list is directly dependent on the rise of feminist scholarship. But these works are specialized and focused on a single deity or small social group; they are not attempts to rethink our model of the Hindu pantheon, nor should they be, since that is not the task taken up by their authors. However, they provide all the evidence we need to make the case that a more adequate model of the Hindu pantheon would not consign the goddesses to a rank of poor third or lump them all together as a generic goddess.

Throwing out the androcentric “Vishnu, Shiva, Devi” model is much easier than coming up with a replacement that would deal differently with gender within the Hindu pantheon. I am convinced that overcoming the androcentric “Vishnu, Shiva, Devi” model is intimately connected with the problem of how better to understand the relationship between plurality and non-duality in Hinduism.

Gender and Number in a Polycentric Symbol System

“Gender” and “number” are both critical categories in Hinduism and both are handled far differently in Hinduism than in monotheism. A more adequate model of the Hindu pantheon must deal differently with both. Though I am willing to hazard some suggestions about an alternative model, I think it is important to concede first that the very idea of a model of the Hindu pantheon, even the idea that there is a **pantheon**, an organized collection of all the gods of Hindu polytheism, is somewhat artificial. Though we know that Hinduism is not a systematic, organized, coherent whole, we keep expecting it to be so, by analogy with other major world religions or ancient polytheisms, frozen in place at one moment in their development.

I am becoming ever more convinced of the thesis put forth by Nancy Falk and others that **Hinduism** is not one of the oldest world religions, but one of the newest, being forged in recent and contemporary times, though certain strands of Hinduism, usually not too important for most peoples’ religious lives, do go back for thousands of years. Therefore, one should not expect a coherent Hindu pantheon or theology, any more than one would expect a unified North American Indian theology, or a unified Aboriginal Australian pantheon. Instead, we have many local versions of a religious worldview and all the versions bear a cousinly resemblance to one another, but trying to impose a superstructure on the local variants is both impossible and something only outsiders would want to do. Nevertheless, in all these cases, under modern influences, coherent, unified theologies and pantheons are emerging.

If correct, this insight also means that when using the comparative mirror³ to look for relevant comparable religious phenomena, care is required. The least

² Among others, see Bernard (1994), Brown (1974, 1990), Coburn (1985, 1991), Erndl (1993), Hawley and Wulff (1982), Jayakar (1980), Kinsley (1986), Nathan and Seely (1982), Pintchman (1994) and Sax (1991).

³ William Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 164.

relevant comparative model is Western monotheism, but, whether consciously or unconsciously, it has been the model most frequently used by Western scholars of Hinduism. Given its intense fixation on the superiority of the number “one,” monotheism provides no relevant models for thinking about a polycentric worldview. Westerners, from Max Mueller with his *henotheism*⁴ to many current commentators, have been mystified as to how multiple personifications of the Ultimate could be mutually tolerated.⁵ There has always been an attempt, both on the part of some Western scholars and some Hindu apologists, to see Hinduism as essentially monotheistic. I have always seen this trend as a concession to monotheism that does disservice to Hinduism, the only polytheism ever to successfully withstand many centuries of monotheistic onslaught. Rather than cosmetically redoing this robust polytheism as monotheism in disguise, I think we should be actively inquiring into the dynamics of polytheistic imagination.

In addition, monotheism provides no help at all in thinking about how female deities fit into a pantheon, because monotheism is actually **male** monotheism. Probably one of the reasons why Hindu goddesses came in as a poor third in so many textbook portrayals of them is because the monotheists who wrote the textbooks found female deities even stranger than a plurality of deities and actually barely saw those deities when they looked at Hinduism.

Even among other polytheisms, it is hard to find an analogy for Hindu polytheism, largely, I think, because India has defied political unification and thus avoided religious unification. Other major examples of polytheism, such as Greek and Shinto polytheism, present much more highly organized pantheons largely because a winning tribe benignly imposed its version of a pantheon of familiar gods onto the rest of the population and that pantheon became frozen in time. Therefore, perhaps the continually shifting Egyptian or Mesopotamian pantheons would be more relevant comparative models. But they are also difficult to use as models because they are so remote historically that one cannot really live within their worlds conceptually or imaginatively, as one can with Hindu polytheism. These polytheisms lost out to monotheism many centuries ago without leaving much trace in the contemporary world, which is not at all the case with Hindu polytheism.

If we are left without useful models in the comparative mirror for understanding the Hindu pantheon, I would suggest that at least Hinduism be approached from the angle of vision presented by religions like the primal traditions or Shinto, rather than monotheism. The current tendency prevalent among authors of textbooks on world religions to isolate “the sacred” as the lowest common denominator of religious experience is, in my view, completely on target. Without question, the most obvious examples of “the

⁴ Max Muller was one of the founders of the academic study of Indian Religions and a proponent of *religionswissenschaft*, the claim that religions could and should be studied like an other observable object using scientific methods. He coined the term “*henotheism*” as his attempt to understand how a religion could take seriously the existence of a multiplicity of deities. His explanation was that the religious person accepted many deities as “real,” but in the religious experience, the only deity that was “real” psychologically was the deity being worshipped.

⁵ An older very highly recommended exception to this generalization is Daneilou (1964). This book includes poetic and cogent arguments for the profundity of “polytheistic” theology.

sacred” as the primary building block of religion are found in the primal traditions and Shinto. The effectiveness with which Hinduism could be interpreted by using this model of religion is under-estimated because of tendencies to approach Hinduism doctrinally, relying mainly on Hindu literary sources, and monotheistic religions.

If we must approach Hinduism doctrinally, then I would suggest that the doctrinal system most commonly put forth as the dominant Hindu religious outlook is simply a philosophical rendition of the primal worldview of all-pervading sacredness. Brahman nirguna (the unqualified absolute), commonly presented as the substratum into and out of which all diverse phenomena (brahman saguna) merge and arise, is like the all-pervading sacredness of primal traditions. Immanent non-dualism, so commonly presented as the dominant Hindu doctrine is, I would suggest, simply a philosophical and abstract reading of the sense of all-pervading sacred presence.

If that is correct, then the many deities of Hindu polytheism are simply crystallizations—high points of energy—in the generally sacred phenomenal world. As such, they are more similar to the kami of Shinto tradition or the energies of the four directions in North American Indian religions than to the deity of monotheism. In these cases, the emphasis is on sacredness, with the anthropomorphic personifications of sacredness being less central. But, on the other hand, though Hindu deities may well be understood as such high points of sacredness, they are unusually vivid and long-lasting such crystallizations. They have very strong and distinctive personalities and devotees who are oriented primarily to one among the many deities, making them somewhat more like the deity of monotheism than like the deities and spirits of indigenous traditions, who are more amorphous and interchangeable.

At this point, we outsiders again encounter headlong the puzzle of Hindu polytheism. I am convinced that it is a mistake to simply merge all the Hindu deities into an underlying substratum, as if that substratum were the only important phenomenon, but I am equally convinced that arranging the Hindu deities into a neat pantheon or hierarchy in which maleness predominates is also inaccurate.

Working with people who had never before encountered the Hindu tradition has convinced me that the first requirement for a more accurate model of the Hindu pantheon is to overcome the Western bias for oneness over plurality.⁶ My students almost universally felt that Hindu polytheism might be tolerable so long as Hindus understand that some underlying unity is more important and more basic. Using my hands to demonstrate, I suggested that both the unity and the plurality are equally important. Unity is not the upper hand lying over the lower hand representing plurality; both hands are upraised, at the same height, parallel to each other.⁷

⁶ A recent Western theological challenge to Western fixation on the number “one” and attempt to work out a theology of multiplicity is Schneider (2008).

⁷ It is very interesting that the gesture I am describing, called “anjali” is one of the most common gestures in both Hinduism and Buddhism. It is used, among other things, as the most common gesture of greeting and of showing respect. In Vajrayana Buddhist ritual, this *mudra* is very common and is often interpreted as expressing a non-dual joining of seeming opposites without minimizing or obliterating either of them. The right hand symbolizes many things, as does the left. They are joined without losing their individuality—an extremely potent but simple gesture representing the coincidence of opposites or non-dual “union.”

However, the problem remains. If we can somehow come to realize that plurality is not inferior to unity, how can the plurality of the Hindu pantheon be organized in a manner that does not cater to androcentrism? I am convinced that models of the Hindu pantheon are necessary pedagogically, especially for new students, because a **model** will inform the student in ways that mere descriptions of the many Hindu deities will not.

The foremost requirement for a non-androcentric model of Hindu plurality is that the primary fault line of Hindu plurality be correctly located. The familiar “Vishnu, Shiva, Devi” model incorrectly locates that fault line in gender. It suggests that the plurality of the Hindu deities is most adequately described by appealing to the gender of the deities—two guys and a girl! But gender simply is not the major fault line in the plurality of Hindu deities and therefore should not be used as the major organizational principle in the model of the pantheon. Using gender as the primary fault line within the Hindu pantheon does not work because female dimensions of deity are important in both Vaishnavite and Shaivite systems (usually thought of as “male” deities), and male dimensions of deity are usually found in Shakta systems (which are usually thought of as “female” deities).

Those who describe themselves as primarily oriented to one of the major male deities readily emphasize the importance of female deities in their system and those who are primarily oriented to a female deity usually include some male figures within their system. The question is not whether Hindus venerate goddesses—virtually all Hindus venerate Goddesses. The question is which goddesses different Hindus venerate, which clearly indicates that the fault line around which Hindu polytheism organizes is **not** gender. Therefore, the “two guys and a girl” model is out.

We need a different fault line along which to organize the Hindu pantheon. I suggest using the fault line that has proved to be so successful in other attempts to understand Hinduism in ways that outsiders can comprehend and that is also at least somewhat accurate—the moksha-dharma tension and synthesis. “Moksha” connotes release from cyclic existence and conventional patterns of behavior, while “dharma,” (for Hindus but not Buddhists) connotes the importance of upholding those conventional norms. In terms of Western logic, these goals are mutually exclusive, but one of the defining traits of the Hindu tradition is that it affirms both of these paradoxical goals rather than coming down on one side or the other of that dichotomy.

Thus, I suggest that discussions of the Hindu pantheon as a whole, **especially in introductory contexts**, be organized around a dyadic, “moksha-dharma” model, rather than around the triadic “Vishnu, Shiva, Devi” model for several reasons. First, it builds upon one of the most illuminating models of Hinduism as a whole. Second, it is not hierarchical, either regarding number or gender. Oneness is not privileged over plurality and maleness is not privileged over femaleness. Third, it is not androcentric and does give the impression that male deities are more normal and important than female deities.

Such overviews of the Hindu pantheon would explain very explicitly, that the Hindu pantheon as a whole, like Hinduism in general, affirms both dharma and moksha. Some deities tend to emphasize dharma more than moksha and others reverse that emphasis, but all deities actually emphasize both in the long term. Only the more relative and obvious emphases differ. That is to say, the pantheon as a

whole and all the deities within it are involved both in giving life and in giving death, in some way or another. The cyclic interdependence of life and death is integral to the Hindu understanding of our lot and each deity within the pantheon speaks to the whole of existence.

The emphasis differs, depending on whether a specific deity patronizes moksha or dharma more, but Vishnu is not only The Preserver and Shiva is not only The Destroyer. The deities who patronize dharma—Vishnu (m.), Laksmi (f.), Krishna (m.), Radha (f.), Rama (m.), Sita (f.), Sarasvati (f.)—also patronize moksha in subterranean ways. And the deities who patronize moksha—Shiva (m), Kali (f), Durga (f.)—also have a major concern with the continuity of dharma. By making it very clear that no deity is only a destroyer and no deity is only a preserver, but that all deities manifest a symbolism of the coincidence of opposites in every detail of their mythology and iconography, we could easily present a much more vivid and accurate portrait of deities like Vishnu and Shiva. These deities often seem, inaccurately, to be quite flat and uni-dimensional in their standard textbook portrayal and unless the professor is careful, some students also project a moral “good-bad” hierarchy and dualism onto the Hindu deities.

To return to gender and the Hindu pantheon, whether a deity tends to emphasize moksha or dharma, that deity is not ultimately single-sexed. As in the human realm, so in mythology. Female and male deities are interdependent and dominance flutters back and forth between them. One could also make a strong argument that the predominant divine image in Hinduism is not of a single deity with a clear-cut gender, but of an androgynous deity (a deity who is both male and female), often pictured as a couple and less often as a hermaphrodite.⁸ Thus the primary deities are a Preserver who also destroys and a Destroyer who also preserves, sometimes seen as a couple, sometimes as a male, and sometimes as a female. But in all cases, the primary division is not along gender lines. Both genders are prominently found on both sides of the moksha-dharma fault line.

Regarding dominance, sometimes the male seems more dominant, sometimes the female, and sometimes genuine mutuality is portrayed. But, clearly, Hindu goddesses do not bear out many stereotypes about goddesses. They are almost never portrayed as child rearers, nor are they merely wives or adjuncts of the male deities, though sometimes they bear that identity. The fact that Hindu goddesses do not bear out these stereotypes is more easily demonstrated using this dyadic model than using the “Vishnu, Shiva, Devi” model. Yes, Laksmi is Vishnu’s wife and is often portrayed as submissive to him. But she is also an important deity in her own right, often portrayed without her consort. Sita is almost the paragon of the Total Woman who lives through her husband. But Kali dances upon Shiva’s prone body—to his delight in iconography, though not always in texts. Durga and Sarasvati function almost independently of any males. The relationships between the male and the female aspects of deity is not at all monolithic and this important information is easily communicated to beginning students through this dyadic model of the pantheon.

⁸ For more, see Goldberg’s “Ardhanarisvara: An Androgynous Model of God” in the Ultimate Unity section of this volume.

Only one safeguard needs to be emphasized. Unless it is very clearly seen that neither major deity is fundamentally single-sexed, blatant androcentrism would again distort one's overall view of the Hindu pantheon. But, clearly such a leap would take a great deal of selective vision. It is impossible for anyone with his or her eyes open to look at Hinduism and not see goddesses everywhere.

It must also be conceded that this suggested dyadic model is still only a model and thus inadequate to fully grasp the kaleidoscopic diversity of Hinduism. But, especially in introductory contexts, we need models. The primary virtue of this abstracted model is that it more closely adheres to prominent fault lines in the Hindu tradition. Just as important, this model does not artificially divide the Hindu pantheon into two guys and a girl who are somehow analogous to the deity of monotheism. It recognizes that both female and male personifications of the sacred are equally concerned with both moksha and dharma.

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Part X
Naturalistic Models
of the Ultimate

Introduction to Naturalistic Models of the Ultimate

Kurt Anders Richardson

Naturalism is the guiding rubric of this section, and, while it is broad ranging, encompassing versions of theism, agnosticism and atheism, it implies a certain epistemic orientation to the world. Religious naturalism emerged within the early modern philosophies of science with respect to understanding physical causation. The theological and philosophical impact of religious naturalism did not lead to the elimination of ‘transcendence’ as an effective category of thought – even in philosophical materialism. Although atheism is presumed by many apologists for religion as the logical outcome of naturalism, this is certainly not the case. Indeed, modern atheism (a-theism even more often) also discovers transcendent dimensions in its wake. Naturalism is a kind of epistemological orientation, a rationalist intuition about the human being as knowing subject and what it is that human consciousness perceives as it ascertains knowable relations. Naturalism does not preclude the transcendent nor God, but it does completely reorient the terms and conditions for such knowledge claims. Indeed, naturalism does not preclude divine intervention or non-material agencies but it does offer a robust notion of epistemology based upon the place and epistemology of the human within the physical universe. Naturalists can be pragmatist or realist, and is represented via other models represented in the present volume: panentheism, process theology and monism. A naturalist theology can convey a profound interpretation of evolutionary processes, e.g., in terms of “humanization”, “ethicization”, “agapaization”. Naturalism is not the only way to think in terms of evolution and ultimacy, but it can provide an important guard against anthropocentrism. Naturalism also can convey an equation between nature and reality. This is where atheism and pantheism may assert themselves. And yet like the word “reality”, when “nature” is conceived as the basis for any notion of ultimacy it is not necessarily a cancelation of the transcendent. Indeed,

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the “ultimate” in naturalism would be a case of distinguishing between various orders of nature, much like metaphysics does in terms of “Being”.

Naturalism represents something basic in terms of “natural science” orientations to all of human knowing and experience. The medieval and early modern projects of theism are essentially attempts to turn naturalism to the purposes of theology as “queen of the sciences” (often amounting to apologetics for divine existence and even orthodox doctrines). Indeed, “natural theology” in one sense, grew out of the early modern attempts to come to grips with the implications of natural science. Natural theology would become questionable at the point of modifying earlier arguments about God and the world and this is one of the underlying agendas of the present section as well as narratives behind the present volume. It is incorrect to describe the relation between science and religion as a “war” and yet there was a war to prevent the propounding of what were viewed as atheistic ideas and anti-religion. Natural theologies and theologies of nature attempted mightily to adapt to the cosmological and anthropological implications of natural science. At the same time, different conceptualities of religion, religious perception and identifying the religious object also emerged. This was the other side of “natural theology” – that of “natural religion”, which rejected all prophesy claims of the particular religions in favor of a substrate of universal religion. Various forms of deism banked on this model and in many ways provided cultural or liberal Christianity with a theological intuition for its own purposes.

“Naturalism” of many pedigrees is a cultural term that tends to be anti-supernaturalist. Since at least the time of the Enlightenment, the “natural” was an epistemic and experimental approach to the world; with or without reference to divinely designed natural laws. Religious authorities would initiate their own philosophical and scientific projects, bolstering the sense of “natural law”, i.e., a kind of “natural revelation” from “nature’s God”, pursuant to the apprehension of nature’s destiny through a discernable teleology. Physico-theology was one way to provide models of nature concordant with its divine designer. Unlike the charge of “atheism” for a time when there were religious crimes such as blasphemy, there were fewer and less alarming impediments to the claims of naturalism since divine design could be seen as the source of natural features in the world. Indeed, subtle changes had occurred in theology requiring that revelation always be understood as mediated through and in nature – the only means by which the human senses could know anything. In the early modern world, the charge of “atheism” was over-used, frequently misapplied, e.g., ascribed wholesale to those who professed varieties of deism.¹ In many cases the reality of the divine being was not denied at all, but redefined according to new perceptions of epistemological boundaries and/or new religious sensibilities. And of course agnosticism is not atheism. “Atheists” often put forward critical reviews of the claims of religion in the religious politics of their day, objecting to what they perceived as incredible view of the true God. Indeed, “atheism” itself would get redefined intending a liberating effect on human thinking on new transcendental

¹ Reflective of the etymology of the ancient charge: *atheos*, “godless”, which is a moral as much or more than a theological judgment.

bases. Only a relatively small number of individuals ever call atheists as such and many so-called bear closer reading to discover post-institutional, post-metaphysical accounts of both religious knowledge and sensibility.

Some of the essays in this chapter present what might be classified under the rubric of ‘polydoxy’² – multi-voiced praise of God outside the bounds of traditional religion. One of the Enlightenment motives was to show the full rationality of religious belief and in so doing sometimes constructing reductive models of God and at others pluralist. On the other hand, there is also the presence of reasoning that finds no warrant for including God among the appropriate items of human belief. Indeed, there has emerged an entire discipline of naturalist metaphysics which considers the transcendent only in materialist terms. Each aspect here allows for a gesture that some might regard as a religious affectation or as unavoidably religious. This cluster of essays demonstrates these features accordingly.

Wishing to overturn the characterization of Hume as radically critical of all tradition and religion, Hardy immediately highlights Hume’s usage of the classic distinction of “true and false religion”. Virtually claiming that Hume was a theist, it was his utterly unacceptable variation that occasioned that radical rejection of his ideas by religious authorities and their apologists. Hume’s religious perspective was based upon “serious reflection” on the cosmological evidence for the “intelligent author”. Hume’s opposition was to “vulgar religion” since it is bereft of necessary reasoning. The “atheism” charge is also a characteristic of religious polemics of the Enlightenment period as much as at any other time while not necessarily having anything to do with actual beliefs of an otherwise rejected point of view. His great critical objection was to the anthropomorphization of God – the heart of the vulgarity, indeed, ‘barbarity’; the fashioning of a god in human likeness. Hume’s contribution to theology was to provide a profoundly conceived naturalism as the basis for any future theology.

With Jason Smick’s contribution, we have a perspective where ultimacy has a transcendent referent. With the observation that Nietzsche’s task was constructive as well as deconstructive, the “God of life” must be considered alongside the deaths of ‘God’. Cultural change required for Nietzsche the taking leave of God. In light of this, there is even a kind of regimen of ‘spiritual exercises’ to be noted. Nietzsche’s brand of philosophical theology comes to expression in terms that are naturalistic, yet anthropocentric. With Turner and Turrell on Levinas we have a further turn toward a-theism and yet the trace of transcendence. Here the by now modern tradition of radical criticism of religion is continued along several now considerable traditional lines: theodicy, the denigration of the human being, the eclipse of the other, etc. God’s beyond-ness with respect to being excludes thinking of the being of God. Postmetaphysical thought of God, along with all theology is inadequate to God; God is not in existence as such because God is not part of the things belonging to existence – God does not belong to anything or any state of affairs. Only in this way can transcendence begin to show its traces. God is not a God of effects but of

²Cf., Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider, eds. *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2010.

traces. Through the recognition of this trace, the ethical comes properly into view beyond even the hermeneutics of suspicion.

In Taylor's contribution on Dawkins, the so-called 'new atheism' in popular literature of the new millennium is discussed and the kind of "God" that is whose existence is being denied. Richard Dawkin's is the standout contributor to the movement since he offers a model of God as part of his grounds for disbelief which Taylor aims to show has not been demonstrated not to exist. This is the "God hypothesis", any and every version of which Dawkins claims "probable non-existence" is pure ideological fabrication. Interestingly, Dawkins grants a kind of exception to Einstein and the latter's religious comments which he describes as poetically pantheistic and therefore not to be really argued against. There are things which his hypothesis leaves out specifically the attribute of perfection in God and therefore necessary as well with all the supreme attributions of classical theism. Taylor's argumentation follows a design to turn self-refutation back upon Dawkins' own arguments. For Dawkins, one perceives the virtual equation of reality and nature.

Gross' essay pursues the Buddhist ultimate that is always in this-worldly terms and thus fits in well with our section. The abandonment of the causes of suffering and the eschewing of metaphysical questions result in something like sceptic therapeutics. Analytical deconstruction toward an emptiness that sustains itself as interdependence is a singular contribution of this essay. Grappling Buddhistically with all things in their lack of inherent existence is provided very readably here. The emptiness even of emptiness is in view here. What Nirvana accomplishes as a place of the unconditioned and birth-less and deathless; the unbound condition without conditions and without annihilation. All of this is the result of inherent potential for enlightenment. The Buddhist path in this is not detachment from the world by the transcending of confusion and its causes. But the Buddhist approach can also be seen as a kind of naturalist apophaticism; a contemplation of something like the second law of thermodynamics and the ultimacy of the non-being out of which the universe emerged.

Finally, Steven Weinberg's 'facing finality' looks at temporal and therefore also spatial ultimacy as natural/cosmological transcendent. The natural transcendent (excluding any 'supernatural' transcendent) is one where "final physical principles" are fully explained in terms of "deeper physical principles". A "final theory" would of course mean no infinite regress of deeper explanations, that at some point we hit bottom and work forever after with truly fundamental principles. Actually positing the existence of a final theory, there seems to be a convergence of explanatory "arrows" based upon a notable process of theoretical simplification. An attendant thought is that the whole notion of law or fundamental principle is a human fiction imposed upon nature. The other possibility is that human beings are fundamentally incapable of knowing the fundamental law. Weinberg is confident that the theory will be forthcoming and provides considerable reference to that kind of transcendent or in his words 'logically isolated' characteristics it might have. Finally, he even dreams that the discovery of the final theory might even rid the world of maladaptive beliefs and behaviors attendant to those beliefs – almost reminiscent of religious reformation.

The Deity, Figured and Disfigured: Hume on Philosophical Theism and Vulgar Religion

Lee Hardy

*“How is the deity disfigured in our representation of him!”
David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion**

Typically David Hume is taken to represent the unalloyed forces of secular rational criticism against the traditions and propriety of religious belief. In this essay I intend to challenge this picture of Hume. It represents, in my view, something of a retroactive secularization of the historical record as well as a grave distortion of Hume’s position on religious matters. It should be clear from his *Natural History of Religion* that Hume does not reject religion *en bloc*. He is careful to make a distinction between true and false religion and their respective models of ultimate reality. He attacks the latter, but endorses the former. The beliefs constituent of true religion are rationally justified, in Hume’s view, but easily bypassed, overlaid and perverted by the all-too-human propensities at work in false religion. Thus Hume’s criticism of religion is more akin to the prophetic tradition, in which false religion is denounced in favor of true religion, than to the wholesale rejection of religion we should expect to find in the work of an unreserved atheist. Granted, Hume’s philosophical theism is much thinner than the robust theism associated with the Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition; granted, too, that much of the positive content of that prophetic tradition will fall, in Hume’s view, on the side of false religion. But Hume is still in the business of sorting out true religion from false religion. He is not invested in the project of rejecting all religion as false or irrational, as he is often represented in the philosophical dialectics of the present age.

Hume was well aware of his reputation for irreligion and has his own account of why he was taken for an atheist. It is not because he *is* an atheist; rather, it is because his theism does not match the requirements of the often vulgar and self-serving theism of those who wished to persecute him. Here Hume identifies strongly with the

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person of Socrates who, although “the wisest and most religious of the Greek Philosophers” was nonetheless charged with impiety by the citizens of Athens (Hume 1993a, 117; see also Hume 1993b, 186).¹ Hume thought he was experiencing a similar fate, but this time in eighteenth-century Edinburgh, the “Athens of the North.”

True Theism

Hume begins the *Natural History of Religion* (1757) by distinguishing between two questions one might ask of religion: one concerns its “foundation in reason”; the other its “origin in human nature” (Hume 1993b, 134). One searches out and assesses the justification of religious belief; the other seeks an explanation of religious belief. “Happily,” Hume writes, “the first question, which is the most important, admits of the most obvious, at least, the clearest solution. The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion” (Hume 1993b, 134). Hume maintains this position consistently and without qualification throughout the work. In the last section he again claims that “A purpose, an intention, a design is evident in every thing; and when our comprehension is so far enlarged as to contemplate the first rise of the visible system, we must adopt, with the strongest conviction, the idea of some intelligent cause or author” (Hume 1993b, 183). Although Hume thinks that we have a natural propensity to believe in an intelligent author of the universe upon the experience of design, here he wishes to emphasize the rationality of the belief according to the rules of evidence and inference. The belief in a deity “infinitely superior of mankind” is, he says, “altogether just” (Hume 1993b, 163). The basic tenet of theism conforms to “sound reason” (Hume 1993b, 165). In “A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh” (1745), Hume, defending himself against the charge of irreligion, underscores the inferential probity of the design argument: “Whenever I see order, I infer from experience that *there*, there has been design and contrivance. And the same principle which leads me into this inference, when I contemplate a building, regular and beautiful in its whole frame and structure; the same principle obliges me to infer an infinitely perfect architect, from the infinite art and contrivance which is displayed in the whole fabric of the universe” (Hume 1993a, 119).

Hume’s commitment to an empirically grounded design argument for God’s existence should be of some assistance in rightly dividing the famous last lines of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (first edition 1748; quotes from the 1777 edition), where he bids us to run through the world’s libraries and commit to the flames those books of divinity and school metaphysics which do not contain either abstract reasoning concerning number or experimental reasoning concerning

¹ In some of the Hume quotes I have slightly, and silently, modernized the spelling and orthography.

matters of fact (Hume 1993a, 114). Many have taken this statement as a sign of Hume's militant atheism and a general incitement to theological book burning. But just prior to this great commission Hume states that theology, in its endeavor to prove the existence of God on *a posteriori* grounds, is based on reasoning concerning matters of fact, both particular and general. Insofar as this theological project is supported by experience, it has, he says, a foundation in reason (Hume 1993a, 114). So the force of the last lines in the *Enquiry* is not that all books of divinity are but "sophistry and illusion," but rather only those that do not contain any reasoning concerning matters of fact. The argument for the existence of one wise and powerful creator God begins with the experience of a matter of fact: the order and design in the universe. Such reasoning is thus supported by experience. It follows that books containing such reasoning should be spared the flames.

Vulgar Religion

Although Hume places the entire weight of the well-considered belief in God on the platform of the design argument, he also thinks that we have a general built-in propensity to believe in an intelligent author of nature upon the experience of design. This propensity works at the level of what Hume sometimes calls "instinctual beliefs" (Hume 1993a, 30), beliefs that are directly prompted by experience and not based upon an explicit consideration of evidence and its implications. Hume has Cleanthes, in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, give an example of the triggering circumstance and effect of this remarkable feature of the human mind: "Consider, anatomize the eye: Survey its structure and contrivance; and tell me, for your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation" (Hume 1993b, 56). This propensity, however, is not just a blind fact about human nature; rather, God implanted it in us, Hume claims in the *Natural History*, as a trace or sign of his existence. "The universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, if not an original instinct, being at least a general attendant of human nature, may be considered as a kind of mark or stamp, which the divine workman has set upon his work; and nothing surely can more dignify mankind, than to be thus selected from all other parts of the creation, and to bear the image or impression of the universal Creator" (Hume 1993b, 184). Perhaps humanity was not created in the image of God as the *Genesis* account has it; even so, Hume insists, it bears the image of God.

However powerful the propensity for belief in the existence of the divine may be, Hume ranks it as a secondary rather than a primary principle of human nature. This is both because it can be overridden by other propensities, giving rise to atheism in some cases, and because it is largely indeterminate with respect to the nature of the divine. Here too, other propensities are at work, producing a marked diversity in religious beliefs, and in most cases perverting the philosophically inclined belief in a wise, infinite, transcendent Creator God, for the first principles of religion are "easily perverted by various accidents and causes..." (Hume 1993b, 134). Hume

takes it that the content of true religion has a foundation in reason as well as our nature. But when he turns to false religion, he seeks an explanation entirely rooted in our nature: “It is chiefly our present business to consider the gross polytheism of the vulgar, and to trace all its various appearances, in the principles of human nature, whence they are derived” (Hume 1993b, 150).

Polytheism is the “original religion” of humankind in both the historical and existential sense. It is the “first and most ancient religion of mankind” (Hume 1993b, 135); but it is also a religious tendency rooted in the practical life of finite beings who are not in control of the forces that determine their welfare, a life that rarely admits the occasion for a calm and disinterested awareness of the grand order of the universe. “We may conclude, therefore, that, in all nations, which have embraced polytheism, the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature [which would lead to true religion], but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind” (Hume 1993b, 139). Here humanity is moved by “anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst for revenge, the appetite for food and other necessities” (Hume 1993b, 140). Polytheistic deities typically superintend the various passion-filled domains of practical life: marriages, births, agriculture, seafaring, and the like—“and nothing prosperous or adverse can happen in life, which may not be the subject of peculiar prayers or thanksgivings” (Hume 1993b, 140). Thus the vulgar are led to prayers and sacrifices, rites and ceremonies, as ways of finding favor with the gods (Hume 1993b, 139). They look upon life “agitated by hopes and fears” (Hume 1993b, 140). Too little aware of the marvelous order of the universe, “they remain still unacquainted with a first and supreme creator, and with that infinitely perfect spirit, who alone, by his almighty will, bestowed order on the whole frame of nature” (Hume 1993b, 142). Narrow in their concerns, surrounded by unknown powers on which their tenuous grasp on happiness depends, unable or unwilling to conduct a scientific investigation of these powers, the multitudes exercise their imaginations rather than their reason, and, under the guidance of certain propensities in human nature, form a religious system. One of the human propensities at work is to conceive of all beings to be like themselves, to transfer familiar qualities in themselves to unfamiliar things, here, in short, to anthropomorphize the divine (Hume 1993b, 141). As a result, the deity is often represented as “jealous and revengeful, capricious and partial, and, in short, a wicked and foolish man, in every respect but his superior power and authority” (Hume 1993b, 141–142).

Vulgar religion is an instrument developed in the search for control over the objects of desire. It is based on a strong attachment to the goods of fortune, and motivated by the fear of losing them, or failing to attain them (or, conversely, the hope of attaining them or hanging on to them). The gods of vulgar religion, in the form of polytheism, are there to be placated and persuaded through various actions that possess no positive moral value in themselves. This, according to Hume, was the general condition of religion in “barbarous ages” (Hume 1993b, 142). Yet progress toward true religion is to be expected on the basis of improvements in government, making life more secure and less fearful, and the development of science,

which will acquaint us with the intricate order of the universe, prompting belief in a transcendent and wise creator God (Hume 1993b, 142). The full span of this progress would take humanity from “groveling and familiar notions of superior powers” to a “conception of that perfect Being, who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature” (Hume 1993b, 134–135); from a divine being who is powerful, but limited, “with human passions and appetites, limbs and organs” to one who is “pure spirit, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent” (Hume 1993b, 136). At any point in this process an individual may take a shortcut to the end by way of an “obvious and invincible” design argument that appeals to reason and leads to a pure theism (Hume 1993b, 137). But the common run of humankind is neither acquainted with nor moved by such arguments. Exceptions are rare, to be found only among the learned.

The kind of religion one has is largely a function of the kind of person one is. Although the propensity to believe in an intelligent author of the world is universally distributed across humankind, it is activated only in those of a more noble and contemplative bent of mind. The vulgar never put themselves before the intricate order of the universe as a whole, or in its parts, and thus are not moved to believe in a supreme intelligence. The “stupidity of men, barbarous and uninstructed [is] so great that they may not see a sovereign author in the more obvious works of nature” (Hume 1993b, 183). Their vision is narrowed by practical concerns for their own welfare; their attention is keyed only to the immediate but obscure powers “which bestow happiness or misery” (Hume 1993b, 152). In many ways, the religion of the vulgar is a product of their own vice, their own narrow attachment to the single issue of their worldly weal and woe. On the other hand, there is a “manly, steady virtue, which either preserves us from disastrous, melancholy accidents, or teaches us to bear them. During such calm sunshine of the mind, these specters of false divinity never make their appearance” (Hume 1993b, 182). But when we “abandon ourselves to the natural undisciplined suggestions of our timid and anxious hearts, every kind of barbarity is ascribed to the supreme Being, for the terrors with which we are agitated; and every kind of caprice, from the methods which we embrace in order to appease him” (Hume 1993b, 182). Only the pure in heart will see God.

Clearly on this point Hume draws from the Stoic tradition, recommending the philosophical life of detachment as a prerequisite for true religion. The Stoics taught that virtue is not only necessary for happiness, but sufficient. A concern with the external goods of fortune over which we have, ultimately, no control—a concern with health, wealth, fame and the like—will only serve to set a person up for a life of disappointment, misery and vice. “The happy life” counsels Seneca, “is to have a mind that is independent, elevated, fearless, and unshakeable, a mind that exists beyond the reach of fear and of desire” (Seneca 2007, 88). The highest good must find its place beyond hope and beyond fear (Seneca 2007, 99). This is the way to the best life; it is also the way to true religious devotion. In the *Encheiridion*, Epictetus states that “piety is impossible unless you detach the good and the bad from what is not up to us and attach it exclusively to what is up to us,” (Epictetus 1983, 21) that is, unless you detach yourself from the goods of fortune and focus exclusively on the cultivation of virtue within the soul. Hume’s sentiments lie in the same direction.

Only with the acquisition of Stoic virtue through the discipline of detachment will a person be delivered from the generation of anxious god-manipulators and enter into the repose of genuine theism. Vulgar religion begins in fear; true religion begins in wonder.

Hume made no secret of his disdain for polytheism. He associated it with barbarous and vulgar cultures; and he refers more than once to its practitioners as “idolaters” (Hume 1993b, 134, 152). His more pointed criticism, however, is that polytheism is in fact a form of atheism. The divine beings of polytheism are but denizens of this world, not the transcendent Creator of it (Hume 1993b, 147). “The gods of all polytheists are not better than the elves or fairies of our ancestors, and merit as little any pious worship or veneration. These pretended religionists are really a kind of superstitious atheists, and acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity. No first principle of mind or thought: No supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world” (Hume 1993b, 145). In words reminiscent of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, Hume identifies the chief defect of polytheism as the worship of the creation rather than the Creator. “Whoever learns by argument, the existence of invisible intelligent power, must reason from the admirable contrivance of natural objects, and must suppose the world to be the workmanship of that divine being, the original cause of all things. But the vulgar polytheist, so far from admitting that idea, deifies every part of the universe, and conceives all the conspicuous productions of nature, to be themselves so many real divinities” (Hume 1993b, 150). St. Paul put it this way: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles … and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:23, 25).

Vulgar Theism

Hume holds that there are two roads out of polytheism to theism of the monotheistic sort. The high road, which we have already explored, begins with the disinterested experience of design and leads us to the Creator by way of propensity or inference. This road is undergirded by sure and “invincible reasons” (Hume 1993b, 153). The low road, often taken by the vulgar, has its origins in the irrational side of human nature and the passions that attend it. Starting with the threatening experiences of adversity, death, disease, famine, drought, and the like, travelers on this road ascribe such events to the workings of a particular providence. Modeling the god of particular providence on an earthly king, they then seek to flatter and influence this deity to their advantage. Outdoing each other in flattery in a kind of encomium competition, they eventually form the conception of their god as an infinite, perfect being. This is the vulgar route to the God of the philosophers: “While they confine themselves to the notion of a perfect being, the creator of the world, they coincide, by chance, with the principles of reason and true philosophy; though they are guided to that

notion, not by reason, of which they are in a great measure incapable, but by the adulation and fears of the most vulgar superstition" (Hume 1993b, 155).

The impulse toward the perfect being theology of the philosophers makes of the divine, however, something cold, abstract, distant and practically unavailable, a God too distant from human affairs to be of any help in facing the terrors of this life. It therefore spawns within common human nature the opposite impulse: a downward pull by a sentiment that wants to make the divine more familiar, more approachable, more localized, more arbitrary and therefore more persuadable. This contrary impulse tends to backfill the universe with lesser gods and various intermediaries, infecting the antecedent theism with all manner of idolatry (Hume 1993b, 159). "Men have a natural tendency," Hume observes, "to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism into idolatry" (Hume 1993b, 158–159). The second idolatry, however, only sets the stage for a renewed theistic impulse. The movement becomes cyclic, giving rise to a constant "flux and reflux" of theism and polytheism, all powered by human anxiety.

The Persecution of Philosophical Theists

Socrates, Hume writes in the "Letter from a Gentleman," was "the wisest and most religious of the Greek Philosophers" (Hume 1993a, 117). Yet, in spite of his genuine religious devotion, Socrates was "esteemed impious" because his form of philosophical theism demoted the divine standing of the gods of the ambient polytheism (Hume 1993b, 186). In effect, Socrates's philosophical theism threatened to deprive the vulgar of those divine beings who, fashioned in their own likeness, could also be persuaded to do their bidding. This was not the only time that philosophical theists have been persecuted by the vulgar. In Hume's day, however, the persecution came not from the camp of vulgar polytheists, but vulgar theists. Although vulgar theists hold that there is but one God, not many, they drink at the same well as the polytheist: desire and passion more than reason influence their conception of the divine. Their God is much more likely to become an available instrument in the human quest for power and advantage in the domain of earthly goods; and their God is more likely to be in the habit of intervening the course of the world's affairs in order to honor the requests of those who have learned how to please him. Philosophical theists, on the other hand, believe in a general providence, but not a particular. They hold that God established the general and regular order of the universe, but deny that God intervenes on particular occasions (or on all occasions). The vulgar equate the denial of particular providence with atheism.² Here, Hume avers, they are taught by "superstitious prejudices" to look for God within the workings of the world as the direct cause of particular events. They are thus inclined to identify as atheists all

² At the time, the General Assembly of the Scottish Presbyterian Kirk considered deism to be a form of atheism, as evidenced by its 1696 statement against Thomas Aikenhead in an "Act against the Atheistical Opinions of the Deists" (Stewart 2003, 34).

those who limit the explanation of natural events to natural causes. But as science reveals that particular natural events are caused by other natural events within a huge natural system, God disappears from the purview of the vulgar and they are apt to lose their faith, unless upon further reflection they see the overall regular order of the universe itself as evidence of a supreme intelligence, and return to belief on a stronger foundation (Hume 1993b, 154). Here Hume notes, along with Lord Bacon, that a little philosophy makes men atheists, but a great deal reconciles them to religion (Hume 1993b, 154).

An extreme form of vulgar theism has its philosophical representation in the doctrine of the occasionalists. These philosophers, like the vulgar in the presence of the miraculous, “acknowledge mind and intelligence to be, not only the ultimate and original cause of all things, but the immediate and sole cause of every event, which appears in nature” (Hume 1993a, 46). Although the occasionalists seek to make God first in all things by their maximal version of particular providence, they actually diminish the deity in Hume’s view. “It surely argues more power in the Deity to delegate a certain degree of power to inferior creatures, than to produce every thing by his own immediate volition. It argues more wisdom to contrive at first the fabric of the world with such perfect foresight, that, of itself, and by its proper operation, it may serve all the purposes of providence, than if the great Creator were obliged every moment to adjust its parts, and animate by this breath all the wheels of that stupendous machine” (Hume 1993a, 47). Better a God who figured out the plan of the universe in advance.

The philosophical theist (that is, a deist) limits belief in God to only what is licensed by empirical reason—here what can be inferred from the presence and unity of design in the universe. It is skeptical of human reason’s ability to make any further determinations on the basis of *a priori* speculation. In addition, because of their Stoic ethical formation, Humean deists are not overly attached to the desires for earthly goods and the passions that attend them. They are, therefore, under no special motivation to conceive of the divine as an agent of intervention, as a personal assistant in attaining and retaining such goods. This is to say that Hume’s brand of deism *cum* skepticism is not aligned with any “disorderly passion” of the mind. In “renouncing all speculations which lie not within the limits of common human practice,” it goes against “superstitious credulity” (Hume 1993a, 26); it cares only about the truth that can be established on the basis of experience. Yet however innocent, it is the object of much reproach: “By flattering no irregular passion, it gains few partisans: By opposing so many vices and follies, it raises to itself abundance of enemies, who stigmatize it as libertine, profane, and irreligious” (Hume 1993a, 27). Here, in a move of delicious irony, Hume exposes the passion of his religious critics as a function of their worldly attachments and anxieties.

In an earlier statement, “Letter from a Gentleman” (1745), Hume responds to the charge of atheism by pointing out that in criticizing the notion that reason can prove the existence of God through intuition and demonstration he was not claiming there was no evidence for God’s existence. Rather, he was claiming that there was just not that kind of evidence. There is such a thing as moral certainty as well as a mathematical or “rational” certainty. The certainty that attends the design argument is not

the rational certainty gained through intuition and demonstration; it is, rather, a certainty based on moral evidence, that is, on matters of fact plus a high degree of probability. “It would be no difficult matter to show, that the arguments *a posteriori* from the order and course of nature, these arguments so sensible, so convincing, and so obvious, remain still in full force,” since the critique of natural theology he proposed was focused only on the *a priori* arguments which depend on deductive reason alone (Hume 1993a, 118). Here Hume is not denying that there is evidence for the existence of the Deity, but only trying to identify which kind of evidence is relevant (Hume 1993a, 118). Assigning one kind of evidence to a proposition, instead of another, is not the same as denying the proposition in question. Hume is only against one kind of argument for God’s existence; not all the arguments (Hume 1993a, 119).

I have portrayed Hume as a supporter and defender of Enlightenment deism, and as a vigorous critic of interventionist theism of either the monotheistic or polytheistic sort. Hume had little that was remarkably new or novel to say about these competing models of the divine. His real contribution, in my estimation, comes with his psychologically probing account of the motivations behind these models, and the ethical profiles of those who subscribe to them.

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Nietzsche on the Death of God and the God of Life

Jason Smick

That philosophers pertain to the history of religion can scarcely be doubtful to anyone who regards theoretical investigation as inseparable from some commanding experience of Power.

Gerhardus van der Leeuw, Religion in Essence and Manifestation

[God] the supreme power – that suffices! Everything follows from it, “the world” follows from it!

Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Nietzsche's account of the death of God is a well-explored aspect of his thought. It is generally understood in one of two ways. First, it is sometimes taken as an analysis of the cultural situation in Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth century in the manner of what one Nietzsche scholar has called a “sociological impressionism.”¹ Interpreted in this way, his discourse on the death of God is understood as a notation and description of the effects in the West of declining belief in God and of the weakening authority of religious traditions and the values central to them. The second line of interpretation views this aspect of Nietzsche's work as a philosophical thesis meant to undermine the legitimacy of the concept of the God of metaphysics

¹ Vattimo (2004, pp. 4–5).

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and morality.² More precisely, it is seen as a thesis intended to call into question the assertion common to certain forms of religion and philosophy that the highest value lies in what is permanent, fixed, and otherwise opposed to the flux of lived experience and the world which such experience in some manner reflects.

In what follows I will revisit several of the texts in which the idea of the death of God is elaborated and defended. I will also briefly recount the vision of the world that Nietzsche offers as an alternative to the one founded upon the God who he believes is dying or already dead. I will show that these two discourses constitute complementary deconstructive and constructive movements in Nietzsche's thought. However, rather than revisiting and reassessing in a straightforward way the traditional hermeneutical strategies mentioned above, I will instead attempt to cast these strategies in a new light. The latter will be provided by the light shed on the practical aims of philosophical discourse by the French philosopher and historian of philosophy, Pierre Hadot. Hadot develops a set of powerful interpretive resources for the historian of philosophy, most especially in relation to a figure like Nietzsche. His discussion of what he calls, following Christian tradition, "spiritual exercises" in connection with philosophical forms of life, will help us establish a close and substantial relation between the sociological and philosophical readings of the death of God.

In order to display this link, I will outline a rationale for reading Nietzsche's deconstructive and constructive discourses as spiritual exercises meant to recollect a form of philosophical thought and of the philosophical life first outlined by Heraclitus. It is the experience of life that gives rise to the Heraclitean form of thought and life, and which is non-identically repeated in the life and work of Nietzsche that motivates, I will argue, his rejection of the God of metaphysics and morality and his concomitant recommendation of what I will call a God of life. Indeed, his earliest writings bear witness to an experience of the sort that led him later to devalue and revalue the highest value of metaphysics and the religions. Viewed in this way, the spiritual exercises of Nietzsche relative to the phenomena of God and life can be seen as practices meant to effect a transformation of the way philosophical subjects see and relate to the world. This effort to deconstruct and reconstruct philosophical praxis lends unity to a project that can easily appear fragmented and incoherent. But since the problem of philosophy that Nietzsche's deconstruction of God addresses is a problem it shares, in his estimation, with nearly every religious tradition these discourses can provide guidelines for reforming the subjects of religious forms of life as well. And indeed, the work of Nietzsche has transformed portions of the philosophical and religious traditions to which his discourse on the death of God is directed in ways largely consistent with his practical aims, and roughly analogous to those effected in him over the course of his own life.

²Here and throughout, I will use the term "God" in the singular. Though the God of philosophy (or metaphysics) and the God of the religions are distinct, with overlapping but separate histories, the use of this term in the singular is meant to reflect Nietzsche's belief that there is a common link between terms like God related to his claim that both religion and metaphysics display and embody an anti-life tendency.

The Death of God and the God of Life

Nietzsche's account of the death of God is most famously set forth in parable form in *The Gay Science*. The parable recounts the story of a madman who runs into a marketplace and calls out "unceasingly: 'I seek God! I seek God!'"³ Those in the marketplace are not "believers." Rather, they are what one commentator has identified as "scientific atheists."⁴ Such types reflected the forms of thought and life common to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment atheistic philosophies such as one finds in thinkers like Baron d'Holbach, La Mettrie, and Marx. Spurred by a secularized will to truth descended from Christianity and the Christian God, and emboldened by liberalized intellectual, social, and political contexts and, eventually, the presumed triumph of modern science over theology and metaphysics, these scientific atheists long ago set aside the God-hypothesis as theoretically untenable and practically harmful from the perspective of the progress of humanity. The gathered crowd collectively laughs at the madman, asking whether God might not just have wandered away like a child, or be lost, or possibly have taken a trip abroad? The madman confronts them, exclaiming

Where has God gone? I mean to tell you! *We have killed him*,
you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it?
How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge
to wipe away the horizon? What did we do when we loosened this
earth from its sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move?
Away from all suns? Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards,
sideways, forwards, in all directions? [...] Do we not hear the noise of
the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we not smell the divine putrefaction? – for
even Gods putrefy! God is dead! God remains dead!
And we have killed him!

The madman's declamation elicits surprise, silence, and incomprehension. Exasperated,

at last he threw his lantern on the ground, so that it broke in pieces
and was extinguished. "I come too early," he then said. "I am not yet
at the right time. This prodigious event is still on its way, and is traveling
– it has not yet reached men's ears. Lightning and thunder need time, the light
of the stars needs time, deeds need time, even after they are done, to be seen
and heard. This deed is as yet further from them than the furthest star –
and yet they have done it themselves!"⁵

This passage is important to understanding what I will call the descriptive aspects of Nietzsche's account of the death of God. It also hints at the prescriptive dimensions of this account. By descriptive I mean to refer to the sense in which Nietzsche's discourse on the death of God is a diagnosis of the cultural situation of late modern

³ Nietzsche (1974, pp. 181–182).

⁴ Magnus and Higgins (1999, p. 36).

⁵ Nietzsche (1974, p. 182).

Western culture. This situation is marked by the rise of explicitly atheistic philosophies, secular humanisms, democracy, and the dizzying theoretical and practical successes of modern science. Taken in this way, Nietzsche is describing a cultural event, namely, the death of God and the effects of that event on Western culture. There are, however, two prescriptive aspects to this discourse, or rather, there are two prescriptive aspects. The first is negative and encompasses Nietzsche's stigmatization and deconstruction of the God of metaphysics and morality. The second aspect concerns his positive recommendations for a thought and life conceived and enacted in relation to life regarded variously as *Becoming*, *chaos*, or a *God of life*. This is to say that Nietzsche is both describing a cultural situation and recommending certain courses of action meant to reshape and redirect it.

The parable of the madman pertains primarily to the descriptive bearing of Nietzsche's account of the death of God. It outlines a series of claims about the cultures affected by the event of God's death. At its most general level, Nietzsche is suggesting something like a logic of historical and cultural change: when new histories emerge and work to displace existing cultures and cultural histories, they can under certain conditions destabilize the theoretical and practical moorings of the cultures affected and facilitate the emergence and institution of new histories and cultures.⁶ These formulations suggest the need for a new point of orientation. New cultural histories generally do not deconstruct existing ones and leave it at that. Instead, the subjects of the emerging truth and history want to reconstruct the culture or form of culture on a new basis. If the challenge of a new and emerging form of culture involves the critique and displacement of an existing culture's worldview, that challenge is fundamental. The deeper the displacement, the more radical its character, the more uncertainty and danger it poses for the culture involved. Displacement of a worldview and the world or worlds associated with it will involve a profound shift in thought and life.

Nietzsche's parable means to reveal and invest with sense just such a fundamental shift in thought and life. The first claim is that those cultures previously oriented to and held together by God no longer are so. It is not that people no longer believe in God; many do. Instead, it is that God and the philosophies and religions of God lose their central place in the intellectual and cultural life of the societies affected by His death. The cultural life of the West thereby undergoes a profound reorientation of its personal and communal life. The center does not hold, European culture rolls away from its historical points of orientation and sources of meaning. What it rolls toward is a secular form of life and community linked to modern science that offers persuasive alternatives to traditional metaphysical and theological accounts of life. Yet those who take up and attempt to actualize these new possibilities fail to recognize the full import of this event. They do not see that the death of God refers not

⁶ While attempts to schematize the process of radical historical and cultural change have their limits, Bruce Lincoln's discussion of three conditions that need to obtain in order for a religious or philosophical movement to become a revolutionary movement are helpful in this regard. See Lincoln's (1985, pp. 275–277).

only to what they themselves already see – that the God of metaphysics and morality has lost its hold on the minds and lives of certain people – but to an even more radical possibility. The realization of this other possibility that inheres in this event would entail a reversal of traditional religious, metaphysical, and scientific ways of interpreting and living in the world.

Thus, in a sense, what Nietzsche is here narrating is true of any culture undergoing a period of transition, when its foundational ideas, practices, institutions, and communal forms are called into question. The instability and uncertainty that characterize cultural transitions releases other forms of culture that attempt to institute other sets of values and different form of life. Nietzsche can be taken to be here offering, then, a generic account of the processes and conditions that effect cultural change. He accentuates and makes manifest the uncertainty such transformations entail. Profound uncertainty obtains until efforts to seize or retain the reigns of cultural authority are successful in reconstructing the bases of life.

Yet Nietzsche's madman is announcing something more than just another profound societal transformation such as occurred through the life and work of Jesus or the Buddha or Mohammed. Every cultural transition is fraught with danger and uncertainty. But the transition that Nietzsche's madman means to make visible is so radical as to be catastrophic.⁷ What the madman announces, hopes for, and means to bring about, is the weakening of the hold of a set of values that have remained largely in tact for at least two millennia, though they have been expressed variously as "Platonism," "Christianity," or "the Enlightenment." As these remarks indicate, it is not that everyone affected by the death of God has abandoned either God or what God, in Nietzsche's view, also symbolizes. It is that the processes of conversion whereby other possibilities of thought and life emerge and transform the sense of the world, were finding some degree of success. Nietzsche himself can be seen as an instance and a symbol of one of these forms of thought and life, and his writings as a chronicle of the birth and development of another possibility of thought and life. Indeed, in Nietzsche's view, the possibility of life that he proposes is a novel alternative relative both to the traditions devoted to the God he regards as opposed to life and to the secular forms of life to which the people in the marketplace adhere, which in his view are modifications of the mode of being that they displaced.

The death of God forces a series of questions regarding those cultures affected by it. These questions are more existential than theoretical in their import: Can that portion of humanity which accepts and inhabits the world in the way now being called into question accept and adjust to such a profound reorientation of the intellect and of the cultures related to it? Will they create a new table of values, at whose center would be a "Yes" to those features of the world traditionally down-played or rejected by metaphysical philosophies and the religions, and thus become able to affirm life as such and as a whole? The possibility implied in the last of these questions is that other, more radical possibility that Nietzsche believes also becomes visible with the death of God. But the import of the emergence into visibility of this

⁷ Haar (1998, p. 158).

possibility is not only the curious or astonishing or horrific fact of its abstract visibility, but, through labor, the possibility of its becoming the actual basis of the lives of individuals and cultures.

It is here that we can begin to sketch out the deconstructive aspect of the prescriptive dimension of Nietzsche's thought of the death of God. I would first note that the term "God" functions for Nietzsche as the symbol of an experience, idea, and relation to life at its most fundamental level which he believes to be common to metaphysical philosophies and the religions. The common thread running through the various intellectual and cultural formations evoked above, in his estimation, is a world- or life-denying tendency and aspiration:

[D]espite important differences among the Hindu, Buddhist, Platonic, Christian, Cartesian, Kantian, and Schopenhauerian world-interpretations, Nietzsche sees in them a basic similarity: they are all forms of what he would later call "the ascetic ideal," that "hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself."⁸

Whether it be the space of eternal, unchanging forms in Plato, the eternal, all-knowing God of the Abrahamic religions and metaphysics, or the diminishment of difference, conflict, and human suffering by the scientific and political projects of modernity, each form of culture is Nietzsche holds predicated on a rejection of certain aspects of life. Which aspects? Those related to loss, the unpredictable, decline, and death, but also the coming of new and different forms of human thought and life since these are the material agents of loss, unpredictability, etc.

It is not that the aforementioned traditions fail to recognize these features of life. Rather, it is that each, in Nietzsche's view, is set against them, and so is set against the essence of life. Taken together, metaphysical philosophies and the religions constitute something close to a universal history whose invariant trait is an inability to joyfully accept and affirm life as it is. Thus, historically, the "greatest reproach against existence was the existence of God."⁹ The religions and metaphysical philosophies erect so many variations of a view of life and culture meant to diminish, if not destroy, what the highest value (God, Being) devalues – the life of the world. What is most valuable is what does not change, and every effort it made to ensure that a steady-state is achieved, or at least promised. Since the world as it is knows no thing that does not suffer the effects of powers and processes that cause things to come into being, remain, and pass away, the unchanging is not of this world. It is either outside the world (Christianity, Platonism) or a revolt within the world against the logic of the world (modern philosophy and science). In both cases, what is most valuable and what constitutes the basic orienting point of individual and communal life, is opposed to this world. The world and the things of the world suffer as a consequence, Nietzsche thought, including the adherents of world-denying traditions.

⁸ Cox (1999, p. 193).

⁹ Nietzsche (Nietzsche, Friedrich 1967b, p. 377).

Indeed, they suffer the most since they are called upon to embody and enact one or more forms of the ascetic ideal.

In addition to the destabilization of our theoretical bearings, the death of God affects morality. For Nietzsche, the God of metaphysics is a function. Its primary function is to serve as a designation for the first cause of being. This is the impersonal God of philosophical metaphysics whose gradual and wholly unspectacular death Nietzsche narrates most explicitly and succinctly in *The Twilight of the Idols*.¹⁰ Commentators are largely in agreement as to the relative importance Nietzsche assigns to the Gods who are dying. The God of metaphysics simply “wore out and vanished.”¹¹ Due to its primarily theoretical import, the death of this God has little direct bearing on the life of humanity.

The God of the Abrahamic religions – and Nietzsche has in mind here, the God of Christianity, first and foremost – functions as a creative principle as well. But He is also, and even more so, a moral God. Thus His affect on life is even more profound and, insofar as He devalues life, even more problematic from the vantage point of Nietzsche’s understanding of life. The reasons for this include the historic centrality of this God to the cultural life of Western culture, the negative effects of this God on human life (for example, guilt in the face of a failure to achieve perfection), and the source of these negative effects in a will to fix life and arrest its flow in accordance with the will to create and institute truths and ways of life immune to revision, supplementation, or death. In the section of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* entitled, “The Ugliest Men,” God does not choke or suffocate from pity, as yet another fable of the death of God asserts.¹² Instead, God is murdered because of the excess of shame and guilt induced by his constant witness to humanity’s perceived ugliness, brutality, and imperfection:

The god who saw everything, *even man* – this god had to die.
Man cannot bear it that such a witness should live.¹³

This passage well-illustrates the existential reasons for Nietzsche’s rejection of this God. The God of Christianity makes *us* want to die. This constant witness to our failures and imperfections leads to a relation to ourselves and the world that is characterized by guilt, self-hatred, and the desire to escape the body and the world, which are the presumed sources of imperfection and guilt. The moral God, Nietzsche believes, causes us to hate the world and the life that unfolds within it. For this reason too, for this reason first and foremost, this God must die.

To summarize the descriptive account of Nietzsche’s idea of the death of God and the deconstructive aspect of his prescriptive project: the death of God names the point at which some portion of humanity sees and wants a different idea and mode of being in the world. Even more so, they want a different valuation of life and a

¹⁰ Haar (1998, pp. 158–159); and Huskinson (2009, p. 44).

¹¹ Haar (1998, p. 158).

¹² Ibid., p. 161.

¹³ Nietzsche (1975, p. 267).

different life in the world. Thus, Nietzsche's deconstruction of God is rooted in his sense that not only is this God no longer believable. It is also, and arguably first of all, grounded in his contention that God's utility and value to human life are a serious question such that the cultures and subjects of cultures historically oriented to God and other ideas of life opposed to life need to be transformed in the direction of a life-affirming relation to the world; "we deny God ... only *thereby* do we redeem the world."¹⁴ So much so that for those, like Nietzsche, for whom a radical revaluation of concepts and ways of life is called for, there is no other recourse than to turn and head toward another highest value – perhaps even another God – and another vision of life.

This other vision of a highest value that enables its subjects to affirm life as it is, and the new life that it is to found and structure, has as its ideal "the new philosopher." This new ideal of life and the relation to life that it urges is to be embodied in dispositions like *amor fati* or contemplative practices associated with the Eternal Return. Each of these point to what Nietzsche hopes will be the new philosopher's resolve to will to accept life as a whole. In short, these locutions express a desire to say "Yes" to life, to affirm "that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward ... [Not] merely to bear what is necessary, still less conceal it ... but *love* it".¹⁵ In this way we can see the new philosophy Nietzsche proposes as "an alternative to religious views that seek life's meaning in an afterlife." His alternative philosophy can be seen as one that works to cultivate "an immanent appreciation of this life ...[, with] all its flaws, just for what it is."¹⁶

Nietzsche denominated in various ways the experience of life that motivated his rejection of the God of metaphysics and morality, and the alternative ideal life for those in whom the God opposed to life is dying. "Chaos" and "Becoming" are two of the key terms Nietzsche uses for a vision of life that recognizes, or better, interprets it as a continual process of creation and destruction. For humans, this motive force is at work as a will to exert power over a domain of some sort, and to unmake and remake (*Wille zur Macht*) it. In terms of human subjectivity this requires an exertion of power over oneself so as to reshape ones vision of and relation to life. In relation to others and societies, it requires educational and other training technologies that are able, at least in principle, to reshape a social body's worldview and world. In terms of the world, it is manifest in our efforts to reshape Nature. In each case, the intended result is the creation of individuals and societies able to affirm the apparently aimless, chaotic Becoming of life. The articulation of ideas like Becoming and chaos follow "from the 'death of God.' If God guaranteed a single world-trajectory and world-interpretation, the death of God unleashes a series of 'irregular,' 'contradictory' movements and opens the way for an 'interpretive multiplicity.'"¹⁷

¹⁴ Nietzsche (1990, pp. 50–51).

¹⁵ Nietzsche (1967a, p. 258).

¹⁶ Magnus and Higgins (1999, p. 36).

¹⁷ Cox (1999, p. 207).

Among the sources that enabled Nietzsche to give voice to his own experience of life as a ceaselessly given non-teleological phenomenon that allows for a multiplicity of interpretations, and which enabled him to envision his ideal of the new philosopher who would be this multiplicity's witness and caretaker, Heraclitus was especially important.¹⁸ Nietzsche recounted his experience of Heraclitus' vision of life and of the response to life given through that vision which pointed to a different evaluation and ideal of life, in the following terms:

In this world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming-to-be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence. [...Such] is the game that the aeon plays with itself. [...]It builds towers of sand like a child at the seashore, piling them up and trampling them down. From time to time it starts the game anew. A moment of satiety, and again it is seized by its need, as the artist is seized by the need to create. Not hybris but the ever self-renewing impulse to play calls new worlds into being.¹⁹

This passage is important in this context for at least three reasons. First, it articulates a sense of life as an impersonal non-teleological multiplicity given by a power or principle that is in no clear way moral or subject to final determination. This sense is the one that Nietzsche believes lies at the origin of the falsification of the world's Becoming in metaphysical philosophies and their analogues in the religions. Confronted by the multiplicity of life and the untameable character of it, we recoil, refuse it, and claim to be able to discern behind it something clearly simple and unchanging, something that does not pass away, and even, perhaps, something that cares for us always. In Nietzsche's view, the clearest examples of this effort to falsify Becoming are encapsulated in the traditional definitions attached to words like "God" and "Being." God is the eternal, ever-present One who cares; Being is opposed to Becoming, and the former is privileged over the latter. It is the Heraclitean experience of the world and the revulsion, terror, and fear it elicits that Nietzsche believes the God of metaphysics and morality are meant to overcome by way of devaluation and occlusion. It is life experienced and understood as such that humanity has difficulty stomaching. It can cause us to deny or resist decline, loss, and death and to reject alteration and the new for fear – for the sometimes well-founded fear – that they will replace or destroy cherished possessions such as career, love, an idea or set of ideas, a metaphysic, a religion, a form of scientific knowledge, or a culture.

Second, if God can die it is because God too is subject to the same forces and powers of life that humans are. God may name a phenomenon irreducible to "God" or "YHWH" or "Brahman." Indeed, the names of God may be appropriate names for what the term indicates so long as the sense they communicate leaves intact, as much as possible, the irreducibility of God to them. But God only becomes present in the words, images, and material expressions through which

¹⁸ Cohen and Ulfers (2002, pp. 21–29).

¹⁹ Nietzsche ((1962, p. 62).

we memorialize our experience of It (or He or She). The vehicles for the expression of God are historically-given and, due to their contingency and finitude, provisional. They must be instituted and protected, which fact is an indirect proof that they, like all things, can and sometimes do pass away.

Nietzsche clearly states that it is only the God of metaphysics and morality that has passed away, or that can now pass away, if certain conditions obtain. Among these conditions is the will of the new philosopher to set these figures of God aside and conceive and relate to the world anew. But it is also, implicitly, that this possibility has been given. It is from this perspective that we might understand the madman's cry “[w]e have murdered him, you and I!” less as a description of an accomplished fact, and more as a hope and aspiration. Given the contingency that Nietzsche thinks determines even our gods, we can better understand how a certain figure of God – the God opposed to life – is in process of dying. A fundamentally new possibility of life emerged. Along with it, a new vision of the highest value of life took shape: Becoming or chaos. It seized Heraclitus and, quite some time later, Nietzsche himself. This might be considered a philosophical counter-history, one that Nietzsche thinks ought to become normative at the moment the experience of life structured by the dominant ideals and values of the history of philosophy and religion no longer makes existential and theoretical sense.

This brings us to the third and final reason that this passage is important. Nietzsche regards Heraclitus' vision of life as a more adequate expression of our experience of life. It is this experience of life that he wants to learn to accept and affirm. And it is this experience of life that he wants to name, ideate, define, and return to the center of a new form of philosophy and the form of life associated with it.

The constructive aspect of Nietzsche's prescriptive project thus involves a new vision of life and a new ideal of life thus understood. “Chaos” and “Becoming” are terms suggestive of the truth of life. Their affirmation constitutes the new ideal of life and the basic thrust of a new form of life that is at once a counter-movement relative to traditional philosophical and religious existential and theoretical ideas and ideals of life. Each of these terms designates an active ontological principle whose self-expression is the will to power. Its existential, human form is also marked by the will to power. The ideal response to Becoming is enacted in practices like eternal return, *amor fati*, and yes-saying. However, Nietzsche also speaks somewhat enigmatically of this active principle of life with the help of a traditional term redefined in such a way as to make it display life as Becoming, chaos, and will to power:

Let us remove supreme goodness from the concept of God: it is unworthy of a god. Let us also remove supreme wisdom ... No! God the *supreme power* – that suffices! Everything follows from it, “the world” follows from it!²⁰

²⁰Nietzsche (1967b, p. 534).

Though passages where Nietzsche uses the term God in a positive, constructive sense are rare, they are nevertheless consistent with the complicated nature of his relation to the philosophical and religious traditions more generally. Their occurrence makes philosophical sense. After all, why should philosophy not be able to experience and name God, if indeed ‘God’ denominates the world as that which cannot, finally, be named and dominated. Most especially if by “God” we mean, at a minimum, that formative power that forms, deforms, and reforms the world? And is not Nietzsche’s experimental attitude toward what he attempts to name with words like “chaos” and “Becoming” a sign that he too sensed that one both can and cannot name something like God? And, likewise, that one both can and cannot kill God?

Certainly, Nietzsche is not often read as a philosophical theologian, even though he has been put to use by theologians from other traditions, including the Christian tradition. But such an interpretation does suggest itself, as Michel Haar, for one, has indicated.²¹ Haar argues that what occurs in Nietzsche is a metamorphosis of the divine, not its liquidation. We might even interpret Nietzsche’s ideas of Becoming, chaos, and will to power in light of Rudolf Otto’s idea of the Sacred (*das Heilige*). If so, Nietzsche would be pointing to an experience and idea of the Sacred that holds in view and refuses to turn away from its *mysterium tremendum* or to identify it in a straightforward sense with ethics or morality as traditionally understood and practiced.²² Interpreted in this way, we could then speak of the death of God as a double movement whereby the God opposed to life dies and a God of life is born, or, given its precedence in the history of philosophy (and the religions), reborn.

Interpreting the Discourse on the Death of God: Nietzsche’s Spiritual Exercises and the Reformation of Philosophical and Religious Forms of Life

It can easily seem that for Nietzsche adherence to the God of metaphysics and morality is simply intellectually untenable. However, another, perhaps even more significant objection to this God is, in his judgment, its symbolization of a way of thinking and living that is opposed to *life*. For this reason, I would argue that the importance of his appeals to deconstruct and set aside this God has less to do with

²¹ Haar (1998, pp. 157–176).

²² Here I would note that Heidegger in several places argues for the identity of the Sacred and chaos. Though in at least one of these places he does so by way of criticizing Nietzsche for overlooking chaos’ reference to “the yawning, gaping chasm, the open that first opens itself, wherein everything is engulfed,” his critique of Nietzsche seems largely to miss the mark. After all, to speak as Nietzsche does of a horizon of Becoming or a non-teleological field of coming-to-be and passing away is to speak of a notion of life as constituted by multiple centers of will to power, that is, of multiple openings which unfold their being and are then consumed in the very same process. See Heidegger ((1991, p. 77, 2000, p. 85).

its theoretical untenability than it does with their affect on human life. Thus, I would tend to agree with Gianni Vattimo who argues that

the statement ‘God is dead’ is not a metaphysical thesis argued and demonstrated to the ideal ‘we’ of human reason. It is [rather] the tale of an experience, an appeal to others that they might discover it in themselves, constituting, on this basis, a ‘we’ to whom and in whose name Nietzsche might speak.²³

Recognizing the sense in which Nietzsche’s critique of God is linked to an *experience* is one of the strengths of the reading advanced by Vattimo. Another is its recognition and accentuation of Nietzsche’s complex attitude toward the phenomenon of God.

The complicated character of Nietzsche’s attitude toward God is illustrated most explicitly in *The Will to Power*. There he discusses his own “religious, that is to say god-forming, instinct” which instinct has historically generated manifold figures of the divine.²⁴ Or again:

The Christian moral God is not tenable: hence “atheism” – *as if there could be no other kinds of god* [emphasis added].²⁵

If we take such passages in conjunction with the earlier reference to God as supreme Power, Nietzsche is abandoning neither God nor theology, but is instead articulating a specifically philosophical theology. He seems to profess an ontological commitment that might still deserve to be called religious.²⁶ Moreover, this form of philosophical theology, and its attendant religiosity, was part and parcel of Nietzsche’s effort to heighten, radicalize, and shape the cultural transformations that become possible in the wake of the death of God and the birth of a God of life.

Approached in this way, the aim of Nietzsche’s philosophical project is not just to revise philosophical theories of being and the processes that govern it. Nor is it simply an experience of the loss of a familiar belief and the exhilaration one can experience as new horizons of thought open up. This project is also an effort to recreate, or better, recover a form of philosophy for which “[t]heory and practice, discourse and life, affect one another.”²⁷ Indeed, the apparent weakness or incompleteness of the reading advanced by Vattimo and others is that they insufficiently appreciate Nietzsche’s practical aims.²⁸ In my view, his philosophy is motivated by a desire to assist the passing away of a *form of life* whose passing has now become

²³ Vattimo (1988, p. 46).

²⁴ Nietzsche (1967b, p. 534).

²⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁶ Vattimo (2006, p. 37).

²⁷ Nehamas (1998, p. 2).

²⁸ See Schact (1983); Heidegger (1991); Kaufmann (1974).

possible and to facilitate the emergence of a different form of the philosophical life that affirms life as it is.

To see this, we need to briefly return to the descriptive and prescriptive components of Nietzsche's thought of the death of God and draw them into a relation to Pierre Hadot's notion of spiritual exercises and the role they played in the life of ancient Greek and Roman philosophical communities. Not only is this necessary in order to make sense of Nietzsche's rejection of the God of metaphysics and morality. This will also allow for the harmonization of the descriptive and prescriptive dimensions of his account of the death of God.

One of the central goals of Hadot's work has been to show that and how ancient philosophy was practiced as a form of life in terms of spiritual exercises and the communities they shaped and were enacted within. Spiritual exercises can be understood "not only as a concrete, practical activity but also as a transformation of our way of inhabiting and perceiving the world."²⁹ The transformation in question is the passage from a pre-philosophical to a philosophical form of thought and life. In ancient philosophy, philosophical spiritual exercises functioned in two ways: they were employed either as a way of initiating someone into the ways of a given school of philosophy – its specific and unique form of thought and life (for example, Stoic or Epicurean) – or as a technique for accustoming the initiate to a school's way of seeing, understanding, and relating to the world since there is always the danger that one might fall back into a pre-philosophical way of seeing and living. Thus, spiritual exercises can be understood as conversion techniques, on the one hand, and as practices meant to habituate a philosopher to the ways of their community subsequent to conversion, on the other.

For the ancient schools, philosophical discourse was intimately related to living a philosophical life. Along with practices like examination of the conscience carried out by the lone individual or among friends, contemplation of Nature (*physis*), and meditation on death, philosophical theorization and the communication of this activity's results served as a means of transforming individuals into good philosophical subjects. In this sense, philosophical theory – its production and reception by hearers or readers – was a spiritual exercise that had the power to transform the individual and community. More generally, the intent of spiritual exercises was to transform the way that the philosophical novice saw, understood, and related to the self, others, Nature, and death and habituate them to modes of understanding and relation appropriate to a specific school and to the philosophical outlook and way of life more generally.³⁰

As these considerations already indicate, the aim of spiritual exercises was for the most part 'existential.' Though theoretical activity was important in varying

²⁹ Hadot (2004, p. 270).

³⁰ For an extended discussion of both the spiritual exercises common to the predominant schools of ancient philosophy (the Academicians, the Peripatetics, the Stoics, the Epicureans) and the common objects of philosophical practice in the ancient period, see Hadot (2004, pp. 172–233).

degrees across schools, its performance through dialogue and the written word served as a way of training the philosopher to live a philosophical life. There can be little doubt that Nietzsche's eventual polemic against the God of metaphysics and morality had an existential origin. In an early essay, "Fate and History: Thoughts," Nietzsche writes of his efforts to free himself from God and the religions of God. In this sense, for Nietzsche the discourse on the death of God names a process of disenculturation and enculturation. Moreover, this process of becoming a philosopher and freeing himself from this God required *effort*. It required a transformation of how he, most fundamentally, saw and understood the world. More so, it necessitated an ongoing habituation to this new vision and to a way of life that corresponded to it. For this reason, the work of freeing himself from the God of metaphysics and morality and freeing himself for the God of life was "not the work of a few weeks, but of a lifetime."³¹

I want to suggest that what Nietzsche is here marking is the initial stage of a transformation by way of an experience which would eventually issue in more rigorously formulated and enacted spiritual exercises, namely, the descriptive and prescriptive exercises outlined here. This is to say that his descriptive and prescriptive projects are offered as methods of dispossession, conversion, and habituation relative to the God of metaphysics and morality and Becoming or the God of life. The value of this approach to interpreting Nietzsche's discourse on the death of God can be seen by posing and sketching out provisional answers to three related series of questions that will here serve as a way of evaluating these two related projects.

First, has Nietzsche succeeded in transforming the way that people see the God of metaphysics and morality, what he regarded as symbols of the more general world-denying tendencies of religion and philosophy? Has training them to see this God as worthy of indifference (the God of metaphysics) or refusal (the God of morality) led to a deconstruction of these symbols of a Power opposed to life?

Second, has Nietzsche succeeded in training people to see and accept – to say "Yes" to – this other figure of the Sacred, the Sacred as sublime Power of life?

Third, in terms of the cultures in question, has there been a decline in the forms of life associated with the God who Nietzsche claims is dying? And has there been a corresponding birth of new forms of life which are grounded in a common aspiration to build a cultural life founded upon a "Yes" to life as it is and unfolds?

It seems to me that the answer to each of these questions is yes. There has manifestly been a shift away from the God of metaphysics and morality. Recent philosophical and religious intellectual history also has seen the emergence of theoretical discourses that bear witness to an experience of Becoming or something like a God of life, and which have given rise to ideas that articulate such a God. Likewise, the last 200 years of the history of philosophy and religion in the West has been the scene of struggles within and across traditions to turn toward an idea and ideal of

³¹ Nietzsche (2006, p. 12).

life that affirm it, and to reconstruct cultures on their basis. One might see the rise of religious fundamentalisms, at least in the West, as efforts to reassert both the God of morality and, in a perhaps less obvious way, of metaphysics.

If there still exist adherents of the God Nietzsche's deconstructive spiritual exercise is meant to dispossess his readers of, this is only to confirm Nietzsche's vision of life as a non-teleological scene of multiplicity that is transformed only through effort, discipline, and habituation to a different vision and practice of life. The death of God and the birth of a God of life is an remains a struggle undertaken in and through the bodies of their partisans on the terrain of history and culture. Whether or not the God whose death the madman announces passes away will therefore depend in part upon the efforts of those who oppose this symbol to cultivate in themselves and others a different idea of life and a different form of life. That religion still has the power to do so is perhaps due to its continued being as a form of life. That contemporary philosophy is primarily seen and enacted by its practitioners as a form of thought suggests that while Nietzsche's vision of life in many sectors of post-Nietzschean philosophy may have been transformed in a theoretical sense, the practical intent of his work has largely gone unnoticed or unassumed as a task.

Whatever one might conclude about the viability of the claim that there is a metamorphosis of the divine in Nietzsche, it is clearly the case that he offers an alternative to the God of metaphysics and morality. Of course, the meanings associated with these forms of God are not the only senses of God operative historically or at present in philosophy and the Abrahamic religions. And to some extent the elaboration or recovery of a God of life in the religions has been spurred by the provocations Nietzsche supplied.³²

In various guises Nietzsche's philosophical project outlines the contours of a highest value whose affirmation would require an affirmation of life as such, and an ideal of life that would affirm life as it is instead of wishing to flee it or suppress certain aspects of it. Whether or not this itself is an ideal life or adequate idea of life is another question. That it is for Nietzsche something approaching an adequate idea of life and a more ideal form of life is, I think, manifest. What I hope is now also

³² Nietzsche's critique and deconstruction of Christianity and religion per se can easily seem inadequate for anyone familiar with the actual range of meanings and possibilities historically operative in Christian tradition and other analogous "anti-life" tendencies in other religions. His attack on Christianity and religion more generally appears nevertheless to be applicable to certain forms of it, as Jorg Salaquarda argues; see Salaquarda (1999, p. 107). Still, one might wonder whether Nietzsche's attitude toward religion, and his often Manichean view of it, does not indicate the difficulty of resisting the desire to say "No" to at least a portion of what Becoming gives to the world, and thereby result in a corresponding attempt to take revenge upon certain of those "gifts." For a discussion of the traces of the 'spirit of revenge' in Nietzsche, see Müller-Lauter (1998, pp. 148–165). Even more so, one might – must – ask whether life as it is can be simply accepted as it is. Nietzsche's inability to appreciate the relation of ethics to the eschatological hope for a better world makes his thought veer in the direction of a justification and alibi of those aspects of the world that are simply unacceptable.

evident is that Nietzsche's discourse on the death of God can and perhaps should be understood as a spiritual exercise intended to dissolve an existing vision and form of life and convert and habituate those for whom God has died to another form of thought and life.

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Emmanuel Levinas's Non-existent God

Donald L. Turner and Ford J. Turrell

Introduction

Twentieth century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes a God that is wholly human, is always good, and does not exist. Explaining this startling combination of themes, this paper will present Levinas's novel model of a divinity whose transcendence allows Levinas's model to either incorporate or sidestep certain modern objections to traditional theology, whose connection to humanity inspires a deeply satisfying view of human and divine nature, and whose exclusively ethical significance promotes peace in a violent world.

God's Transcendence

Many elements of Levinas's philosophy, such as his linguistic theory or his handling of gender, change remarkably over the course of his 60-year writing career, but his theology remains almost entirely consistent. It is also highly unusual: on the one hand, Levinas invokes God again and again to help explain his ethical metaphysics, while on the other hand, he always insists that God does not exist. Attention to his vision of divine transcendence clarifies this enigmatic situation.

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Like some of his more traditional predecessors, Levinas repeatedly states that God exceeds the powers of human cognition and representation.¹ For example, he maintains that the Infinite is a “depth of undergoing that no capacity comprehends, and where no foundation supports it any longer … a placing without recollection” (Levinas 1998, pp. 66–67). Here Levinas shares some common ground with Descartes, who also described a dynamic whereby the idea of infinity was placed, by that which is infinite, within a finite being.² In Levinas’s phenomenology, God always remains beyond the scope of the grasping subject, maintaining epistemological transcendence.

While this aspect of divine transcendence might be philosophically appealing for readers with existentialist sympathies, if this were the entirety of God’s transcendence according to Levinas’s philosophy, we would have only an updated version of the basic picture presented previously by a tradition of thinkers from Descartes and Pascal to Kierkegaard. Levinas’s vision is more radical than those of these thinkers, however, for his God exceeds not only human cognition but also metaphysical existence itself.

Many brands of theism, including both the existentialist theologies mentioned above and the more traditional systems involved in the classic “proofs” for God’s existence (e.g., Anselm’s ontological “being than which none greater can be conceived,” Aquinas’s cosmological first cause, or the teleological watchmaker) involve, as Levinas puts it, “thinking God as a being and in thinking being on the basis of this superior or supreme being” (Levinas 2000, p. 160). In contrast to these approaches, Levinas baldly states that his view is “diametrically opposed to the traditional idea of God” (Levinas 2000, p. 207). This is because Levinas does not consider God to be a supreme being, repeatedly insisting instead that God is “beyond being.” Levinas disavows what he calls the traditional “positivistic” approach, citing Simone Weil, for whom God “does not exist” because “existence … is not enough for God” (Levinas 2000, p. 143).

For Levinas, traditional theological conceptualizations—and the language used to formalize or convey them—rob divinity of its holiness. As he puts it, traditional theology “thematizes the transcending in the logos, assigns a term to the passing of transcendence, congeals it into a world behind the scenes” (Levinas 1981, p. 5). This locating of God in a “world behind the scenes” is the natural result of theological language that “destroys the religious situation of transcendence”; hence, “language about God rings false or becomes a myth, that is, can never be taken literally” (Levinas 1981, p. 197). For Levinas, God’s transcendence means not that God exists in a “world behind the world,” but that, strictly speaking, God as a being does not exist at all—in either a “worldly” or an “otherworldly” realm. God is, as Levinas puts it, “transcendent to the point of absence” (Levinas 1998, p. 69).

Levinas’s is a God that one can believe in, even if it does not exist—especially if it does not exist—*because* it does not exist. As John Llewelyn puts it, paraphrasing Levinas’s discussion in *Totality and Infinity*, “God is not numinous, and … is ‘in-himself’ … only

¹ See e.g., Levinas (1969, pp. 80–81, 1998, pp. 66–68).

² For a more detailed discussion of Levinas’s link with Descartes, see Levinas (1998, pp. 62–64), and the note on Descartes’s idea of the Infinite in Levinas (1998, p. 198).

on the assumption of ontological atheism" (Bernasconi and Critchley 1991, p. 239). For divinity to be truly holy, it cannot exist ontologically. Instead of representing being *par excellence*, Levinas asks, "Does not God signify the other than being ... the bursting and subversion of being?" (Levinas 2000, pp. 153, 124–125).

This is one of the most philosophically satisfying aspects of Levinas's theology. By refusing to think of God as a being, insisting that God does *not* exist in this way, Levinas sidesteps the problem of establishing God's existence with some kind of argument or proof that would have to be defended in the face of counterarguments. In Levinas's view, not only are the traditional proofs for the existence of the divine being unnecessary—they are downright problematic, because the God whose existence they purport to prove turns out to be too limited and static. Furthermore, Levinas's vision helps him avoid the tangles of traditional theodicy, for a theology that disavows thinking of God as a being obviates the conceptual acrobatics required to reconcile belief in such a being with the reality of radical evil. Thus, because Levinas rejects the idea of God as a being, his thinking frees us from some of the most serious problems with which traditional theism must deal.

Divinity and Humanity

Levinas's refusal to believe in a certain conception of divinity and his auditing of the bankruptcy of certain theological formulations justifies characterizing him as part of the "Death of God" movement,³ and he faces the significant question of whether his insistence on God's radical transcendence forecloses meaningful discourse about God's relationship with the world. For Levinas, the answer is certainly "No," because his assertions of ontological atheism are followed by a creative reconceptualization of divinity. While the traditional idea of God as a supreme being has been rendered obsolete, a different concept of God lives in Levinas's philosophical texts, and though it is not a being, it is strangely human.

Though God proper does not exist, in Levinas's view, we do find what he calls *traces* of God within the world, and the trace provides the linchpin for Levinas's reformulation of the familiar transcendence—immanence dichotomy and the divine—human relation. As Levinas elegantly puts it, "A trace is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there" (Levinas 1986, p. 358). Levinas reserves the designation "trace" to refer to that which transcends history such that it has never been fully realized therein, nor could it ever be. Instead, the divinity that transcends leaves traces, and it does so exclusively in the face of the other human being whom one encounters in the ethical relationship. To illustrate his meaning, Levinas employs the image of a stone scratching another stone and contends, "[W]ithout the man who held the stone this scratch is but an effect" (Levinas 1986, p. 358). That which distinguishes a "trace"

³ Levinas explicitly states that his discourse can accommodate the idea of "the death of a certain God" as "tenant of the world-behind-the-world" (Levinas 2000, pp. 274–275).

from a mere “effect” (or a mere “sign,” as he sometimes says) is the reference to the human being, the considering of his relevance to the scene. This, then, is the bridge from Levinas’s view of God’s transcendence to his utterly humanistic ethics.

Levinas is clear: without humanity, the trace of God has no significance. He locates divinity within humanity, explicitly humanizing “God” and divinizing humanity. He writes, “There can be no ‘knowledge’ of God separated from the relationship with men,” because God “is not approached outside of … human presence” and “rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men” (Levinas 1969, p. 78). He asserts that, indeed, interhuman relations “give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of,” or, more poetically: “The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face” (Levinas 1969, pp. 78–79). While Levinas believes that it is in one sense inappropriate to consider “God” as another being, it is precisely in the encounter with other human beings that Levinas locates the trace of divinity. His dual commitments to “God” and to “the Other” as elemental concepts lead him to equate the two, intentionally and strategically, thus recognizing the divine in human alterity and vice versa. The title of a recent work of commentary on Levinas’s philosophy contains the essential idea: *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*. For Levinas, the latter is to be found in the former: the trace of divinity is manifest in the face of the other human being.

Levinas thus provides a theological conceptualization that avoids the powerful objections of thinkers such as Feuerbach and Nietzsche, who criticized any theology that elevates God while debasing humanity.⁴ By humanizing divinity, or divinizing humanity, Levinas provides a theological model that recognizes human value and importance in a way that Feuerbach and Nietzsche might have approved, given their desire to affirm the true nature of humanity by negating the otherworldly pretenses of bad theology.

Ethics

Finally, we claimed above that Levinas’s God is always good. By this we mean that for Levinas, religion is inseparable from ethics—indeed, the two fields are one and the same, and Levinas intentionally conflates them. He unapologetically admits, “The terminology I use sounds religious,” but this is an understatement (Levinas 2001, 204). Levinas’s philosophy can defensibly be called a religious philosophy or religious ethics—given a particular understanding of religion. For Levinas, the ultimate meaning of religion lies in the ethical encounter with the other person. In a sense, “religion” and “ethics” are synonymous, since both words describe the scene of the same interpersonal dynamic.

The secret to Levinas’s assimilation of religion and ethics lies in his identification, via the concept of the trace, of humanity and divinity. Nietzsche took philosophy in this direction when his Madman claimed that the death of God as an external source of moral truths required individual human beings to become Gods *themselves*: to

⁴ As Feuerbach famously put it: “To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing” (Feuerbach 1989, p. 26).

generate their own values.⁵ Like Nietzsche, Levinas locates divinity within humanity, but Levinas aims to recognize divinity in the *other* human being to whom one is ethically bound, rather than in the autonomous, law-giving self. The fundamental existential event is not a free, self-affirming act; it is a recognition of one's being ethically subject to a demand that precedes the concepts with which one attempts to understand it or the legal systems by which one attempts to do it justice.

Paradoxically, the Other's power in this regard is grounded in her worldly powerlessness. No trope in Levinas's work better illustrates this aspect of the structural asymmetry between self and Other than his frequent characterizations of the Other as "stranger, orphan, widow." These figures, repeatedly described in the Bible as right recipients of generosity, figure prominently in Levinas's writings for the first time in *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas claims, "The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is ... the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated" (Levinas 1969, p. 215).⁶ Each of these marginal figures is defined by a particular deprivation—of friendly fellows, parents, or spouse. The power of the appeal that these figures issue exists in inverse proportion to their "empowerment" in the traditional sense of the word: the strength of their ethical appeal is a function of their lack of worldly power.⁷ Levinas's frequent discussion of the self as "hostage" to the Other illustrates this situation well, and this would provide Levinas a coherent arena for a concept of God's omnipotence, for, as Levinas puts it, the Other subjects one to an appeal to which it is impossible for one to be deaf.⁸

Providing a necessary ethical supplement to Nietzsche's philosophy, which can all too easily be made to serve egoistic projects, Levinas capitalizes on Nietzsche's Promethean delivery of God-talk to its rightful place in the human realm, but he reorients it from the self to the Other. Like Feuerbach, Levinas would "transform theologians into anthropologists, lovers of God into lovers of man," for he believes that "God" has meaning only with regard to interhuman relations. Thus Levinas infuses ethical situations with a religious significance that raises them to the level of ultimate concerns. For philosophers who seek a vision of God that has earthly significance and ethical import, Levinas's conceptualization of divinity offers a compelling, though non-traditional, combination of transcendence and immanence.

Like Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche, who condemn religious frameworks that divert attention from the human sphere to some supernatural realm, Levinas refuses

⁵ See Nietzsche (1974), p. 181.

⁶ For Biblical references to generosity toward strangers, orphans, and/or widows, see *Deuteronomy* 24: 17–22 and 26: 13–15. For other places where Levinas invokes this imagery, see Levinas (1969, pp. 78, 213), (1981, p. 123), (1998, p. 166).

⁷ Here we see connections between Levinas and Kierkegaard, both of whom ground theological discourse in paradox.

⁸ Though it surfaces in other works as well, the "hostage" symbol is most pervasive in Levinas (1981), showing up as early as the fifth page, as late as the penultimate paragraph, and in many other places in between. For the "deafness" formulation, see Levinas (1969, p. 200).

to conceptualize God as a being existing in a “world beyond the world.” Instead, by recognizing the trace of God in the face of the Other, Levinas’s theological discourse does not divert us from human problems, but directs us toward them. As Levinas puts it: “To go toward Him [God] is to go toward the others” (Levinas 1986, p. 359). Among the great philosophical strengths of Levinas’s theology are his incorporation of the critiques issued by the hermeneutics of suspicion and his insistence that ethics demands our ultimate concern. These gestures give his vision relevance and urgency in a violent world, where the Other is all too often wrongly deemed the enemy.

Closing

Admittedly, Levinas’s model has limitations. For example, one might ask whether the ethical imperative Levinas describes is even achievable or whether it is *too* altruistic. Can one truly relinquish all being-for-oneself and manifest complete being-for-the-other? Furthermore, given the quantity and complexity of human relationships in our lives, how can Levinas’s model not have problematic social repercussions? Will not the ethical responsibility one has to many Others require focusing attention on certain relationships at the expense of others? Will not one’s response to the demand of some entail the suffering of others?

Levinas recognizes this complexity, and he acknowledges that these effects are inevitable, given the limitations of individual human activity. The best that one can do in this difficult situation is to attempt to recognize and do justice to the needs of others as they arise. This is what Levinas means when he says that necessarily flawed and incomplete institutions of justice should be inspired by an ethical orientation, even if they cannot perfectly embody or fulfill it. He writes, “The word justice is in effect much more in its place, there, where equity is necessary and not my subordination to the other” (Levinas 1998, p. 82). In other words, equity might be a just goal to pursue when trying to weigh the interests of different Others, and such a principle has a place in institutions of justice through which we attempt to reconcile competing claims. Such institutions are themselves necessary because there are more than two people in the world to be affected by our actions, but this institutional demand for equity is a necessary compromise of the self’s subordination to the Other that the fundamental ethical encounter establishes. Moreover, there will always be needful others beyond the one to whom the self attends in the singular face-to-face relationship, so there will always be more to do, and a perfect state is an ideal, never a reality. The imperative without promise of completion only adds to the existential strain in committing to and pursuing the ethical life, but with Levinas, as with Kant, ethics is difficult.

One might also recognize other limitations to Levinas’s model of God. By locating the trace of divinity solely in the face of the other human, Levinas neglects the possibility of religiously significant relationships with non-human animals or with the earth itself. Furthermore, whereas William James’s landmark *Varieties of Religious Experience* was criticized for over-emphasizing individual experience and giving

short shrift to the communal aspects of religion, it might be argued that Levinas pays insufficient attention to certain solitary experiences. Restricting religious language to the encounter between self and Other, Levinas seems to allow no room for describing with religious language the sense of awe inspired by the beauty of the natural world or the moving power of works of art. Whether this limitation detracts from Levinas's religious philosophy depends largely on the degree of one's inclination to describe aesthetic experiences as "religious"—a topic too large for this paper.

Such possible limitations notwithstanding, Levinas offers a vision of a God that transcends existence while leaving divine traces in the human face. Among the many strengths of his model are the ways it escapes the necessity of "proving" God's existence, incorporates some of the most strident critiques of traditional theism with regard to the value of earthly life and human beings, and deploys religious language, including the idea of "God," in the realm of interhuman ethical relations. As such, we find it to be among the most compelling visions of divinity to have emerged in the twentieth century.

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The New Atheism and Models of God: The Case of Richard Dawkins

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An atheist is a person who denies the existence of God. But there are many different models of God. So an adequate understanding of a particular atheistic position requires a specification of the conception of God that it entails. What are the models of God employed or presupposed by the “New Atheists” Sam Harris (2004, 2008), Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), and Christopher Hitchens (2007)? An answer to this question would illuminate the extent to which these recent bold opponents of religion and religious belief are saying the same thing when they say that God does not exist.

But it is not easy to determine what model of God each New Atheist has in mind. Only Dawkins provides a single explicit conception of God in the course of justifying his atheism. Though both Harris and Hitchens presuppose implicit models of God, their assumptions about divine reality are either unexpressed or distributed unsystematically throughout their discussions. And though Dennett does mention a number of models of God, he does not settle on any one of them as being definitive of the metaphysical position he denies. Instead, he argues that the concept of God is insufficiently determinate for it to be possible to know what proposition is at issue in the debate over God’s existence (2006, p. 246).

Since Dawkins is the only one of the four to commit himself to an explicit model of God, this essay will focus on his conception. I will examine what, specifically, this New Atheist says or implies about models of God in general, and how the particular model he adopts would stand up to the scrutiny of the larger community of scholars, both classical and contemporary, who have discussed models of the same sort. Finally, I’ll consider the nature and adequacy of the case for atheism that Dawkins constructs on the basis of the model of God he articulates. I will argue that, because his model of God is deficient in certain important respects relative to traditional monotheistic models of God, his argument for atheism fails to establish the

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non-existence, or even probable non-existence, of the God described by these models. I will also contend that Dawkins' case for atheism does not succeed in showing that there probably isn't a non-monotheistic or non-traditional monotheistic divine being (or reality) either.

Dawkins' "God Hypothesis"

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins makes his model of God fairly clear. He defines what he calls "The God Hypothesis" as follows: "there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us" (2006, p. 31). He then argues that this God Hypothesis is "almost certainly" false (2006, Chapter 4). So Dawkins' brand of atheism is at least a denial of any version of monotheism involving a divine creator. But given how his God Hypothesis is formulated, his rejection of it does not necessarily rule out versions of monotheism that entail that the universe is co-eternal with God and so uncreated (such as in the case of Aristotle's model of God as the unmoved mover of the eternal universe and in the case of the Manichean eternal duality between God and matter).

However, after discussing polytheism, he also says, "I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented" (2006, p. 36). This more general characterization of his position makes it clear that Dawkins means to exclude, not only monotheism of the sort indicated by his God Hypothesis (which includes deism), but *any* sort of monotheism and any version of polytheism as well. He is ruling out the existence of all *supernatural* realities. But that leaves open the possibility of there being a divine reality or divine realities not completely ontologically distinct from nature but instead completely within nature (animism), absolutely identical with nature (pantheism), or such that nature is an essential part of God (panentheism).

Dawkins does discuss pantheism in connection with his assessment of Einstein's "religious" remarks (such as Einstein's rejection of quantum indeterminacy on the grounds that "God doesn't play dice with the universe"). After concluding (uncontroversially) that Einstein was not a traditional theist (because he denied divine intervention), Dawkins makes the (tendentious) claim that "there is every reason to think that famous Einsteinisms ... are pantheistic, not deistic" and that, moreover, "Einstein was using 'God' in a purely metaphorical, poetic sense" (2006, p. 18). Dawkins' attribution of pantheism to Einstein aside, it is clear that he thinks the pantheist affirmation that "nature is divine" is metaphorical and so not a claim about what is literally true (note his reference to "the metaphorical or pantheistic God of the physicists;" 2006, p. 19). Since Dawkins does not mention pantheism (or related models of God) again in *The God Delusion*, it seems reasonable to infer that he would consider his classification of it as merely metaphorical to suffice as grounds for dismissing it (and similar models such as panentheism) as a legitimate alternative to naturalism.

In sum, Dawkins has explicitly committed himself to the rejection of any sort of divine reality, supernatural or natural. But his sole attempt at a serious argument for atheism targets only his creation monotheistic God Hypothesis. So his case for a thoroughgoing atheism relative to the broad range of existing models of God is insufficiently comprehensive.

Even so, might Dawkins' reasoned repudiation of creation monotheism at least constitute a serious challenge to models of God of this particular sort? Our answer to this question will depend upon what we think about the extent to which Dawkins' God Hypothesis is faithful to the creation monotheist model of God as traditionally and widely conceived. Does Dawkins' monotheistic model of God adequately match the model that most creation monotheists and their respected opponents have employed in debating about the existence of such a divine reality?

In comparing Dawkins' creation monotheist model of God with other monotheist models, we can ask both whether he includes elements left out by the others and whether he excludes components the others contain. All models of God involve both (a) a specification of divine attributes and (b) an indication of the nature of God's relation to reality as a whole. Let us analyze Dawkins' God Hypothesis to determine how the model of God it presupposes can be divided into these two categories.

In terms of intrinsic properties, Dawkins characterizes God as an intelligent, superhuman, and supernatural being. Though Dawkins does not analyze these concepts, it seems reasonable to infer that, in virtue of being intelligent, God must be a conscious being capable of a relatively high degree of rational thought. But because God is superhuman, God can exercise this capacity so as to exceed what is normal or possible for mere human beings. Finally, since God is supernatural, God is completely above and beyond nature in the sense that God is not a part of nature, identical with nature or such that nature is a part of God. Consequently, God does not have any properties possessed only by natural things. Though Dawkins doesn't mention what these might be, it is likely he would agree that God has no physical properties.

Dawkins does provide an indication of some of the specific ways in which the God described in his hypothesis is capable of exercising intelligence: by deliberately designing and creating "the universe and everything in it, including us." So the kind of God Dawkins has in mind must have a will and must be capable of exercising this will to act on the basis of God's purposes. Consequently, this God must also have the power to bring into existence the sorts of things that constitute and are contained within the physical universe and to order them in such a way as to serve the purposes for which he created them.

This analysis of the intrinsic properties Dawkins' God Hypothesis attributes to God makes it clear what God's relationship would be to the rest of reality: God would not comprise the whole of reality, but instead the existing universe and everything in it including us would be absolutely ontologically distinct from God but also metaphysically contingent and absolutely dependent on God for their original and (and possibly ongoing) existence and design.

On the basis of this account of Dawkins' model of God, it seems clear that everything Dawkins has included in it is also included in most classical creation monotheist

models of God. However, there are a number of elements shared by most of the classical models that Dawkins has not made a part of his model. As a result, Dawkins' monotheistic model of God is not as comprehensive as these classical models. The remainder of this section will be devoted to a discussion of some of these attributes that have been traditionally ascribed to God but which are not included in Dawkins' model. In the following section we will consider whether Dawkins' case for atheism is hampered by any of these omissions.

The best way to compare Dawkins' model of God with classical monotheist models is to characterize the latter in terms of the most comprehensive conception of the intrinsic nature of God that they all have in common. This is the concept of God as a supremely perfect being. Though this model of God finds its most explicit initial expression in Anselm, there are earlier general formulations of the divine nature that contain a seminal version of the same idea. These pre-Anselmian accounts include Plato's characterization of the Form of the Good as a being that possesses the highest degree of reality and value, Aristotle's description of the Unmoved Mover as fully actualized and so not capable of changing for the better or for the worse, and St. Augustine's definition of God as "that to which nothing is superior." We also find post-Anselmian affirmations of the perfect being model of God in the works of such philosophers as Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza (though Spinoza's model is pantheistic rather than monotheistic).

A perfect being model of God lends itself to further more specific development through reflection on the properties a being would have to possess in order to be perfect. These "perfections" have traditionally been thought to include at least most of the following: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, omnipresence, necessary existence, self-existence (or independent existence), immutability, immateriality, eternality, and (though this is perhaps more controversial than the others) simplicity.

It should be clear that Dawkins' model of God does not entail that God has all of these perfections. Indeed, for all Dawkins has said, it is possible that his model of God does not ascribe *any* of these perfections to God, even by implication (though as mentioned above, it seems reasonable to infer that, if God is the creator of the material universe, God must be immaterial). Though Dawkins' model requires God to be *very* powerful and *very* knowledgeable, it does not necessitate that God be *all*-powerful or *all*-knowing. God would only have to possess enough power and knowledge to create and design the universe ("and everything in it, including us"). Still less does Dawkins' God need to be necessary, independent, unchanging, eternal, or simple. So there is a significant divergence between Dawkins' monotheistic model of God and the traditional monotheistic models of God that characterize God as a perfect being.

This discrepancy between Dawkins' model and the received models should cause one to question how Dawkins' case for the falsity of his God Hypothesis could serve as an adequate basis for a full-blown atheist position. Even before considering his argument for the claim that his hypothesized God "almost certainly" doesn't exist, there is good reason to suspect that the "God" it knocks down will be made of straw (a "straw-God" argument!). Given the insufficiently comprehensive nature of

Dawkins' model of God relative to the traditional monotheistic models, it may well be the case that even if there are reasons to think that the sort of "God" hypothesized by Dawkins probably doesn't exist, these reasons would be inadequate to demonstrate the probable non-existence of a God more comprehensively conceived. But let us now examine Dawkins' argument to see whether this suspicion can be confirmed.

Dawkins' Argument Against the God Hypothesis

Dawkins' argument for the probable non-existence of God is the most explicit and thorough attempt at an atheistic argument amongst the four New Atheists. However, he does not state this argument in a deductively valid form, so it is difficult to discern exactly what he has in mind. Dawkins labels his argument for God's non-existence "the Ultimate Boeing 747 gambit," because he thinks that God's existence is at least as improbable as "the chance that a hurricane, sweeping through a scrap-yard, would have the luck to assemble a Boeing 747" (2006, p. 113). At the heart of his argument is the claim that "any God capable of designing a universe ... must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide" (2006, p. 147). Dawkins also says that the hypothesis that an intelligent designer created the universe is "self-defeating" (2006, p. 158). What he appears to mean by this charge is that this intelligent design hypothesis claims to provide an ultimate explanation for *all* existing improbable complexity and yet cannot provide an explanation of *its own* improbable complexity. Dawkins further states that, "Far from terminating the vicious regress, God aggravates it with a vengeance" (2006, p. 120).

Though this argument raises a number of interesting questions, I will concentrate on the assumptions Dawkins makes about aspects of the model of God it presupposes. Clearly, it is Dawkins' attribution of *complexity* to God in virtue of God's being an intelligent designer that drives the argument. But this assumption that God would have to be complex in such a way as to require God to have been designed by another designer conflicts with the longstanding assumption that God is a perfect and so necessary being who is consequently self-existent and ontologically independent. At the very least, Dawkins owes the defender of this classical model of God further clarification of the kind of complexity he attributes to God and further arguments for the claims that God possesses this kind of complexity and that God's being complex in this way is incompatible with God's being self-existent.¹ That is, given the traditional and widely-endorsed creation monotheist model of God as a supremely perfect being, if Dawkins wants to construct an adequate case for the non-existence of a creation monotheist God, the burden of proof is on him to provide a more thorough explanation and defense of the appropriate instances of the following two claims: (1) If God is the intelligent creator and designer of the universe,

¹ Alvin Plantinga makes this point in his 2007 review of *The God Delusion*.

then God must possess a certain degree of a certain kind of complexity, and (2) anything that possesses this degree of this kind of complexity is a contingent thing that depends for its existence on another intelligent creator and designer.

Let us consider each of these claims more carefully. With respect to (1), we must first determine the kind of complexity that Dawkins has in mind. One kind is the sort manifested by physical objects in virtue of their being composed of parts. The degree of complexity of a physical object could then be spelled out in terms of the number of its parts and their physical connections with each other. But we have already seen how Dawkins would likely agree that, since God would be a supernatural being, God would not be a physical object. So if God is complex in any sense, the kind of complexity he possesses must be a non-physical kind.

Since Dawkins thinks God's being an *intelligent designer* would suffice for God's being complex in the relevant sense, this non-physical kind of complexity would seem to be of the sort possessed by a non-physical *mind*. Though such minds do not have separable parts as physical things do, at least finite minds have many *contents* (thoughts, sensations, etc.). And if God's infinite mind is like finite minds in this respect (an assumption that contradicts the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity as formulated by Aquinas and others²), it would have a much higher (perhaps infinite) number of such contents. And in this sense it may well be appropriate to say that God, in virtue of being or having an infinite mind, is very complex.

But is this kind of complexity the sort that would require God to have been designed by another intelligent designer? Whether it depends on the plausibility of claim (2) above (that anything that possesses the relevant kind of complexity to the relevant degree is a contingent thing that depends for its existence on another intelligent creator and designer). But now that we have clarified the kind of non-physical mental complexity God would possess (assuming the falsity of the doctrine of divine simplicity), it is not at all clear that God's being complex in this way would require God to be a contingent and dependent being whose existence would thus need to be explained in terms of something outside of God.

In order to see this, it will be helpful to remember the possibility that we can explain God's existence by appealing to something in God's nature rather than by appealing to something outside of God. As mentioned above, the classical perfect being model of God entails that God is a necessary being. If so, then what explains God's existence is that God *has* to exist. Since on the perfect being model of God it is God's nature to be such that God cannot fail to exist, then on this model God is self-existent or ontologically independent; God does not depend for God's existence on anything other than God.

Would God's having an infinitely rich and so complex mind require God to be otherwise? Is it impossible or even unlikely that there is a personal being who is self-existent and who also has a complex – perhaps infinitely complex – mind? Dawkins has not given us any reason to think so. Dawkins' claim that a complex being requires an external designer does seem plausible when the kind of complexity at issue is physical. The existence of a *physically* complex thing needs to be explained, and it is implausible to think that its existence can be explained internally by appealing to its nature. After all, its nature

² Plantinga also mentions this in 2007, p. 3.

is to be a particular collection of physically connected physical parts and things of this sort are imperfect in virtue of the possibility of their disintegration. Since physically complex things are not perfect things, we do not have a reason to think that they are necessarily existent things. And if we do not have a reason to think of them as necessary, we do not have reason to think of them as independent. Rather, it is reasonable to think of them as contingent and so dependent on something else for their existence (This is, of course, a fundamental assumption of the cosmological argument for God's existence.).

But in the case of a non-physical mentally complex being – a mind that has many contents – there is no possibility of disintegration into separable parts. Indeed, the contents of a mind are essentially inseparable from the mind that contains them. My thoughts are not free-floating entities; they are *my* thoughts. And as such they are fundamentally unified by their relationship to me. They can exist only as a modification of my mind. The same thing is surely true of God's mind. Though there is a sense in which God's mind is infinitely complex in virtue of the sheer number and variety of God's thoughts, since this infinitely complex mental life is the mental life of one personal being, it is a kind of complexity that is ultimately unified in the simplicity of that personal being's non-physical divine mind. And if this complexity is a product of a simple mental substance, it isn't at all clear why an explanation of it would need to appeal to an external designer.³

Finally, if an explanation of God's mental complexity does not clearly require the existence of something outside of God, then it seems plausible that this complexity could be explained by appealing to God's nature. And if, as the traditional monotheist models have it, it is God's nature to be a perfect being, then the explanation of God's mental complexity may well be that a perfect being would have an infinitely complex mind. Even more, we can follow Leibniz in affirming that perfection involves the greatest possible variety (or complexity) with the greatest possible order.⁴ Since this condition would be satisfied by the existence of a maximally unified mental substance with maximally complex contents, it follows that a perfect being would be not only a necessary being, but also a being with a mind that unifies a complex mental life. If that is the case, then God's self-existence and mental complexity are compatible and we can explain both in terms of God's nature as a perfect being without needing to posit the existence of a designer of God outside of God.

In sum, both of the claims identified as being central to Dawkins' argument against his God Hypothesis, once clarified, are questionable when assessed from the standpoint of classical monotheist models of God. An adequate case for claim (1) (that if God is the intelligent creator and designer of the universe, then God must possess a certain kind of complexity to a certain degree) would need to rule out the doctrine of divine simplicity entailed by some classical models of God that would allow for God to be an intelligent designer without being complex in any sense. But even if (1) is granted on the grounds that God's mind would have to be complex because of its myriad contents, claim (2) (that anything that possesses the relevant degree of the relevant kind of complexity is a contingent thing that depends for its existence on another intelligent creator and designer) would require additional support in order to rule out the assumption of

³ Bill Craig makes this sort of point in his reply to Dawkins (2009, pp. 2–5).

⁴ See *Monadology*, paragraph 58.

many classical models of God that God can have an infinitely complex mind and yet be a necessary and so independent being whose existence needs no further explanation.

But even if Dawkins' case against monotheism is inadequate to demonstrate the probable non-existence of a *perfect* God, might it nonetheless succeed as a case against an imperfect monotheistic deity? In particular, would Dawkins' argument for the claim that his God Hypothesis is almost certainly false succeed if the god in question were a contingent and dependent being? Recall first that what Dawkins means by 'God' is "a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us." Given this definition, the question that is now under consideration is whether Dawkins' argument shows that there is almost certainly no imperfect, contingent, and dependent being of this sort.

Before we answer this question, let us grant that a god of this sort would have a very complex mental life. Let us also grant that since such a being would be imperfect, contingent, and dependent, we would not be able to account for its existence by appealing to its nature and so would need to explain its existence by appealing to something outside of it on which it depends. Notice that in granting these two points, we are conceding two important premises of Dawkins' argument for the probable non-existence of God (as defined by his God Hypothesis). Nonetheless, it seems clear that this conclusion does not follow from the conjunction of these two premises alone. We need an additional reason for thinking that there probably isn't a contingent and dependent creator of the universe with a complex mental life. What might this other essential premise be?

This key assumption appears to be Dawkins' charge that the God Hypothesis leads to a "vicious regress" (2006, p. 120). What regress does he have in mind and why does he think it is vicious? Dawkins begins the chapter in which he presents his argument against the God Hypothesis with the observation that theists often argue that the hypothesis of an existing creator God is needed to provide an adequate explanation of the existence of statistically improbable complexity in the universe. But then Dawkins claims, as we have seen, that such a creator God would also have to possess a high degree of statistically improbable complexity, and that therefore, on the theist's assumption that all statistically improbable complexity requires an explanation in terms of a designer and creator, there must be a designer and creator of God as well. But then this additional designer and creator of God would have to possess a high degree of statistically improbable complexity for the same reasons that God would, and so must have a creator and designer as well. Obviously, we have the makings of a regress of explanations here, and unless there is something to which we can appeal to stop the regress in such a way as to leave no relevant questions unanswered, it will be vicious.

So in a nutshell, Dawkins' argument against the God Hypothesis appears to amount to this:

- D1. If the God Hypothesis leads to a vicious regress, then the God Hypothesis is almost certainly false.
- D2. The God Hypothesis leads to a vicious regress.
- D3. Therefore, the God Hypothesis is almost certainly false.

But there are good reasons to doubt each of the premises of this argument. Though D1 might seem to be unobjectionable, it isn't clearly true. To see this, suppose that the God

Hypothesis does lead to the sort of vicious regress sketched above. Would it follow from this that the God Hypothesis is probably false? That is, would it follow that there probably isn't a supernatural, superhuman intelligence who deliberately designed the universe and everything in it? No. What would follow instead is that there is some statistically improbable complexity for which there is no adequate explanation. Would it follow from the assumption that the God Hypothesis generates a vicious regress that the God Hypothesis does not provide an adequate explanation of the statistically improbable complexity *in the universe*? Again, no. A hypothesis can provide an adequate explanation of something even if there are aspects of the hypothesis itself that need further explanation. For instance, we can explain why the car is missing by means of the hypothesis that it was stolen without being able to explain who stole it or how or why they stole it. But wouldn't the God Hypothesis's involving a vicious regress of explanations entail that there is an infinite series of creator/designers, and wouldn't the absurdity of this consequence show that the God Hypothesis is false? Not necessarily. Though an infinitely regressive explanation may not result in a complete explanation (in the sense of explaining everything we want to explain), Dawkins has not given a reason for thinking that there cannot be an infinite series of creator/designers (and if he did, it is hard to see how he could avoid having to endorse a version of the cosmological argument for God's existence!).

D2 is even more doubtful. For one thing, as we have seen, if the hypothesized God is perfect, then the God Hypothesis would not lead to a regress of explanations, since it is arguable that both a perfect being's existence and mental complexity can be explained fully in terms of its perfect nature. Moreover, even if the supernatural being in question were imperfect, contingent, and dependent, the hypothesis that the universe was designed and created by such a being would not necessarily lead to a vicious explanatory regress. Even if there is an explanatory regress, it could be stopped at some point by an appeal to an ultimate designer/creator that is perfect or even to an ultimate designer/creator that is imperfect and yet necessarily complex and necessarily existent. On this scenario, there would be an imperfect, contingent, and dependent intelligent being that designed and created the universe who would in turn be ultimately dependent on a perfect being or at least a being that would possess the perfections of being necessarily complex and necessarily existent (even if it didn't also possess all the other perfections required for being absolutely perfect in every respect).

The preceding considerations provide good reasons for thinking that, even if Dawkins' God Hypothesis is about an imperfect monotheistic being, his argument against it does not clearly succeed. The bottom line is that Dawkins' case against monotheism fails both because of its reliance on an inadequate model of God and because of questionable assumptions. And even if Dawkins had succeeded in showing that no *supernatural* God exists, he has not even offered an argument for the conclusion that there is no divine reality corresponding to a pantheistic or panentheistic model of God.

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Buddhist Ultimates? A Difficult Question

Rita M. Gross

Within this fathom-long sentient body itself, I postulate the world, the arising of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world.

The Buddha.¹

I begin this short article about ultimates in Buddhism by quoting the Buddha in a famous statement which claims that if we do find or encounter any ultimates, they will be found only in this life and what we do with this life. There is no realm of a truer or more ultimate reality beyond our lives as they are. This is why Buddhism is a thorough-going non-theistic religion, whatever impressions people might have from a superficial acquaintance with some forms of popular Buddhism. It is also why Buddhism categorically denies the possibility an immortal soul inhabiting our mortal bodies. So the question about Buddhist ultimates is really a question about what we can do with this life.

Buddhists definitely do say that there are wiser and more foolish things we can do with our lives. They also say that it is definitely better for everyone when we take the course of wisdom, which involves coming to understand deeply, not just conceptually but in the very fabric of our being, How Things Truly Are. We need to stop living only at the level of appearances and realize How Things Are. Most Buddhists would also agree that such a transformation involves tapping into the already-present clear mind of enlightenment that is and always has been our birthright; only our own confusion and self-grasping makes it so difficult to manifest that enlightened mind of clarity and compassion.

¹ This statement is from the Anguttara Nikaya, one the scriptures in the Pali canon. It is quoted in Rahula (1974), 42.

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My standpoint for writing this essay is as a scholar-practitioner of Buddhism, someone well acquainted with both the academic standpoint of Buddhist studies and with the understandings of Buddhist texts and practices that develop through many, many years of doing the same practices that the Buddhists who wrote these texts actually did themselves. I contend that, especially with cross-cultural differences thrown in, mere study of the texts is unlikely to produce a fully accurate understanding of Buddhist principles. It is also common for Buddhists themselves to state that their own Buddhist scholars, if they do not also practice meditation but only know the texts, are unlikely to have a deep understanding of the heart of Buddhism.

Because most of my discussion on ultimates in Buddhism will actually be a commentary on or an expansion of the Four Truths, which Buddha taught in the first discourse after his awakening, and because many people reading this essay may not have extensive knowledge of these four truths, I will first present a summary of them. This summary will be important for following the rest of the essay. These truths are:

1. Suffering arises due to causes and conditions. It is important to remember that the first truth **does not** state that all life is suffering, a very common misinterpretation of this truth. Instead, it states if life is lived in a merely conventional way, suffering will inevitably result.
2. Suffering has causes. Suffering results from grasping/aversion and from ignorance.
3. Suffering ceases when its causes are abandoned. This state is called Nirvana.
4. There is a path that helps one overcome aversion, greed, and ignorance so that one can experience the cessation of suffering or Nirvana.

After the Buddha presented his first teachings in the Four Noble Truths, he never stopped saying they were all he had to teach, and they were all a person needed to assimilate for full emancipation. He is particularly adamant about the fact that he nothing to say about metaphysical questions, and he always refused to answer such questions, saying speculation about such things was not conducive to enlightenment. In one well-known story a “Wanderer” asks the Buddha a long series of metaphysical questions, beginning with the question of whether the cosmos is eternal and ending with the frequently-asked question of what happens to enlightened beings after they die. Do they exist, not exist, both exist and not exist, nor neither exist and not exist? The Buddha did not reply to that question with the statement that none of the alternatives are correct, but rather with a comment on the counter-productiveness of devising views about such matters. The Buddha replied:

Vaccha, the position that “the cosmos is eternal” is a wilderness of views, a thicket of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is accompanied by suffering, distress, despair and fever and it does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation; to direct knowledge, full awakening, Unbinding (this translators’ translation for Nirvana).²

In a similar text, the Buddha describes a person who does not fabricate views about unanswerable questions.

² Bikkhu (2002), 126.

One neither fabricates nor mentally fashions for the sake of becoming or un-becoming. This being the case, one is not sustained by anything in the world (doesn't cling to anything in the world). Unsustained, one is not agitated. Unagitated, one is totally unbound right within. One discerns that "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world."³

I emphasize these passages and many more like them because many people persist in understanding Buddhism in general and its most basic teachings as "theory," or "concept," the result of speculation. It must be understood that for Buddhists they are not "theory" at all, but attempts to put into words insights that can never be fully grasped in words and concepts. Experiencing what is behind them is essential to liberation as Buddhists talk about liberation. Many people are familiar with the finger pointing at the moon analogy that is so often used by Buddhists. Don't look at the end of the finger (words and concepts) and think you have seen the moon. Granted, for many people these teachings are difficult to understand at first, and often seem completely out of synch with normal human desires and conclusions, which is probably why the Buddha is represented as having doubted whether he should even try to teach the insights he gained during his awakening. Perhaps because these teachings are so out of synch with what many people expect from a religion, we can be assured that they are not the results of conceptual, speculative theorizing, but are rooted in profound experiences.

Among the several candidates for Buddhist ultimates that I will discuss in this essay, two stand out, the teachings on interdependence and on emptiness. These closely related sets of teachings form the core of what Buddhists have to say about ultimates. The teachings on interdependence were more fully fleshed out earlier in Buddhist thought, often by Buddha himself. Two words are crucial for understanding these two teachings. All phenomena, without exception are **compounded**, being composed of aggregates or parts, which has more to do with their interdependence, and all phenomena without exception are **interdependent**, which has more to do with their emptiness. I have found, even in teaching these materials to somewhat experienced dharma students, that some intellectual understanding may come fairly easily, but their implications for how we live our lives is often much more difficult to take in.

The source for the teachings on interdependence occurs in a story that dates from fairly early in the Buddha's teaching career. Two recluses following another teacher, Sariputra and Mahamoggallana, were dissatisfied with the training they were receiving and made a pact that whomever of them first discovered a true teacher would tell the other immediately. One morning Sariputra was going on alms rounds and saw one of the Buddha's disciples. He was so impressed by his demeanor and bearing that he resolved to ask as soon as possible who his teacher was and what he taught. The disciple said that he followed the Buddha, but that he was new to the order and could not tell him the Buddha's teachings in detail. Nevertheless, Sariputra was so taken by the short answer he received that he immediately attained the lowest stage of the Buddhist path and was on his way to full awakening. His appearance changed immediately and when he returned to Mahamoggalla, he knew something major had

³ *Ibid.*, 364.

happened with Sariputra. When Sariputra repeated the short teaching to Mahamoggalla, he too caught on and was transformed. The teaching?

Of those things that arise from a cause
The Tathagata has told their cause,
And also what their cessation is:
This is the doctrine of the Great Recluse.⁴

When I have taught this story, students often marvel such a seemingly innocuous proposition could have had such a major impact on the development of Buddhism. The subtlety of this teaching is that the Buddha teaches not only how things arise, but how they cease, which means he explained both how we are bound and how those bonds cease. Furthermore, their arising and their cessation are intimately linked. Things arise when the proper circumstances come together, when the certain forces bring certain components together, temporarily. But being component, composite things, impermanence is built into every phenomenon. Thus, their cessation is also explained. We are never stuck with anything; it will disintegrate. The only question is whether we know how to work skillfully with the processes of arising and cessation.

These teachings are expressed in the four truths. Suffering arises (first truth), but because we know its causes (second truth), therefore, if we abandon those causes, suffering ceases. To know both the arising and cessation of suffering, we need to deconstruct the things that appear to us as solid, real entities, such as our belief that we have a real self that endures through time. We must do this deconstruction because it is the illusion that there are enduring things, such as an ongoing self, that lead us to become attached and, therefore, to suffer. Things arise from many component parts coming together to produce a seeming phenomenon, but that phenomenon, not being anything in and of itself, will also cease. Knowing that clearly, we know there is nothing to cling to, nothing whatsoever, whether our seeming self or things in the world around us. The first method for analytical meditation is always deconstruction. Deconstruct what appear to be whole phenomena and you understand both their cause and their cessation. So in terms of the Four Truths, knowing how suffering arises can lead very quickly to the cessation of suffering because we learn that there are actually no phenomena to cling to. We know that as soon as a phenomenon comes together, it starts to fall apart. To repeat: [the Buddha] explained both how we are bound and how those bonds cease. It doesn't matter how real phenomena feel to us. Conventional beliefs and emotions have nothing to do with how things are. If we really do this analysis faithfully, it will lessen our grip on our selves and on everything around us. As a result we will all suffer less. These teachings were worked out in a very thorough way in the abhidharma systems of early Buddhism and are still important in most schools of Buddhism.

Teachings about emptiness flow directly out of teachings on interdependence, as Nagarjuna demonstrated with great force in his major work, the *Mulamadhyamika Karikas* or *Verses on the Middle Way*. As he puts it in that text:

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being itself a dependent designation,

⁴Thera and Hecker (1997), 4–11.

Is itself the Middle Way.
Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Thereafter a non-empty thing
Does not exist.⁵

In these verses, the terms “dependently co-arisen” and “dependently arisen” are other ways of saying “interdependence.” What is fundamentally new here is the claim that because all phenomena dependently arise, they are, therefore, empty, though it can also be argued that interdependence entails emptiness. This move has caused endless debates within Buddhism and endless confusions about Buddhism. What is the difference, if any, between saying that things are dependently arisen and that they are empty? Fundamentally, nothing, which is why teachers such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hahn, who have become quite fluent in English, are urging their students to use terms such as “interdependence,” or Thich Nhat Hahn’s famous coined term “interbeing,” because they believe these terms counter the nihilistic connotations of the English word “emptiness.” But the ink was barely dry on Nagarjuna’s document before his opponents started to claim that his work was nihilistic and could destroy Buddhism because of the way he used the term “emptiness.” As I have watched my students be able to track teachings on interdependence but then become totally confused when the term “emptiness” is introduced, I have come to feel that that the term “emptiness” is of real value, and must have had something of the same effect in Indian Buddhist circles as it does on English speakers.

What is tricky about the term emptiness is that we must remember that it does not mean and never has meant that nothing exists or that there is really nothing there. The Sanskrit term “*sunya*” means that something is not there or something is missing from a phenomenon that is declared to be “empty.” It is crucial to understand **what is missing** from an empty phenomenon. Emptiness fundamentally means that everything lacks *svabhava*, own-being or inherent existence. That is to say, because everything without exception arises in dependence on causes and conditions, things cannot exist independently, have true existence, or exist “from their own side” in the very clear terminology that Tibetans use for discussing these matters. Thus, it is crucial to understand what “inherent existence” would entail. It would entail that phenomena are uncaused, eternal, and unchanging. But because things exist only in dependence on their matrix, both temporal and spatial, which is always changing, they cannot possibly exist forever, in an uncaused and eternal manner. Therefore, they are empty of absolute existence, having only relative appearances. How things appear can also be very different for people looking at the same thing, which shows again that, while things do appear relatively, they lack inherent existence. If phenomena did have true or absolute existence they would appear for all of time and to all people in the same manner.

⁵ Garfield (1995), 304.

Why are these points so important? Again, for the same reason that deconstruction of phenomena into their component parts is so important. The way that things appear to us is very mistaken if we **impute** inherent existence onto a relatively appearing phenomenon, when we confuse relative appearances for absolute reality. Phenomena appear to be solid, enduring and stable, but they are not. Taking their appearance of solidity and stability for granted, we cling to them in millions of ways, all of which cause suffering to ourselves and to others. Thus, the point of this analysis is not to have a philosophical theory about reality but to understand the arising of suffering and its cessation, to be able to understand them clearly enough to undo the conceptual mistakes that keep us bound to cyclic existence, unable to enjoy our natural freedom, the unborn and unceasing true nature of our minds.

However, even understanding this much relatively well, people often still search for emptiness as if it were something to find, something different from what already appears. But it is not the case that emptiness is something superior to phenomena or some kind of negative anti-substance that causes appearances to appear. We must understand not only the emptiness of phenomena, but also the emptiness of emptiness, so that we do not make emptiness into just another concept that we believe in or reject. So where and how do we find this emptiness? Paradoxically, interfused with the relatively appearing phenomena themselves. Emptiness is found nowhere else but right here.

In Madyamika philosophy, ultimate reality is not seen as something that exists outside of or above the empirical reality with which we are confronted every day. Rather, emptiness is the nature of the very world we live in, so the nature of the empirical world is ultimate reality.

Normally, a sharp contrast is made in philosophy and religion between creation and the creator. There is a big gap between ultimate reality and empirical reality.....The view of the middle way is to posit a dialectical relationship between empirical reality and ultimate reality, wherein they cannot be separated. Ultimate reality is found in the midst of empirical reality and not somewhere else; nor is empirical reality denied or undervalued: this is the Middle Way.⁶

This is what makes the question of ultimates in Buddhism difficult, to the point where we might even say that there are no ultimates in Buddhism. Usually, talk of ultimate reality results a duality between something real and something ephemeral or not so valuable. But Buddhism is thoroughly non-dual in its outlook. If we do not mistake relative appearances to be inherently existing phenomena, we find emptiness right here. They must be discovered together to know how each really is. If there is a true duality, it is not between appearance and emptiness but between confusion or wisdom about them both.

To complete this introduction to ultimates in Buddhism, it is necessary to make explicit the term “Nirvana,” whose meaning has caused so much speculation, among both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. The first thing to be said about Nirvana is that it is uncaused, not the result of causes and conditions, but self-existent.

⁶Kyabgon (2001), 75–6.

With craving and unknowing abolished, he (the Buddha) he found happiness in the purity of his heart and he called that purity the Unconditioned. It is unconditioned because it does not depend on circumstances and one who realizes that experiences nibbana (the Pali for Nirvana).⁷

Or, as Walpola Rahula put it, very simply and starkly:

Nirvana is neither cause nor effect. It is beyond cause and effect. Truth is not a result nor an effect. It is not produced like a mystic, spiritual, or mental state, such as *dhyana* or *Samadhi* (mental states that result from certain meditation practices). TRUTH IS. NIRVANA IS. The only thing you can do is to see it, realize it.⁸

There have been many attempts to put the terms “Nirvana” into other words, both in Buddhist traditions and among modern translators. A very common synonym in the oldest Buddhist texts is “the Deathless.” Transcending the cycle of birth and death was a very urgent concern in the earliest Buddhist texts. If one is not reborn, one has become deathless, not subject to death again in the future. That is the meaning of nirvana as deathlessness, not that the present person has become immortal. The present person dies and after that, there is nothing more that can be said. We saw that the Buddha absolutely refused to answer such speculative questions about the status of an enlightened being after their physical body wore out, but no one expected that an enlightened being’s body would not die, but only that such a person could die without any clinging to life or any aversion to what the future would bring.

Among modern translations, I would suggest that the best is Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s “unbinding.” He uses this word because in conventional life, we are totally bound up by the three poisons—greed, aggression, and ignorance—to which I have referred many times in this essay. They keep us in a tight prison of reactivity, lashing out, willfully ignoring what is before our very eyes, totally absorbed in “me” and “mine” while remained unconcerned with the bigger picture. Freeing ourselves from those three poisons is often compared to cutting fetters that have bound us, kept us all tied up in knots, whereupon there is complete relaxation—and genuine, rather than dualistic bliss and joy, one might add.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu also encourages us to understand that there is no connotation of “going out of existence” in the term Nirvana. If anything goes out of existence, it is our own greed, aggression, and ignorance, with the result that we have come home to who we really are and have always been. The Buddha was very clear in his teachings that he did not advocate seeking annihilation. In fact, seeking annihilation is another form of craving, which keeps us bound up, and has nothing to do with peace and freedom. In the long run, Nirvana is indescribable. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu puts it, “as for the experience of nirvana, it is so free from limitation that there is no means of saying whether there is a person having the experience. There simply is the experience, in and of itself.”⁹

⁷ Sucitto (2010), 55.

⁸ Rahula, p. 40.

⁹ Robinson et al. (2005), 19.

To complete this discussion of nirvana, we must return to the point that nirvana/cessation is Unconditioned, outside the network of cause and effect, which also brings up the question of the relationship between the third and fourth truths, between cessation and the path. This is a crucial point that even many fairly experienced Buddhist practitioners miss for a long time. They think that by doing many formal practices and following all the rules, they can produce cessation, Nirvana, enlightenment, but that is a very confused point of view. Why is this so important? If we produced Nirvana by our efforts on the path, it would be another impermanent product subject to decay, which would solve nothing. It could not be the deathless. As Rahula puts it, “There is a path leading to the realization of Nirvana. But Nirvana is not the result of this path. You may get to the mountain along a path, but the mountain is not a result of the path, not an effect of the path.”¹⁰

I know of no clearer analogy about the relationship between cessation and the path, which is why for years I have taught that the fourth truth is about the path that **facilitates** cessation, which is the same thing as clearing away the obstacles that obscure our minds and keep us from being able to see our true nature. Without walking the path of the three trainings—morality, meditation, and wisdom—there is little likelihood that the obscurations that cloud our vision would disappear of themselves. But it is important to understand what is the result of our effort and what is self-existing, without any input from us. We cannot produce enlightenment because we are already enlightened, or at least have completely the potential to become enlightened. It is just that we keep missing it, not using our potential by clinging to our wants, needs, opinions, views, to our own self-created prison of self-centeredness.

In addition to interdependence/emptiness and Nirvana, this inherent potential for enlightenment might be considered as another candidate to be a Buddhist ultimate. Though the claim that everyone, even everything, can become enlightened is most forcefully and openly developed in Mahayana Buddhisms, the germ of teachings on *tathagatagarbha* or indwelling Buddha-nature, is clearly present in early Buddhist scriptures and in Theravada Buddhism. Those forms of Buddhism would be unlikely to make the radical claim that we are already enlightened. They are more likely to say that we are now confused rather than enlightened, but they do claim that anyone could become enlightened by applying themselves to the path and the practices that will dispel the clouds of our confusion. In either case, this claim to the (inherent) potential for enlightenment completes the survey of Buddhist ultimates very nicely. Knowing or trusting that we could become enlightened, we gradually come to understand that interdependence/emptiness, not independent selfhood, is the Way Things Are, and that supposing otherwise has been the source of all our troubles and suffering. Fully getting those truths, not just as intellectual beliefs but as something so deeply penetrating us that we live in accord with these truths, we experience Nirvana, unbinding, the Deathless, which is completely free, natural, and unproduced.

If one truly understands these points, it should be easy to overcome many mistaken impressions about Buddhism, such as that it is world-denying and advocates

¹⁰Rahula, p. 40.

not being involved in the world around us, or that there is no basis for ethics or concern for others in Buddhism, or that it is difficult to lead a joyful life as a Buddhist. These very common misperceptions of Buddhism are all based on misunderstandings of interdependence and of emptiness as nihilistic denials of any meaning at all if phenomena are not as we commonly understand them. But if we understand deeply that there is nothing that can be clung to or rejected, the barriers to contentment and joy disappear, whereas clinging and rejection only bring unhappiness. What could be more frustrating than trying to claim or reject something that is bound to dissolve, change, and disappear? Knowing how things truly are is considered to be the basis for genuine compassion, that is to say, compassion that is not based on bias or self-interest. In terms of being world-denying or of being uninvolved with the world, what Buddhists deny or don't want to be involved with is not the world of appearances itself, but confusion about the nature of that world of appearances. Such confusion inevitably leads to attitudes toward the world of appearances that can have no positive, lasting results.

To close, I will quote one of the most succinct summaries of these Buddhist ultimates that I have encountered, from the great twentieth century Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki. Though he uses the term “transiency” rather than interdependence/emptiness, the meaning is the same.

When we realize the everlasting truth of “everything changes” and find our composure in it, we find ourselves in Nirvana.

Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure. But unfortunately, although it is true, it is difficult for us to accept it. Because we cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is our non-acceptance of this truth.¹¹

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¹¹ Suzuki (1970), 102–3.

Facing Finality

Steven Weinberg

The Pole at last! The prize of three centuries.... I cannot bring myself to realize it. It seems all so simple and commonplace.

Robert Peary, diary, quoted by him in *The North Pole*

It is difficult to imagine that we could ever be in possession of final physical principles that have no explanation in terms of deeper principles. Many people take it for granted that instead we shall find an endless chain of deeper and deeper principles. For example, Karl Popper, the dean of modern philosophers of science, rejects “the idea of an ultimate explanation.” He maintains that “every explanation may be further explained, by a theory or conjecture of a higher degree of universality. There can be no explanation which is not in need of a further explanation....”

Popper and the many others who believe in an infinite chain of more and more fundamental principles might turn out to be right. But I do not think that this position can be argued on the grounds that no one has yet found a final theory. That would be like a nineteenth-century explorer arguing that, because all previous arctic explorations over hundreds of years had always found that however far north they penetrated there was still more sea and ice left unexplored to the north, either there was no North Pole or in any case no one would ever reach it. Some searches do come to an end.

There seems to be a widespread impression that scientists in the past have often deluded themselves that they had found a final theory. They are imagined to be like the explorer Frederick Cook in 1908, who only thought that he had reached the

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North Pole. It is fancied that scientists are given to constructing elaborate theoretical schemes that they declare to be the final theory, which they then doggedly defend until overwhelming experimental evidence reveals to new generations of scientists that these schemes are all wrong. But, as far as I know, no reputable physicist in this century has claimed that a final theory had actually been found. Physicists do sometimes underestimate the distance that still must be traveled before a final theory is reached. Recall Michelson's 1902 prediction that "the day appears not far distant when the converging lines from many apparently remote regions of thought will meet on ... common ground." More recently Stephen Hawking in assuming the Lucasian Chair of Mathematics at Cambridge (the chair held previously by Newton and Dirac) suggested in his inaugural lecture that the "extended supergravity" theories then fashionable were going to provide a basis for something like a final theory. I doubt that Hawking would suggest that today. But neither Michelson nor Hawking ever claimed that a final theory had already been achieved.

If history is any guide at all, it seems to me to suggest that there *is* a final theory. In this century we have seen a convergence of the arrows of explanation, like the convergence of meridians toward the North Pole. Our deepest principles, although not yet final, have become steadily more simple and economical. We saw this convergence here in explaining the properties of a piece of chalk, and I have observed it within the span of my own career in physics. When I was a graduate student, I had to learn a vast amount of miscellaneous information about the weak and strong interactions of the elementary particles. Today, students of elementary particle physics learn the standard model and a great deal of mathematics and often little else. (Professors of physics sometimes wring their hands over how little of the actual phenomena of elementary particle physics the students know, but I suppose that those who taught me at Cornell and Princeton were wringing their hands over how little atomic spectroscopy I knew.) It is very difficult to conceive of a regression of more and more fundamental theories becoming steadily simpler and more unified, without the arrows of explanation having to converge somewhere.

It is conceivable but unlikely that the chains of more and more fundamental theories neither go on forever nor come to an end. The Cambridge philosopher Michael Redhead suggests that they may turn back on themselves. He notes that the orthodox Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics requires the existence of a macroscopic world of observers and measuring apparatuses, which in turn is explained in terms of quantum mechanics. This view seems to me to provide one more example of what is wrong with the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, and with the difference between the ways that it treats quantum phenomena and the observers that study them. In the realist approach to quantum mechanics of Hugh Everett and others, there is just one wave function describing all phenomena, including experiments and observers, and the fundamental laws are those that describe the evolution of this wave function.

Yet more radical is the suggestion that at bottom we shall find that there is no law at all. My friend and teacher John Wheeler has occasionally suggested that there is no fundamental law and that all the laws we study today are imposed on nature by the way that we make observations. Along somewhat different lines, the Copenhagen

theorist Holger Nielsen has proposed a “random dynamics,” according to which, whatever we assume about nature at very short distances or very high energies, the phenomena accessible in our laboratories will look about the same.

Both Wheeler and Nielsen simply seem to me to be merely pushing back the problem of the final laws. Wheeler’s world without law still needs metalaws to tell us how our observations impose regularities on nature, among which metalaws is quantum mechanics itself. Nielsen likewise needs some sort of metalaw to explain how the appearance of nature changes as we change the scale of distances and energies at which we make our measurements, and for this purpose assumes the validity of what are called renormalization group equations, whose origin in a world without law is certainly problematic. I expect that all attempts to do without fundamental laws of nature, if successful at all, simply result in the introduction of metalaws that describe how what we *now* call laws came about.

There is another possibility that seems to me more likely and much more disturbing. Perhaps there is a final theory, a simple set of principles from which flow all arrows of explanation, but we shall never learn what it is. For instance, it may be that humans are simply not intelligent enough to discover or to understand the final theory. It is possible to train dogs to do all sorts of clever things, but I doubt that anyone will ever train a dog to use quantum mechanics to calculate atomic energy levels. The best reason for hope that our species is intellectually capable of continued future progress is our wonderful ability to link our brains through language, but this may not be enough. Eugene Wigner has warned that “we have no right to expect that our intellect can formulate perfect concepts for the full understanding of inanimate nature’s phenomena.” So far, fortunately, we do not seem to be coming to the end of our intellectual resources. In physics at any rate each new generation of graduate students seems brighter than the last.

A far more pressing worry is that the effort to discover the final laws may be stopped for want of money. We have a foretaste of this problem in the recent debate in the United States over whether to complete the Super Collider. Its eight-billion-dollar cost spread over a decade is certainly well within our country’s capabilities, but even high-energy physicists would hesitate to propose a much more expensive future accelerator.

Beyond the questions about the standard model that we expect to be answered by the Super Collider, there is a level of deeper questions having to do with the unification of strong, electroweak, and gravitational interactions, questions that cannot be directly addressed by any accelerator now conceivable. The really fundamental Planck energy where all these questions could be explored experimentally is about a hundred trillion times higher than the energy that would be available at the Superconducting Super Collider. It is at the Planck energy where all the forces of nature are expected to become unified. Also, this is roughly the energy that according to modern string theories is needed to excite the first modes of vibration of strings, beyond the lowest modes that we observe as ordinary quarks and photons and the other particles of the standard model. Unfortunately, such energies seem hopelessly beyond our reach. Even if the entire economic resources of the human race were devoted to the task, we would not today know how to build a machine that could

accelerate particles to such energies. It is not that the energy itself is unavailable – the Planck energy is roughly the same as the chemical energy in a full automobile gasoline tank. The difficult problem is to concentrate all that energy on a single proton or electron. We may learn how to build such accelerators in very different ways from those that are used today, perhaps by using ionized gases to help transfer energy from powerful laser beams to individual charged particles, but even so the reaction rate of particles at this energy would be so small that experiments might be impossible. It is more likely that breakthroughs in the theory or in other sorts of experiments will someday remove the necessity of building accelerators of higher energies.

My own guess is that there is a final theory, and we are capable of discovering it. It may be that experiments at the Super Collider will yield such illuminating new information that theorists will be able to complete the final theory without having to study particles at the Planck energy. We may even be able to find a candidate for such a final theory among today's strong theories.

How strange it would be if the final theory were to be discovered in our lifetimes! The discovery of the final laws of nature will mark a discontinuity in human intellectual history, the sharpest that has occurred since the beginning of the modern science in the seventeenth century. Can we now imagine what that would be like?

Although it is not hard to conceive of a final theory that does not *have* an explanation in terms of deeper principles, it is very difficult to imagine a final theory that does not *need* such an explanation. Whatever the final theory may be, it will certainly not be *logically* inevitable. Even if the final theory turns out to be a theory of strings that can be expressed in a few simple equations, and even if we can show that this is the only possible quantum-mechanical theory that can describe gravitation along with other forces without mathematical inconsistencies, we will still have to ask why there should be such a thing as gravitation and why nature should obey the rules of quantum mechanics. Why does the universe not consist merely of point particles orbiting endlessly according to the rules of Newtonian mechanics? Why is there anything at all? Redhead probably represents a majority view, in denying that “the aim of some self-vindicating *a priori* foundation for science is a credible one.”

On the other hand, Wheeler once remarked that, when we come to the final laws of nature, we will wonder why they were not obvious from the beginning. I suspect that Wheeler may be correct, but only because by then we will have been trained by centuries of scientific failures and successes to find these laws obvious. Even so, in however attenuated a form, I think the old question, Why? will still be with us. The Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick has grappled with this problem and suggests that instead of trying to deduce the final theory on the basis of pure logic, we should search instead for arguments that would make it somehow more satisfying that a mere brute fact.

In my view, our best hope along this line is to show that the final theory, though not logically inevitable, is logically *isolated*. That is, it may turn out that, although we shall always be able to imagine other theories that are totally different from the true final theory (like the boring world of particles governed by Newtonian mechanics), the final theory we discover is so rigid that there is no way to modify it

by a small amount without the theory leading to logical absurdities. In a logically isolated theory every constant of nature could be calculated from first principles; a small change in the value of any constant would destroy the consistency of the theory. The final theory would be like a piece of fine porcelain that cannot be warped without shattering. In this case, although we may still not know why the final theory is true, we would know on the basis of pure mathematics and logic why the truth is not slightly different.

This is not just a possibility – we are already along the road to such a logically isolated theory. The most fundamental known physical principles are the rules of quantum mechanics, which underlie everything else that we know about matter and its interactions. Quantum mechanics is not logically inevitable; there does not seem to be anything logically impossible about its predecessor, the mechanics of Newton. Yet the best efforts of physicists have failed to discover any way of changing the rules of quantum mechanics *by a small amount* without incurring logical disasters, such as probabilities that come out to be negative numbers.

But quantum mechanics by itself is not a complete physical theory. It tells us nothing about the particles and forces that may exist. Pick up any textbook on quantum mechanics; you find as illustrative examples a weird variety of hypothetical particles and forces, most of which resemble nothing that exists in the real world, but all of which are perfectly consistent with the principles of quantum mechanics and can be used to give students practice in applying these principles. The variety of possible theories becomes much smaller if we consider only quantum-mechanical theories consistent with the special theory of relativity. Most of these theories can be logically ruled out because they would entail nonsense like infinite energies or infinite reaction rates. Even so there are still plenty of logically possible theories, such as the theory of strong nuclear forces known as quantum chromodynamics, with nothing in the universe but quarks and gluons. But most of these theories are ruled out if we also insist that they involve gravitation. It is possible that we will be able to show mathematically that these requirements leave only one logically possible quantum mechanical theory, perhaps a unique theory of strings. If this is so, then, although there would still be a vast number of other logically possible final theories, there would be only one that describes anything even remotely like our own world.

But why should the final theory describe anything like our world? The explanation might be found in what Nozick has called the principle of fecundity. It states that the different logically acceptable universes all in some sense exist, each with its own set of fundamental laws. The principle of fecundity is not itself explained by anything, but at least it has a certain pleasing self-consistency; as Nozick says, the principle of fecundity states “that all possibilities are realized, while it itself is one of those possibilities.”

If this principle is true then our own quantum-mechanical world exists, but so does the Newtonian world of particles orbiting endlessly and so do worlds that contain nothing at all and so do countless other worlds that we cannot even imagine. It is not just a matter of the so-called constants of nature varying from one part of the universe to another or from one epoch to another or from one term in the wave

function to another. As we have seen, these are all possibilities that might be realized as consequences of some really fundamental theory like quantum cosmology but that would still leave us with the problem of understanding why that fundamental theory is what it is. The principle of fecundity instead supposes that there are entirely different universes, subject to entirely different laws. But, if these other universes are totally inaccessible and unknowable, then the statements that they exist would seem to have no consequences, except to avoid the question of why they do not exist. The problem seems to be that we are trying to be logical about a question that is not really susceptible to logical argument: the question of what should or should not engage our sense of wonder.

The principle of fecundity would provide yet another way of justifying the use of anthropic reasoning to help explain why the final laws of *our* universe are what they are. There would be many conceivable kinds of universe whose laws or history make them inhospitable to intelligent life, but any scientist who asks why the world is the way it is would have to be living in one of the other universes, in which intelligent life *could* arise. In this way we can immediately rule out the universe governed by Newtonian physics (for one thing, there would be no stable atoms in such a world), or the universe containing nothing at all.

As an extreme possibility, it is possible that there is only one logically isolated theory, with *no* undetermined constants, that is consistent with the existence of intelligent beings capable of wondering about the final theory. If this could be shown, then we would be as close to anyone could hope to a satisfactory explanation of why the world is the way it is.

What would be the effect of the discovery of such a final theory? Of course, a definite answer will have to wait until we know the final theory. We may discover things about the governance of the world that are as surprising to us as the rules of Newtonian mechanics would have been to Thales. But about one thing we can be sure: the discovery of a final theory would not end the enterprise of science. Even apart from problems that need to be studied for the purposes of technology or medicine, there would still be plenty of problems of pure science that will be pursued because scientists expect these problems to have beautiful solutions. Right now in physics alone there are phenomena like turbulence and high-temperature superconductivity that are expected to have profound and beautiful explanations. No one knows how galaxies formed or how the genetic mechanism got started or how memories are stored in the brain. None of these problems is likely to be affected by the discovery of a final theory.

On the other hand, the discovery of a final theory may have effects far beyond the borders of science. The minds of many people today are afflicted with various irrational misconceptions, ranging from relatively harmless superstitions like astrology to ideologies of the most vicious sort. The fact that the fundamental laws of nature remain obscure makes it that much easier for people to hope that someday their own favorite irrationalities will find a respectable place within the structure of science. It would be foolish to expect that any discovery of science could in itself purge the human race of all its misconceptions, but the discovery of the final laws of nature will at least leave less room in the imagination for irrational beliefs.

Still, with the discovery of a final theory we may regret that nature has become more ordinary, less full of wonder and mystery. Something like this has happened before. Throughout most of human history our maps of the earth have shown great unknown spaces that the imagination could fill with dragons and golden cities and anthropophagi. The search for knowledge was largely a matter of geographical exploration. When Tennyson's Ulysses set out to "follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost bounds of human thought," he sailed out into the unknown Atlantic, "beyond the sunset, and the baths of all western stars." But today every acre of the earth's land surface has been mapped, and the dragons are all gone. With the discovery of the final laws, our daydreams will again contract. There will be endless scientific problems and a whole universe left to explore, but I suspect that scientists of the future may envy today's physicist a little, because we are still on our voyage to discover the final laws.

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Part XI

Against Modeling: Negative Theology

Introduction to Negative Theology

Wesley J. Wildman

From a very particular angle of view, attempting to talk about ultimate reality is just plain silly. I do not refer to the perspective furnished by critiques of religion as a kind of fantasy discourse. Rather I refer to a religious and theological perspective affirming that ultimate reality, whatever else it may be, must be beyond human cognitive grasp.

This view is definitely not universally shared, and even when it is present its potential silencing impact on theological speech is often blunted or subverted in some way. American philosopher Charles Hartshorne is one of the few religious thinkers who straightforwardly acknowledged this problem of theological speech, and went on to resolve the problem by declaring that human beings have no cognitive limitations in speaking of God; theological discourse is therefore potentially completely rational. But this was only possible for Hartshorne because God—for him and for Alfred North Whitehead and for their orthodox followers in the corresponding two main process theology camps—is not ultimate reality. Speaking about God rationally when God is not infinite, not omnipotent, not omniscient, not simple, and not creator might indeed be possible—probably not more complicated than speaking of society or causation or value. But speaking of ultimate reality is just as problematic in the process framework as it is in any other cosmological vision of reality. With this Hartshornian response to the problem of theological rationality in mind, it is important to clarify at the outset that the subject here is ultimate reality, whether or not this is what people are willing to call God.

Many doctrines of revelation are supposed to solve the problem of theological rationality. By means of self-revelation, ultimate reality somehow gives itself to human cognitive grasp. On this view, so long as we confine ourselves to the parameters of revelation, we can speak confidently of ultimate reality. We see versions of this view

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in all of the Abrahamic faiths and perhaps in the most pronounced ways within some schools of Hindu philosophy, where revelation through the Vedas (*āgama*) is one of the *pramāṇa*, the epistemological relevant factors in discerning reliable knowledge. But even here the problem is not completely resolved. Most theologians have perceived that whatever is revealed through revelation cannot overcome the inherent incomprehensibility of ultimate reality, because this inherent incomprehensibility derives from a mismatch between the nature of ultimate reality and human cognitive powers, and no amount of revelation can remove this mismatch. Swiss theologian Karl Barth powerfully reminded contemporary Christian theology of this by declaring that God (keep in mind that Barth, unlike Hartshorne, viewed God as ultimate reality) is revealed as essentially unknowable, and utterly unscaled to human cognitive capacities. How could it be otherwise?

Despite these attempts to resolve the problem of the rationality of theological speech, therefore, the problem persists—and all the more sharply for having been refined in discussion with competing alternative views of theological rationality. Perhaps, then, the only honest and rational response is to give up God talk altogether. But this is a solution utterly indigestible to ordinary people, and would foreshadow the death or transformation of many forms of religion, within which ultimacy talk is vital. To the extent that theology is in part a second-order discourse aiming to make sense of the first-order discourse of religious communities, theology has to remain in the ultimacy-talk business as long as religions do. But it is thinkable that theology as a type of philosophical discourse unconstrained by any alliances with religious communities—this is “religious philosophy” in the usage of my *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion*—could declare itself unable to speak of ultimate reality, and thereafter confine itself to discussing more tractable topics such as religious anthropology and theological ethics. Here we see emerge the outlines of the sociality of responses to the problem of theological rationality. For confessional theologians allied with religious communities, the show must go on, it simply must. For religious philosophers identifying with the secular academy and not serving the institutional interests of religious communities, calling the curtain down upon ultimacy discourse, with subsequent curtailing of the theological task, is a serious possibility—and a path that some take.

Despite this vital difference in perceived professional obligations among theologians, the confessional theologians and religious philosophers have common cause. This is because there is among all theologians engaged in ultimacy talk a very serious consideration of the rationality problem and a host of intricate responses riding on the backs of long traditions that arc across religions and cultures. These responses are the subject matter of this section of the book. Not all of these responses support the continuation of theological ultimacy talk but most do. Not all allow that ultimacy talk is morally good or spiritually wise but most do. Not all endorse particular linguistic techniques but most do. Not all think that modeling ultimate reality is possible but most allow that ultimacy models remain viable albeit with varying degrees of systematicity. Of course, those opting for abject silence literally disappear from the conversation so their voice is absent.

That leaves the approaches to ultimacy talk discussed in this section in a peculiar position. Each wants to warn of the deep, dark problem confronting theological speech about ultimacy, but each also wants to find a way to persist in such speech, though with varying levels of confidence in the endorsed techniques for subverting the problem. Each thinker discussed strikes this all-important balance in a unique way. Most deploy negative theology in one way or another, for the long-held reason that we are on surer ground when we deny literal assertions about God than when we try to make literal affirmations about God. A few acknowledge the vital role of dialectic in reasoning toward ultimate reality. Surprisingly, the more sophisticated techniques—balancing, juxtaposition, trajectory, and technical-discourse techniques at the level of entire symbol systems—are not taken up in the essays of this section. But negative theology gets a good airing, and there is no question that this has been the dominant method for striking a balance between saying more than advisable and saying less than possible about ultimate reality.

John Peter Kenney's "The Platonic Monotheism of Plotinus" is a philosophical curator's effort to intercept a monist misreading of Plotinus and to situate him where he properly belongs: Plotinus is a *monotheist*. That is, the Plotinian One is ineffable ground of being, a transcendent first principle grounding real ontological difference between the varied orders of reality. Of course, Plotinus's One is not an eternal creator being possessing all perfections, which is what most contemporary exponents of "armchair philosophy of religion" mean when they speak of monotheism. The One resists such finite predication. Though exceeding human cognitive grasp, the One can be discerned through the practice of philosophical dialectic and immediate contemplation. As Kenney puts it, "even to describe Plotinus as a form of monotheism requires some measure of hermeneutical humility." Kenney also sets up comparative contrasts to explain Plotinus and his abiding relevance. He contrasts post-Enlightenment armchair philosophy of religion with the older view of religious philosophy as spiritually potent way of life, which is how Plotinus thought of it. He contrasts Plotinus's ultimacy view with Greco-Roman paganism and Hindu sacrificial polytheism, construing Plotinus as himself a constructive synthesizer attempting to crystallize the organizing principle of monotheism implicitly present in popular pantheons. Kenney's framing of the Plotinian approach as an apophatic ontological strategy for articulating divine transcendence yields a meta-theoretic principle of iconoclasm for guiding the synthetic interpretation of the pluralism of ultimacy models. This iconoclastic principle corrodes every particular model of God in the name of an ineffable ground of being. Plotinus's monotheism, therefore, finally proves to be of limited use as a determinate model of God, at which level it is effectively self-deconstructing, and best suited to be a principle for provoking a fuller understanding of the questionable rational status of any and all models of ultimate reality.

Nancy J. Shaffer's "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Negation of Models of God" also draws on literature deeply influenced by Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Proclus. Her opening gambit is to interpret the Christian doctrine of transcendence as demanding an apophatic approach to theology in which the only wholly true statements about God are negative propositions that declare what God is not. She then

describes the way that Pseudo-Dionysius pursues divine transcendence in three stages. First comes the *via positiva* (using non-literal language to make affirmations about God), where the problem is the inadequacy of all of the conceptions offered in the naming process. Second, and in reaction, the *via negativa* (using literal language to deny affirmations of God) corrects the excesses of the naming process and leaves us straining for a cognitive toehold as one after another of the names of God are deconstructed under the weight of divine transcendence. Third, and finally, in order to avoid the trivialization of transcendence that occurs when one of the first two stages is indulged to the poverty of the other, Pseudo-Dionysius affirms the supereminence of God, which involves a juxtaposition of naming and negation so as to join transcendence with mystery in a way proper to divinity. Shaffer's contribution lies in carefully parsing the logical stages of Pseudo-Dionysius's thought and using contrastive relationships with other Neoplatonists to indicate distinctive elements of his approach to transcendence.

Kenneth Seeskin's "Strolling with Maimonides down the *Via Negativa*" is an entertaining exposition of the *via negativa* in Maimonides, framed by the vibrant assertion that monotheism, properly understood, demands nothing less (or more!) than the *via negativa*. For Maimonides, the oneness of God must be strengthened by affirming the absolute uniqueness of God—uniqueness of such a kind that comparative contrasts break down completely, leaving us with only the ability to deny the adequacy of any finite predicates applied to God. God is unique in the sense that God is not a member of any class of created things and thus can never effectively be compared to anything else—this is nothing short of incommensurability in the strongest sense. In fact, Seeskin points out that even negation is suspect for Maimonides because it links God to the things negated in a shared semantic field. There is little we can do about this besides remaining wary of our inveterate tendency to anthropomorphize God and to be ready to lapse into silence in the face of the divine mystery. Of all the essays in this section, Seeskin most forcefully commends his subject's way of thinking about God to us; he believes that his account of Maimonides' theology can help contemporary readers.

Dietmar Mieth's "Meister Eckhart's God" is a meditation on the mysterious inscrutability of the divine, this time in conversation with one of the most profound and challenging of the Christian apophatic theologians. Mieth draws attention to the way Eckhart managed the tension between God as revealed and the Godhead as unapproachable mystery. The "silent desert of the Godhead" in which all intentions and goals are thwarted places human beings in an extraordinary relationship—that-is-not-a-relationship with God. Mieth rightly points out in passing how strong the affinities are between this view and Zen Buddhism, noting that there is ongoing dialogue around this issue. One of the valuable aspects of Mieth's contribution lies in drawing out Eckhart's vision of the intricacy of the human pursuit of God given God's character as both self-revealed and wholly inaccessible. There is a sophisticated phenomenology of the spiritual journey present in Eckhart that goes well beyond its anticipations in Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius. Interestingly, Mieth clearly recognizes that there is a translation problem facing contemporary thinkers who would venture to speak of God in Eckhart's way. His attempt to re-express

Eckhart's ultimacy model in the language and sensibilities of the modern world is poetic and stirring. Here we see a form of kindness: Mieth is determined to commend Eckhart's model of God as spiritually vital for us today.

Aaron P. Smith's "Kierkegaard's Model of God and the Importance of Subjective Experience" tackles a thinker who never clearly offered any single model of God; rather Kierkegaard discusses a profusion of them in his various writings. Smith's goal, then, is to make sense of this fact, for which he finds Kierkegaard's idea of subjective experience to be vital. Smith argues that Kierkegaard is critical of the very task of model building in relation to God, viewing it as spiritually unhealthy intellectualization of the experience of God. Like Kierkegaard himself, it appears that Smith encourages using models of God as vehicles for subjective existential connection with God—and we should do this without worrying too much about their orthodoxy or philosophical credentials. Importantly, Smith criticizes Kierkegaard for not recognizing that his emphatic embrace of subjective experience naturally leads the true God-seeker—the one who follows subjective experience wherever it leads—well beyond the limits of Christianity. There is implicit here a way of construing the significance of the plurality of ultimacy models as an experiential challenge rather than as a cognitive, theoretical one.

Mario von der Ruhr's "Transcending the World: Wittgenstein, God and the Unsayable" is an historical tracing of Wittgenstein's developing ideas of God, from his early *Notebooks* and the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to remarks made later in life and preserved in *Culture and Value*. Von der Ruhr's essay is the most historically minded effort in this section. What emerges is that Wittgenstein defended the idea of God not merely out of personal religious preference but because he could see no reason to regard God-talk as irrational that did not also apply to the practices of moral judgment. As for Wittgenstein's specific conceptions of God, von der Ruhr argues that there is not much to go on beyond Wittgenstein's affirmation that God is the sort of reality that cannot be put into words and yet makes itself manifest. Reading across Wittgenstein's output, therefore, God-talk emerges as our language for speaking of the meaning of life, truth, beauty, dependency, the preciousness of individuals, and moral rightness, while God is conceived in minimalist terms as the ground of all this being that necessarily eludes cognitive grasp and linguistic expression. One senses in von der Ruhr's argument an implicit, Wittgenstein-inspired disapproval of the more intellectually aggressive adventures of truth-aiming comparative inquiry and constructive synthesis: the effort to grasp the ungraspable in human language is futile and effectively cuts us off from the empirical reality that is actually available to us.

Wendy Farley's "Schleiermacher and the Negative Way: Implications for Inter-Religious Dialogue" is, among the contributions in this section, the most explicitly supportive of comparative inquiry. Indeed, here the curator's interest in a particular figure's God-model (in this case, Schleiermacher's) is subordinated to inquirer's truth-aiming intention, albeit in the modest form of dialogue rather than the more aggressive form of evaluation. Farley regards interreligious dialogue, and so (one presumes) dialogue among ultimacy models, as a strategy for radicalizing awareness of the cognitive breakdown associated with all attempts to model ultimate reality.

Why is this needed? Farley asserts that even apophatically inclined theologians and religious philosophers often succumb to subtle forms of attachment, privileging their symbolic ways of speaking of God, as if the full force of apophasis does not apply to them. Less apophatically minded theologians are even worse off. The upshot of full-bodied dialogue is a loosening of attachment to any particular mode of symbolic ultimacy talk and simultaneously a more consistent activation of the formal acknowledgement that apophasis is necessary in theological approaches to ultimate reality. Farley illustrates the importance of consistent apophasis for the loosening of attachment to ultimacy models by placing Schleiermacher in dialogue with Buddhist philosophy. This essay exhibits the paradoxical status of comparative inquiry in face of ineffable mystery: we may aim for the truth with our efforts at theological and dialogical speech but we perpetually discover both the intractability of the task and the traces within ourselves of intransigent attachment to unduly crisp conceptual formulations of ultimate reality. Where this leaves the task of comparative inquiry, to which Farley herself is clearly committed, or the larger task of constructive synthesis, Farley declines to say, apart from quoting Nāgārjuna to the effect that through great study we finally surrender to the inevitability that we must relinquish all views.

Ian James Kidd's "Feyerabend and the Ineffability of Reality" is an unusual offering in that philosopher Paul Feyerabend is not often spoken of in relation to models of ultimate reality. Kidd demonstrates that Feyerabend had significant thoughts on the subject, however, and unfolds this significance by means of an analysis of the philosopher's later writings. Kidd argues that Feyerabend operates within two conceptual frames when speaking of ultimate reality. In one, the theme of ineffability sets the tone. In the other, fullness of being or "abundance" is the leading theme. In Kidd's analysis, these two conceptual frames are reconcilable and the reconciliation yields a fairly clear view of Feyerabend's distinctive model of ultimate reality. Ultimate reality, for Feyerabend, is subject to a host of modes of apprehension and lines of inquiry, due to the way that human cognitive powers can only work selectively with the cognitive and ontological abundance of ultimate reality. Apart from this perspectival cacophony, therefore, ultimate reality remains forever unknowable. Kidd draws attention to Feyerabend's political motive here: the affirmation of a plenitudinous ineffability preserves a field of pluralistic appreciation of diversity by blocking all attempts to control the entire territory of ultimacy models. Kidd appears to endorse Feyerabend's belief that this is a positive and humane vision of ultimate reality. Implicit here, but not drawn out by Kidd, is a principle of great value for the synthetic task of interpreting the daunting pluralism of ultimacy models. Could Feyerabend's conjunction of the ineffability and abundance of Being be a satisfactory explanation for that pluralism? It is fascinating here that the effect of Feyerabend's approach at the level of comparative inquiry is precisely nil: it is a thoroughly relativist approach that (as presented in this essay, at least) yields no traction for leveraging one view into a superior position relative to another. Yet the promise of this view for synthetic interpretation of the pluralism of models as a whole is exceptional.

Finally, Donald L. Wallenfang's "Immediate Mediation: Jean-Luc Marion as Apophatic Source for Postmodern Modeling of God" is another compassionate

commendation to readers of a way of thinking about ultimate reality. Wallenfang's manifest theological agenda is to speak the truth concerning ultimate reality for our postmodern context. His commendation of Marion's view of God is mostly gentle, taking the form of heart-felt testimony attached to a moving exposition of Marion's thought. Much as in Marion's own writings, however, Wallenfang also performs a robust comparative evaluation of Marion's horizon-saturating disclosive hermeneutics of givenness against the larger tradition of Christian theology, which is rendered in broad-brush strokes as in thrall to metaphysical and conceptual idolatry. This is obviously a bold move, both in Marion and in Wallenfang's endorsement of Marion, but we do know that very occasionally a thinker does in fact slice between bone and marrow in provocative tradition-wide generalizations, so we can acknowledge in principle that Marion may be onto something of great importance in just the way that Wallenfang believes. In one respect, Marion's view of ultimate reality bears a close resemblance to Feyerabend's: in both cases there is a plenitude that gives itself for engagement and interpretation, and upon reception is always fragmented into cognitively manageable perspectives that nevertheless can express authentic forms of engagement. But Marion develops in great detail the phenomenology of saturated phenomena in a way that Feyerabend did not, predictably yielding an affirmation of Christian faith that Feyerabend thought was precisely what ought not be possible in face of plenitudinous mystery.

In closing this introduction, it is worth briefly considering the warnings about ultimacy models and the endorsement of techniques of indirection that we have in these essays in light of the problem of religious pluralism, and particularly the pluralism of ultimacy models. Every single contribution affirms the ineffability of ultimate reality in one or another way, with a corresponding sympathy for apophtic modes of theological discourse. Unsurprisingly, there emerges in the majority of essays recommendations on behalf of principles that could help to explain or at least to manage the pluralism of ultimacy models, and all of these principles are rooted in the fundamental assumption that ultimate reality, whatever else it may be, surpasses complete human cognitive grasp. I take this to be an important coalescence within contemporary religious philosophy: the apophtic way in theology offers more intelligible and convincing solutions to the problem of pluralism of ultimacy models than alternatives.

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The Platonic Monotheism of Plotinus

John Peter Kenney

Few major thinkers in Western philosophical theology have been as misunderstood as Plotinus. Often characterized as a type of monism, the Platonism of Plotinus has nonetheless been recognized as a foundation for the theistic metaphysics of the Abrahamic religions. This brief paper is intended as an abbreviated act of reparation for this paradoxical state of affairs. Because of its restricted scope, I can only offer a précis of previous treatments of this subject from which it is excerpted and to which the reader is directed for elaboration (Kenney 1986, 1991). My argument is twofold: First, Plotinian theology is not a form of monism, that is, the view that all existence is just a mode or aspect of the One. As a classical Platonist, Plotinus remains committed to a ‘degree of reality’ metaphysics and thus to real ontological differences rooted, according to his innovative version of Platonism, in an ultimate One. That suggests that he is also committed to a transcendent first principle and should thus be read as a theist. Yet his theism is no “classical theism,” that is, the postulation of a transcendent creator possessing all perfections, for the Plotinian One resists such finite predication. It can be discerned, moreover, only through a presence that exceeds knowledge, something achieved through the practice of philosophical dialectic, *askēsis*, and finally immediate contemplation. Indeed, even to describe the theology of Plotinus as a form of monotheism requires some measure of hermeneutical humility.

To sort all this out we will need to begin with a few moments of self-reflection on the contemporary practice of the philosophy of religion. Analysis of concepts of deity and the interpretive use of categories such as ‘monist’, ‘classical theist,’ etc. are exercises of what we might call armchair philosophy of religion. This is, to be sure, a productive activity, helping us to map certain outlines in the development of philosophical theology. But it can only take us so far before it meets resistance in capturing the comprehensive vision of some thinkers, particularly those who antedate

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modernity and regard philosophy as much more than a theoretical or academic discipline. For Plotinus, as for most of the ancients, philosophy was – as Pierre Hadot has so forcefully reminded us – an integral way of life (Hadot 1995). The practice of philosophy was understood by Plotinus as the conversion and refurbishment of the soul while the practice of the virtues was seen as purgative. As the soul's inner nature is cleansed and restored, its epistemic capacities are altered as well, allowing it first to engage in sustained discursive reasoning and then to move beyond that to the rational intuition of the higher intellect. In doing so the philosopher's soul gains access to the apodictic and eternal truths of the intelligible world, having left temporal reflection and contingency behind. Contemplation of the One itself is the culmination of philosophy, the accomplishment of the soul's apotheosis in preparation for death and an anticipation of its post-mortem state.

That this is not the common understanding of philosophy since the Enlightenment seems clear enough. But the effect of this dissociation is subtly evident, but often missed, in our reading of ancient philosophers like Plotinus. For Plotinus would regard efforts to characterize models of the divine as a discursive enterprise, and as such at best a starting place – if coupled with philosophical *askēsis* – for the soul's contemplative ascension to higher levels of knowledge and reality. Thus in order to capture some sense of Plotinus's philosophy one must keep that larger conception of its practice and role in view. Its neglect has led to the freezing of his thought into discursive categories uncongenial to its real purpose and intent. Thus it is necessary to start anew here to locate this capacious vision of philosophy as a spiritual endeavor and to describe the trajectory of Greco-Roman thought in which it emerged.

The philosophical theology of Plotinus nests within the traditional religious culture of ancient Greece and Rome (Kenney 1986). To understand his representation of the ultimate divine reality requires at least some attention to that context. But Greco-Roman religion was, of course, not so much a self-articulated system of doctrines, ethics, and formal rituals as a loose cluster of spiritual practices and beliefs embedded within classical Mediterranean society. In this respect Greco-Roman Paganism shares some common features with Hinduism, another ancient religious cluster to which it was remotely related historically. Both Paganism and Hinduism were initially systems of sacrificial polytheism that were able to absorb a wide range of gods and powers into their pantheons and to countenance different styles of religious life and modes of religious thought. As the foundations of life in ancient societies, they had within their scope many cultic sub-traditions as well as alternative philosophical movements, often in some tension with sacrificial polytheism. In both traditions these philosophical schools offered their adherents more than just theories, but whole systems for living life.

It is in this comparative context that the monotheism of Plotinus and the Platonists of late antiquity might best be set into relief (Athaniadi and Frede 1999; Kenney 1991). One can discern within later Greco-Roman religion a variety of monotheistic tendencies that sought to account for a final unity within or behind the pantheon. Without rejecting the multiple gods, a deeper unity came gradually to be recognized and revered. It is in this recognition of divine transcendence behind the surface of multiplicity that Paganism developed its own sort of monotheistic theology. Through the efforts of the Platonists, Paganism took – as it were – a soft approach to the

belief in the ‘oneness’ of God. That development was centered upon the logic of divine ultimacy, rather than upon the harder logic of divine singularity, as in the Biblical trajectory. It might thus be said that the ‘oneness’ of monotheism, in the sense of numerical uniqueness, was less to the fore in paganism, with its continued embrace of plural theophanies and levels of divinity. Yet if we define monotheism as the belief in a single, ultimate, transcendent source of all reality, then Plotinus and the later Platonists were certainly monotheists. It is within this larger context of religious development that the theology of the later Platonists is particularly salient. They were responsible for constructing a systematic pagan monotheism, a project that culminated in the *Enneads* of Plotinus. To get at this Platonic approach to monotheism, we need to concentrate first on its core conception of divine transcendence. Then we can consider the means by which the ultimacy of the divine first principle was secured – that is, through negative or apophatic theology.

The Platonists of late antiquity re-conceptualized the divine world, offering an alternative way to articulate – as it were – the ‘place’ of the divine. They found in Plato an account of a transcendent world – a level of existence not just invisible or hidden, but also non-spatial and atemporal. This was a profound shift in human thinking about reality and the divine. The forms were separate from the sensible world because they were unchanging, unlike the transient states of the visible world. Moreover, forms occupied a level of reality superior to the things of this world, so that the intelligible cosmos was understood to be divine and perfect in contrast to the ontological squalor of becoming. Transcendence among the later Platonists was perceived in reference to the perfection that defined the nature and status of being. Separation from change, time, and space was tied conceptually to the perfection and stability of the forms. An upshot of this approach was its non-anthropomorphism. Although there was considerable discussion about the scope of being in the Platonist schools, there remained a preponderant emphasis on what might be called the perfection of the forms as the foundations of transcendence. This notion of perfect being constituted what might be called ‘first-level transcendence.’ And yet, while this move was a critical advance and the foundation of Platonic monotheism, it was not the whole story.

The later Platonic doctrine of the One as the ineffable ‘ground of being’ was then postulated as an extension of this transcendentalism. Monotheism in the Platonic schools rested on degree of reality metaphysics, which was then understood to be surpassed by the ultimate first principle. The divine One stood in a complex but superior relation to the constituents of ‘being,’ which themselves are preeminent in reference to their ontological clients. The intelligibles were thus conceptually pivotal: they were the standards which lower entities only approximated, while they were also the level of finite perfection which the One exceeded. It was negative theology that served to mark off the One’s unique status and position in reference to the level of ‘being.’ For the One was beyond all predicative ascription in Plotinus, even the perfect predication associated with forms. The One, as the non-finite or infinite root of all finite reality, was thus marked off as distinct from all beings. Apophatic theology might thus be said to have been the fulcrum of a ‘double’ transcendence theory. The first level of transcendence was the postulation of the intelligibles. A second, higher notion of transcendence was then employed in reference

to the One, which was understood to exceed even the transcendent perfection of the intelligibles (Kenney 1991, Chapter 3).

We might get a better sense of these points by considering very briefly the pre-Plotinian development of the notion of a first principle in Middle Platonism (Dillon 1977; Kenney 1991, Chapter 2). The theological character of Middle Platonism had several aspects that warrant attention. First is its exaltation of a supreme and transcendent *nous*, whose primordial status was achieved by emphasizing its remoteness and indifference to the cosmos. The theologies of Numenius and Alcinous both evince this pattern. These theologies presented the divine mind as distant and removed from materiality and the physical world. Emphasis was then placed upon a secondary mind or demiurge understood as the fashioner of the cosmos. This demotion of the demiurge to a secondary status suggests a deliberate effort to clarify the character of the first god such that it is wholly removed from any contact with materiality. The details of this model varied among the Middle Platonists, but it was common for active agency to be located in a secondary or even tertiary power.

Yet there remained one problem with this type of hierarchical theology culminating in a remote divine mind. Identifying the first principle as a divine mind at the head of a chain of powers ran the risk of collapsing this ultimate divinity into the rest of that series. By locating the supreme mind within the hierarchy of being, Middle Platonic theism tended to assimilate it to the overall system of reality, and to obscure its supremacy. While able to account for the first God's transcendence of the material universe, it nonetheless seemed unable to accord finality and ultimacy to this first God. It was in this context that negative theology came to the fore in the articulation of Platonic monotheism. We can find it employed in Middle Platonists such as Alcinous to help refine the nature of the first *nous*. In the well-known tenth chapter of the *Didaskalikos*, Alcinous attempted to remove the first *nous* from epithets which would associate it with lower levels of reality, while also endorsing its self-sufficiency, perfection, goodness, and paternity. But here negative theology was used as just one strategy of divine portraiture.

This brief look at pre-Plotinian theology furnishes a context for discussion of Plotinian *apophasis*. In Plotinus pagan monotheism achieves its most salient philosophical articulation, largely through his relentless use of negative theology. His was a theology of divine infinity and simplicity. Negative theology was systematically deployed to prevent the One's assimilation to all other sorts of reality, which were treated as its consequents. The One was the final divine unity, the ultimate but separate source of reality. As such it was necessary to delineate the One from all finite beings subsequent to it by removing it from the logic of predicative ascription. Apophatic discourse allowed Plotinus to reject any conception that might have allowed the One to be drawn back into the structure of reality, whether that reality was transcendent of the spatio-temporal world or contained within the cosmos. As noted earlier, this 'double transcendent' thesis was a hallmark of Plotinian theology and marked a critical advance in monotheistic theory. What Plotinus achieved, therefore, was the codification of pagan monotheism.

Negative theology was, in this Plotinian account, central to the theological grammar of pagan monotheism. In Plotinus, apophatic theology became the preeminent

method for clarifying the character of the first principle. Through its use the long-standing monotheistic element of the pagan tradition came to new conceptual clarity. Negative theology should thus be seen as a unique strategy that developed within Greco-Roman theology. Provided that one is willing to countenance a broader conception of monotheism than our conventional, culturally freighted one, then there seems no reason to deny that the pagan theology that culminated in Plotinus was monotheistic. It was, as we have seen, a theology of divine ultimacy, focused upon the primordial unity behind the cosmos. Plotinian theology was a theism of ultimate simplicity, of the divine ground that stands as the source of all reality while prescinding assimilation to that reality. The Plotinian One was not so much numerically unique as distinctive because its position as the foundation of all subsequent entities. Plotinus seems to have been especially concerned to articulate the ultimate status of this primordial divinity rather than to secure its singularity. His was thus an inclusive understanding of monotheism; the force of his theology was centered not on establishing a single deity against a plurality of gods but in finding a final divine unity within and behind the cosmos. And while Plotinus's portrayal of the One resisted conceptual specification, nonetheless, the One had what might be called a functional character: Based upon its location in Plotinian metaphysics, it retained certain identifiable, systematic features such as 'source,' 'goal,' etc. These functional descriptions allowed Plotinus to argue for its uniqueness and hence to confer upon the One a resultant exclusivity. Because of its ultimacy, the One was unique, and it excluded – by its metaphysical locus – a plurality of ultimate divinities. This approach to divinity, concentrating upon the special nature of ultimate divinity, also entailed a claim of divine exclusivity. It was articulated by a different logic and arrived at through a different conceptual strategy than in the Jewish or Christian traditions.

Rooted in centuries of reflection on the many gods of cultic polytheism, pagan religious thought thus evolved a theological monotheism that remained compatible with the notion of plural theophanies at levels of reality subsequent to the One. In this theology a hierarchical model of reality was vital: the many gods, powers, and spiritual beings of this rich universe were all derivatively real. They were grounded in the One, and in no sense were they competitive with it. As we have seen, Plotinus made clear that nothing could form a class with the One, for it was entirely distinct ontologically from all else. Nor were those other major divisions of reality and divinity, the hypostases following upon the One, autonomous divinities. In Plotinus it was a theological mistake to view *nous* or *psyche* as a distinct god, meaning by that an independent entity with autonomy of existence, however self-constitutive they may at times have appeared. These hypostases were degrees of divinity; as such they were processions from the One at lower levels of reality.

A further point might be drawn from a recent study in philosophical theology by David Burrell (Burrell 2004). Burrell has discussed various ways by which Western monotheists, including Plotinus, have articulated their understanding of God's transcendence, emphasizing what he calls 'the distinction' (Burrell 2004, Chapter 14). The core credendum of all monotheism is that the first principle is distinct from the world which it is invoked to explain. As such, it must be seen as the One from which all things come forth, but it cannot be part of that universe. Thus the One must be understood to

be fundamental, indeed so fundamental that it cannot even be seen primarily in terms of its distinction from the world. To do so would be to draw the One into a relation with the world, making the One, as it were, part of a larger system. That too would call for explanation. Therefore the One must be responsible both for the world and for the One's distinction from the world. As I have suggested, Plotinus and pagan monotheism has its own unique way of approaching the articulation of this monotheistic distinction, centered on apophatic theology. This is the palmary insight of Plotinus: that the foundation of mundane, finite reality must be infinite, and, as such, it cannot be accessed through finite means of knowing. It can only be discovered by that "presence exceeding knowledge" that interior contemplation affords. By retracing the ontological trajectory of its emergence down through increasingly more restricted forms of reality, the contemplative soul can come to the threshold of the infinite One, there to recover the point of between the eternal self and the infinite One.

There is, of course, much that challenges our discursive intellects in so representing that which is, by the force of this thesis, metatheoretical. Not least among these paradoxes is the nature of the contemplative self itself. Plotinus discusses repeatedly the self that makes ontological choices, what might be called the 'cursive self' (e.g. *Ennead* V.3, 3, 23–39). His theory of degrees of the reality commits him to different levels of the self. And the practice of philosophy offers the contemplative soul the decision of which level to concentrate its nature. It must determine whether it wishes to slip down to the level of the lower self and its ward, the body, or to go deeper into the inner self and to employ powers like discursive reasoning or intuitive intellection. Because we are rational beings, our native habitat is at the level of discursive intellection; that is the natural level, the default setting, of the human self. And yet the motivating issue in Plotinus is the soul's capacity for movement that is at once moral and metaphysical, giving it the dangerous option of pressing down lower with its psychic declension, or "going up on high" and pursuing its collective *epistrophē*. So it is up to this 'us' to decide. Where shall we put down our cursor and choose from this menu of levels? It is this 'us,' this cursive self, that determines at which level we plan to abide.

It is this cursive self that dominates the protreptical passages of the *Enneads* and complicates our inquiry. For the question remains, how does one come to grips with the inner state of this meta-self that makes these choices? What are the deliberative elements to be found there? Notice that, although it is sometimes said that there is no real sense of the private in Plotinus, there is certainly a dramatic sense of a personal self that is pained in its choice of embodiment and which can hope to make a better choice. But what is the inner source of that decision? How does the inner process of determination work and is there any why to describe or disclose that interior dialogue? This sense of radical introspection – which would get at the very basis for our current metaphysical locus – is a profound problem in Plotinus's account. Yet it is reversing this tragic choice that is the foundation of human hope in Plotinus.

This cursive self adds another dimension to our inquiry into comparative conceptions of deity since it underscores the extent to which Plotinus would regard such a project in discursive philosophy to be at best antepenultimate. Dialectical reflection is, by its conceptual nature, a choice to function at the level of rational intellection, something

that is pursued in time by embodied souls. But this is, for Plotinus, a subsidiary stage in contemplation, relying upon the non-temporal intellection of *nous* and ultimately upon the undescended soul's unmediated association with the One. Of course, discursive metaphysics and theological modeling were by no means eschewed by Plotinus. There is, at times, a pronounced kataphatic dimension to his metaphysics, especially his detailed account of hypostatic levels. Moreover even the One must be at least tacitly described if only to locate it as an infinite horizon of reflection, as he was himself acutely aware. As noted above, Plotinus countenanced a series of what might be called 'pointer terms' that direct the soul in its ascension to the One. These are, he tells, used protreptically to urge the soul on and to point out its way towards a vision that exceeds discourse *Ennead VI.9.4*. Thus we find the One referred to as the source of life, the origin of being, the cause of the good, the root of the soul *Ennead VI.9.9*. In so doing, Plotinus regards these epithets as markers for the contemplative soul's recovery of its unity with the One, discursive patterns that intimate the One's infinite reality and ineluctable presence. Yet none should freeze the contemplative soul by a missed-placed recognition of predicative reference. True, these are better terms than others in directing the soul and are, in that sense, more accurate. For Plotinus regards the One as the source of goodness but not the source of evil, and the ground of being rather than nonbeing. But none of these kataphatic expressions offered in the context of discursive analysis captures the One so that the contemplative soul could, as it were, come to rest there at that level and enjoy its theoretical appraisal of the One.

Hence the metaphysics of the One in Plotinus is inherently and structurally iconoclastic, at its core resistant, even destructive, to concepts of the One. We would do well to recognize this iconoclasm and its larger import in our seminar. For Plotinus is a philosopher who, in this sense, has no finite model of God. Nor is he alone in this, initiating as he did a long trajectory of apophatic theology across both the Greco-Roman and the Abrahamic traditions. While it is true that his philosophical theology is best seen as a special form of monotheism, it is the unique character of that theism that pushes back against any theorist who would settle for that characterization alone. And it is in the force of this apophaticism that the special salience of Plotinian monotheism lies.

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Pseudo-Dionysius and the Negation of Models of God

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Modeling God depends on the condition of God's being knowable and the corresponding ability of human beings to know God. But a singular movement of Christian theology holds precisely that God is *unknowable* and that people do *not* have the capacity to describe God. The doctrine of divine transcendence, and the resulting mystery of God, is a heritage of Neoplatonist philosophy and is called apophatic (from the Greek *apophanai*, to negate or say no) theology. In Latin it is referred to as the *via negativa* (negative way). Deeply suspicious of the limitations of human thought and language, it argues that the only absolutely true statements about God are negative ones. By taking seriously the notion of divine infinity, apophatic theology points out that all human thought is ultimately based on the limited world of human experience. If God is infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, etc., God is so far beyond human experience that all that one can correctly say is what God is *not*.

Pseudo-Dionysius' model of God is successful because of a tension he carefully maintains between God's nameability and God's unnameability. He avoids on the one hand, the anthropomorphism of identifying God using human concepts, and, on the other hand, the atheism resulting from not identifying God at all. Names for God are always anthropomorphic, or at least rooted in human experience of the world of space and time. If we describe God as "good," the term "good" can be used in a univocal, analogical, or equivocal sense. The univocal and analogical senses of the term tend to portray God as just another being, albeit an infinitely powerful one. The errors of cataphatic or positive theology that come from imperfect analogies between the divine and the human are matched by the atheistic irrelevance into which the divine is forced by a purely negative theology.

Negative theology, saying God is "not good," is a kind of univocal use of the term "good." God is not good in the same sense of the word meant when it refers to the created order. But this, then is either the same as saying "God is not good," i.e.

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saying God is bad, or it is ultimately a form of analogy with the problems described above. If the term “good” simply means something different when applied to God, there are problems with the meaningfulness of language at all when applied to God. The difficulty is that a total inability to speak of God results in an absence of any divine-human interaction. Utter silence is effectively atheism. Pseudo-Dionysius avoids these two extremes by a Neoplatonic strategy of beginning with divine mystery, moving to the rich nameability that comes from divine fecundity as the Good, and then returning to the mystery of God that is supereminent or beyond all names.

Christian apophaticism is a Neoplatonic tradition found in even early Church fathers who recognized the potential that this philosophy had for expressing essential Christian doctrines. It was the Greek thinkers, Proclus and Plotinus (see Kenney’s piece on Plotinus in this section), who were responsible for a reformulation of Plato’s thought that breathed new life into the idea of a single, infinite, and mysterious source of all things. Christian Neoplatonists found fertile ground in this originally pagan concept and transformed it to conform with Christian orthodoxy. At the heart of Christian Neoplatonism lies the work of the pseudonymous Dionysius (Denys) the Areopagite. Usually referred to as “Pseudo-Dionysius” or the “Pseudo-Areopagite,” this mysterious figure was purportedly the Dionysius converted by the sermons of the apostle Paul referenced in the book of Acts.

While other early Christians, including Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Evagrius, were influenced by Neoplatonism as well, Pseudo-Dionysius stands alone in his exhaustive and even lyrical exposition of the mystery of God. In turn, his books influenced a host of later thinkers, including Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa (for more, see Mieth’s piece on Eckhart in this section, and my piece on Nicholas of Cusa in the section on panentheism). Nicholas of Cusa, for example, refers to him as “the great Dionysius” and “the greatest Dionysius,” often mentioning him in company with “the divine Plato.” He wrote appreciatively of the foolish wisdom of Pseudo-Dionysius and his own term “learned ignorance” may well originate here. Although not all of the texts Pseudo-Dionysius is thought to have wrote have survived (some may never have actually been written), those that are extant include *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.¹

Despite his importance in the history of Christian theology, his identity remains opaque. While certainly not the contemporary of the New Testament figures he claimed to be, his dates and location have been only roughly ascertained. At best, he can be traced to the fifth or sixth century and is suspected to have been a Syrian monk. Regardless of who he was, his singular work has been foundational to apophatic or negative theology. A look at his major texts *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* will uncover his unique vision of a God at once knowable, unknowable, and supereminent. The Neoplatonic foundation of his Pseudo-Dionysius’ thought is evident as he begins by affirming divine transcendence and our inability to name him before moving on to such cataphatic (positive) names for God that are available to us.

¹Luibheid (1987), hereafter referred to as *DN* and *MT*.

To escape the limitations of cataphatic theology, he turns to apophatic or negative theology, which denies all names of God. Finding this inadequate as well, he moves to supereminent theology and a return to the mystery of God.

His work approaches the knowledge of God through the exercise of naming him. While the godhead is a unified and hidden whole, theologians praise it by many names, indeed, says Pseudo-Dionysius, by every name. In the first chapter of *The Divine Names* Pseudo-Dionysius is intent upon establishing the transcendence of God. Because God is a divine ray of light beyond being, he is beyond our capacity to know or name him. True enlightenment entails a halt to the activities of the mind. Nevertheless, the transcendent comes to us veiled in names passed down through tradition and scripture. The names he will apply to God in the following chapters, including “Light,” “Being,” and “Life,” are dependent on this foundational mystery.

This is a theme that Pseudo-Dionysius will return to in *The Mystical Theology*. Divine nameability is both preceded and followed by divine mystery and unnameability. Because we understand God as best we can, as he comes to us, we use analogies and symbols. Indeed, “to praise this divinely beneficent Providence, you must turn to all of creation.”² Thus, the theologians praise God by every name and as the nameless one. It is this multiplicity of names that Pseudo-Dionysius is concerned with, once he has established God’s original transcendence. He emphasizes the vast multiplicity of characteristics that describe God, both within and apart from scripture. These descriptions include every kind, from “human, fiery, and of amber shape” to having praiseworthy “eyes, ears, hair, face, hands, back, wings, arms, posterior, and feet.”³ Although Pseudo-Dionysius will focus on more conceptual names for God, the variety of characteristics is indicative of God’s goodness, where “good” refers to the divine fecundity as the source of all things.

Pseudo-Dionysius is careful to explain that the multiple names for God do not apply to multiple parts of God. God is one, whole, and indivisible. Even the doctrine of the Trinity does not impinge upon the basic unity of God. The differentiation of the godhead into Father, Son, and Spirit reflects the activity of God through procession into the persons of the Trinity. The incarnation is an act of God in which God reveals himself as differentiated. But human knowledge cannot penetrate beyond revelation to the godhead, in whom multiplicity is unity rather than plurality. Pseudo-Dionysius emphasizes the unity of the godhead through his repeated use of the prefix “super” or “supra,” from the Greek *hyper*, to refer to God beyond differentiation.

Thus, he argues, knowledge of God begins with prayer rather than reasoning. We do not pull the heights of divine knowledge down to us through rationality. Instead, the mind is prepared for union with God through prayer, and this is where true knowledge of God begins. Pseudo-Dionysius declares that although he does not possess the inspiration of his teacher, Hierotheus, nevertheless he is resolved to obey the law and share the truth that he does have. His own life reflects at an individual level what holds on a broader human scale. While our language is inadequate and our knowledge is limited, we are driven to speak and to try to know. God’s “most important

² DN I 593C. Luibheid (1987, p. 54).

³ DN I 597A. Luibheid (1987, p. 57).

name, ‘Good’”⁴ derives from the divine presence in all things, and it is this that drives our imperfect individual and collective attempts to name God. Pseudo-Dionysius adopts the familiar Platonic analogy of the sun to represent the Good. Divine Goodness informs, sustains, and perfects all things in the same way that the sun’s rays enliven all beings. Thus, he writes, “The goodness of the transcendent God... gives light to everything capable of receiving it, it creates them, keeps them alive, preserves and perfects them...It is the Cause of the universe and its end.”⁵

The transition to the name “Light” is, thus, easily made. The light of God not only drives away the darkness of ignorance, but also returns all things to God. The Good is named “light of the mind” and “overflowing radiance,”⁶ as well as “the One” and “the Beautiful.” “Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things. It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have beauty. And there it is ahead of all as Goal, as the Beloved, as the Cause toward which all things move, since it is the longing for beauty which actually brings them into being.”⁷ Names that originally indicate divine self-manifestation lead to names that concern the return of the created order to God. The Neoplatonic motion of procession outward from the One and return back to the One are ideas that clearly are foundational for the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius. In succeeding chapter, he uses much the same approach to a variety of names for God, including “Being,” “Life,” “Wisdom,” “Omnipotent,” “Holy of Holies,” “God of Gods” and a host of others. The book ends with a return to the notion of divine unity and the Neoplatonic vision of God as One.

In this context, he discusses his notion of evil as privation. He writes, “To put the matter briefly, all being derives from, exists, in, and is returned toward the Beautiful and the Good. Whatever there is, whatever comes to be, is there and has being on account of the Beautiful and the Good.”⁸ Evil is a lack of being, a deficiency without any ontological substance at all. Whatever force evil possesses, whatever apparent existence it has, it derives from being an absence of the Good. God, therefore, is not a powerful being set against other, lesser powers, but is power and being itself with no rivals. This is a theme, of course, that will be repeated by later Christian theologians, including Augustine. Its importance here lies in the distinction Pseudo-Dionysius maintains between privation and negation. Whereas privation is the absence of something and is linked to evil, negation is the denial of the applicability of a characteristic to God because God surpasses both the characteristic and its privation.

His brief text *The Mystical Theology* carefully outlines this notion of divine supereminence. God is beyond both affirmative and negative statements. Negative theology does not state the opposite of affirmative theology, nor is paradox the last word about God. Rather, as the cause of all things, God is beyond affirmation and denial, presence and privation. Darkness here is not the darkness of an absence of light but a darkness beyond both darkness and light. Divine mystery resides beyond knowing

⁴ DN III 680B. Luibheid (1987, p. 68).

⁵ DN IV 697C. Luibheid (1987, p. 73).

⁶ DN IV 701A. Luibheid (1987, p. 76).

⁷ DNA IV. 704A. Luibheid (1987, p. 77).

⁸ DN IV 705D. Luibheid (1987, p. 79).

and unknowing. There are no oppositions in this supreme unity. Pseudo-Dionysius writes that “The mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute, and unchangeable, in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence. Amid the deepest shadow, they pour overwhelming light on what is most manifest. Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen, they completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond beauty.”⁹

The Mystical Theology is almost lyrical as it describes the mind’s ascent to the God that cannot be approached. Moses’ ascent up Mount Sinai is a metaphor for the climb the mind makes to mystical knowledge of God. Beyond the sensible and intelligible contemplation of the divine, indeed, beyond the mountain itself, Moses entered into the darkness of unknowing. But for neither Moses nor the individual seeking God, this unknowing is not the ignorance of his original absence of knowledge of God. It is union with the divine, a step beyond all oppositions. This is the inexpressible truth of the godhead, the mystery beyond language and conceptuality. And so the mind returns to its origin, the transcendent God, leaving behind all that is perceptible and shedding all that is conceivable.

Given the prominent influence of Neoplatonism on Pseudo-Dionysius’ thought, more must be said about its uniquely Christian soteriological role. It may be that it acts just as the Plotinian hierarchy of rational principles expressing the natural order of things, though costumed in Christian garb. However, a close look at the balance he strikes between divine manifestation and hiddenness and the absence of an emanational hierarchy illustrates his uniquely Christian vision. The Pseudo-Areopagite balances the manifesting God and the God beyond all manifestation in order to avoid making the created world a necessary emanation of God.

The careful tension between the mysterious divine essence and God’s energies results in a Christian metaphysics and epistemology. Both the mystical presence and absence of God’s self in creation and the apophatic and supereminent theology that reflects upon it are uniquely Christian, while at the same time deeply indebted to Greek Neoplatonism. His best known text, *The Divine Names*, and his smaller work, *The Mystical Theology*, outline God’s supereminence and reflect his awareness of the dangers of Neoplatonism. Though much in *The Mystical Theology* surpasses and occasionally contradicts his earlier statements, Pseudo-Dionysius never conclusively resolves the contradiction in favor of either immanence or transcendence. The Creator as Creator is unknown for Pseudo-Dionysius because of the paradox of manifestation and hiddenness inherent in the creative movement.

This is the significant difference between Pseudo-Dionysius and Greek philosophy. While the dialectic between an ineffable One and the many in which it self-expresses itself out is originally Neopatonic, the religious rather than philosophical intent of Pseudo-Dionysius’ construction is evident. The One does not rationally explain the many, but is mysterious in its very relationship with it. Nor do the levels of hierarchy function as Neopatonic static forms, each causing the next lower level. In place of the Neopatonic hierarchy, in which a higher principle of reality underlies every lower principle, is a simultaneous and paradoxical manifesting and not-manifesting God.

For instance, in Greek Neoplatonism the principles of being, life, and intellect are located hierarchically between the One and the many and emanate from the One.

⁹ MT I 997 A, B. Luibheid (1987, p. 135).

But for Pseudo-Dionysius, they are not divine, do not exist between God and creation, nor do they exist in their own right. Creation is not a necessary descent from God down through a series of lesser principles that the mind can then ascend up to God. Rather, the principles are divine Providence itself, God in his self-manifestation. The hierarchical levels of existence are not independently real to any degree.

The Areopagite is aware that the persons of the Trinity could be mistaken for Christian versions of emanations of the One. In light of this, he stresses that the terms “good,” “life,” “Lord,” etc. apply to all persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The Incarnation is not a logical completion of the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being, but a mysterious and crucial act of God.

The tension between the divinity as total source of all creation and the voluntary nature of the creative act originates in God. The divine forms are at once within God, though apart from him in the created order. They never truly stand alone. Instead, there is a balance between their existence within God insofar as they are creative principles and their existence in creation insofar as God is their cause. They have no prior existence to creation and differentiated from God and, thus, are not Neoplatonic emanations. Like Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius frequently uses the term “icon” to describe the way that each level of the hierarchy makes present its precedent. However, for Pseudo-Dionysius, the levels are incarnational. In Neoplatonism, the One is reached through the mind’s ascent to increasingly disincarnate states. Pseudo-Dionysius clearly differs from pagan thought in his affirmation of the incarnate, material world.

All of existence originates in the mystery of the divine; it is not rationally mediated through a series of emanations. By placing the forms or principles within the One, the Pseudo-Areopagite has done away with the Neoplatonic hierarchies and put the impetus toward multiplicity within God himself. Furthermore, he carefully says that this does not mean that there is multiplicity in the Godhead and explains that in God, wisdom, life, and being are merely names for the acts of God regarding creation. They do not characterize God apart from his creativity, nor are they separate causes within God.

Pseudo-Dionysius’ soteriology is characteristically Neoplatonic insofar as it describes a return to God. His view of creation and deification mirrors the procession and return of Neoplatonism. However, he specifically repudiates an approach to God through the power of human reason. Here deification is the immediate unity with God that follows from self-transcendence. Moreover, the latter is a result of divine gifts, not of an ascent through a series of causes. Indeed, God is specifically referred to as the cause of all intelligence, reason, wisdom, and understanding.

According to Pseudo-Dionysius, before we are perfectly united with God and our minds are carried away, we do try on our own to reach God rationally, through symbolism and analogy. But, ultimately,

We leave behind us all our own notions of the divine. We call a halt to the activities of our minds and, to the extent that is proper, we approach the ray which transcends being. Here, in a manner no words can describe, preexisted all the goals of all knowledge and it is of a kind that neither intelligence nor speech can lay hold of it nor can it at all be contemplated.¹⁰

¹⁰ DN I 592D. Luibheid (1987, p. 53).

Natural human rationality, itself a divine gift, is used to approach God as far as it is able. His understanding of grace is expressed here when, significantly using the passive voice, he writes, “We, in the diversity of what we are, are drawn together by it and are led into a godlike oneness, into a unity reflecting God.”¹¹ In the end, however, the mind is stilled when it is struck by the burning light of God. The return to God is a result of the engulfing fire of divine love, not of philosophical discipline. God’s love actively unites the creature to him in a consuming blaze. This alone leads to growth into divine likeness.

Here the Areopagite’s distinction from the Neoplatonic hierarchy of emanation comes to its full significance. Given the ultimate impotence of the mind to truly know God on its own, one might argue that any pursuit of knowledge is futile. After all, no exercise of the mind, however sophisticated, can bring union with God. Unknowing agnosticism, even atheism, would be a demand of faith. If God is totally unknowable, even God’s existence would be necessarily suspect. On the other hand, if, as Pseudo-Dionysius seems to indicate, the attempt to know God is still a worthwhile pursuit, one might ask what knowledge the mind actually attains. If, before the mind is engulfed in the divine light where God cannot be named, naming has any validity at all, what is exactly is it that is named?

The Neoplatonic answer would be that it is the divine emanations, the levels in the metaphysical hierarchy that are named. While the mysterious One is not known, the lesser emanations can be known. Pseudo-Dionysius, however, has an entirely different answer. Instead of distinguishing among a series of ever-increasing levels of divinity, he makes the distinction between God-in-himself and God in his processions, two “levels” that are not levels at all because they are simultaneous. About the name “Being,” for instance, Pseudo-Dionysius writes,

But I must point out that the purpose of what I have to say is not to reveal that being in its transcendence, for this is something beyond words, something unknown and wholly unrevealed, something above unity itself. What I wish to do is to sing a hymn of praise for the being-making procession of the absolute divine Source of being into the total domain of being.¹²

In God’s processions, God is namable and known, though in himself God is unnamable and unknowable. Insofar as God has externalized himself in creation, God is approachable by the human intellect. Without this approachability, such a gulf would exist between Creator and creature that atheism would be the only reasonable human response. Instead, the divine self-manifestation provides accurate, though limited, knowledge of God and the promise of ultimate return to God.

With this the difficulties of the paradox between the natural drive to know God and his ultimate unknowability are resolved. It is not that the names of God are deceptions, giving false information about him. Nor are they only partially true, losing their accuracy as one moves up the series of emanations. And, finally, they are not exercises in futility, just as easily pursued as not. Instead, they are completely accurate and worthy of pursuit insofar as they apply to God as God has proceeded out from God’s self. In Godself, in God’s super-essence, God is, however, still hidden.

¹¹ DN I 589D Luibheid (1987, p. 51).

¹² DN V 816B. Luibheid (1987, p. 96).

The Pseudo-Areopagite's careful outline of the hierarchical principles is, thus, indicative of his views regarding the mysterious balance between the knowable, manifested God and the hidden, inscrutable God. His own understanding of mystical union with God is clearly distinct from a Neoplatonic intellectual ascent. The created order is validated, rather than negated, and the return to the divine is achieved through grace instead of intellectual ascent. Divine theophany in an iconic order replaces an ascent of rational principles with an encounter with the incarnate God. In light of both his creative use of Neoplatonic philosophy and his essential orthodoxy, it is no wonder that Pseudo-Dionysius has enjoyed such influence. His unique model of God stands at the beginning of a significant branch of Christian theology, the *via negativa*.

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Strolling with Maimonides on the *Via Negativa*

Kenneth Seeskin

For its proponents, the *via negativa* is a direct consequence of monotheism. So let me begin by playing Socrates and asking if we are sure we understand what monotheism is. My guess is that most people would fall into the usual trap by answering: That's easy, Socrates, monotheism (mono + theism) is the belief that there is only one deity. In contrast to paganism, which professed belief in a plurality of gods, ancient Judaism emphasized belief in a single God.

It takes only a simple thought experiment to see that this answer cannot be right. Suppose a person living in a pagan culture like ancient Greece believed that of the 12 gods and goddesses supposed to dwell on Mt. Olympus, 11 are bogus: the only true deity is Athena. And this person also believed that she is pretty much the way Homer described her and Greek art depicted her. Would we say that such a belief is monotheistic as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam understand the term? After all, Athena does have a claim to exclusivity. Or, to put the question another way: Is there a principled difference between monotheism properly so-called and single deity paganism?

Surely the answer is yes, and the difference is critical. The emergence of monotheism was important not only because it reduced the number of gods but also because it asserted something deeply profound about the nature of God. Simply put: exclusivity is not enough. In addition to being exclusive, God must be perfect or absolute, conditioned by nothing. Not only does this rule out a god who yields to natural forces, it rules out a god who faces anything in the way of restriction or limitation. Seen in this light, not even Plato's demiurge, who does the best job he can of imposing order on a pre-existing chaos, qualifies as monotheistic. In philosophic terms, monotheism professes that God is self-caused and that everything else owes its existence to God.

Let us say, therefore, that in addition to being exclusive, God is unique in the sense that nothing resembles God or can stand as a rival to God. Thus Isaiah 46:5:

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“To whom will you liken me that I should be compared?” A common way to account for the uniqueness of God is to introduce omni-predicates. Thus God is not just good, powerful, and wise but *all-good*, *all-powerful*, and *all-knowing*. But omni-predicates can mislead if they suggest, as they usually do, that God is nothing but a bundle of superlatives: the wisest, best, most powerful thing in the universe. The problem is that to speak in terms of superlatives normally suggests there is a measure of comparison between good, better, and best – that the thing at the top has more of a certain feature than the things at the bottom.

The crux of Maimonides’ view is that this way of accounting for uniqueness is not strong enough because it assumes we can put God into the same class as other things. For example, I can compare the power in my arm to that of an Olympic athlete and the strength of an Olympic athlete to that of a horse. Moving up the scale, I can compare the horsepower of a train to that unleashed by a hurricane or that unleashed by a hurricane to that of a supernova. But the power of one created object to affect another bears no relation to the power to create and sustain an entire universe *ex nihilo*. Generalizing from such examples, Maimonides writes¹:

... the term “existent” is predicated of Him ... and of everything that is other than He, in a purely equivocal sense. Similarly the terms “knowledge,” “power,” “will,” and “life,” as applied to Him ... and to all those possessing knowledge, power, will, and life, are purely equivocal, so that their meaning when they are predicated of him is in no way like their meaning in other applications.

If this is so, we have no choice but to recognize that God’s perfection is incommensurate with everything else. Compared to the infinite power of God, the difference between the force exhibited by a falling raindrop and that unleashed by a hurricane is insignificant. Compared to absolute omniscience, all human intelligence is, as Socrates points out in the *Apology* (23a–b), of little or no value. To continue with Isaiah (40:17): “All the nations are as nothing before him; they are counted by him as less than nothing ...”

Extending the logic of this position, we must negate everything, which is to say, recognize its limitations, to begin to think about God. Moreover when we do begin to think this way, we will not arrive at a treasure trove of useful information but at something that steadfastly resists our efforts to understand it. As Maimonides sees it, a lifetime of study of the sciences will eventually bring us to the point where we realize that none of the categories we use to describe the world, e.g. cause/effect, essence/accident, subject/predicate, apply to God. This is another way of saying that a lifetime of study will bring us to the point where we see that all efforts to praise or even to describe God end in failure. Accordingly²:

Glory then to Him who is such that when the intellects contemplate His essence, their apprehension turns into incapacity; and when they contemplate the proceeding of His actions from His will, their knowledge turns into ignorance; and when the tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns into weariness and incapacity!

¹ Maimonides (1963, 1.56, p. 131).

² Maimonides (1963, 1.59, p. 137).

Rather than occupy a position at the top of a metaphysical hierarchy where each level contains slightly more perfection than the one that preceded it, God is separate from the world and totally unlike it.

So understood, the effort to know God is not like that involved in discovering a new particle or developing a new process. In the latter cases, knowledge advances when concepts are revised and theories extended. But again we face the demands imposed by the idea of uniqueness. Not only is there no similarity between God and the created order, there is no genus or species, no larger category or description under which God can be subsumed or through which God can be grasped. For if God were to be subsumed under a larger category, then Maimonides objects, there would be a cause anterior to God. To say, for example, that God falls under the category of existent or living things would be to say that existence or life are separate from God and responsible for determining the nature of God. Instead of being self-caused, God's existence or life would apply to him by virtue of his connection to or association with something else. This, in turn, would mean that God would no longer be self-sufficient. As Maimonides puts it: "He exists but not through an existence other than His essence; and similarly He lives, but not through life; he is powerful, but not through power; He knows, but not through knowledge ..." ³

If there is no larger concept or category under which God can be subsumed, then in Aristotelian terms, there is no way God can be defined, no possibility of identifying God by means of genus and specific difference. "For this reason," Maimonides writes: "It is well known among all people engaged in speculation, who understand what they say, that God cannot be defined." ⁴ In the formula made famous by medieval philosophy, we can know *that* God is but not *what* God is.

It is here that we come to the crux of the *via negativa*. An assertion like "God is powerful" is misleading because it has the same grammatical form as "A hurricane is powerful" and suggests that God falls under the category of powerful things. We can avoid the misleading aspects of positive assertion by turning to denial. Accordingly "God is wise" is best understood as "God does not lack wisdom," "God lives" as "God does not lack life," and "God is powerful" as "God does not lack power." By denying that God has a privation, we indicate that God is perfect even though we cannot apprehend what the nature of that perfection is.

But even this is not enough. In order to grasp the full extent of God's uniqueness, we would have to say "God is powerful" means "God does not lack power *or* possess it in a way comparable to us." This indicates that God is not just the most powerful thing there is but a thing whose power is completely different from that of anything else.

This gives us the standard view of the *via negativa*. In Maimonides' eyes, however, even the standard view is suspect because, in his opinion, even negations introduce some degree of distortion: "the attributes of negation have in this respect something in common with the attributes of affirmation, for the former undoubtedly bring about some particularization even if the particularization due to them only exists in the exclusion of what has been negated ..." ⁵

³ Maimonides (1963, 1.57, p. 132).

⁴ Maimonides (1963, 1.52, p. 115).

⁵ Maimonides (1963, 1.58, pp. 134–135).

If we try to guess the identity of an unknown object in a box, we could make progress by ruling out the possibility that it is a vegetable or a mineral. After a number of questions by which we rule out other possibilities, we would be able to make an educated guess. It would be a mistake to think we can identify God's nature in a similar way. The key insight here is that to say God does not lack power or intelligence is still to view God under a description. From the standpoint of negative theology, *any* description introduces limitation and thus distortion.

It follows that even the revised interpretations of "God is wise" or "God is powerful" suggested above cannot be taken at face value. To interpret them correctly, we would have to point out that while it is true that God does not lack wisdom or power, we should not think that we have an identifying description of God. In truth all we have is the claim that, whatever they may be, God's wisdom and power are totally unlike ours. It could be said therefore that the most negative predicates provide is an approximation to the truth, a set of general directions for how to think about God. In Maimonides' opinion, they take us to the limit of what the human mind is capable of understanding but stop short of literal truth. As he puts it, they "conduct the mind toward the utmost reach that man may attain in the apprehension of Him ..."⁶ Though imperfect, they are the best we can do with the limitations we have.

Where does that leave us? We can approach anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Bible with the knowledge that they cannot be taken literally. We can be more sensitive to how language misleads us and why heaping praise on God often has the opposite effect of what was intended. But in the end, anything we say of God will be suspect. In Maimonides' words: "For the bounds of expression in all languages are very narrow indeed, so that we cannot represent this notion [that God is one but not through oneness] to ourselves except through a certain looseness of expression."⁷

Not surprisingly, Maimonides concludes that the only authentic response to God is silence and quotes the Book of Psalms (65:2): "Silence is praise to Thee." Because every time we try to magnify or exalt God, our efforts fail, the best thing we can do is to contemplate God without saying anything. Again he quotes the Book of Psalms (4:5): "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still." When it comes to God, then, all semantic functions fail: we cannot attribute, describe, define, compare or, with the possible exception of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), say anything that reflects the true nature of God's uniqueness and simplicity.⁸ As Plotinus put it, centuries before Maimonides, there are contexts in which we have to admit that silence actually contains more truth than speech.⁹

The reference to silence often leads people astray. Is Maimonides saying that all religious discourse is nonsense? What about prayer? What about the claim that God is immaterial? The answer is that religious discourse, including prayer, has an important role to play. In fact, he is quite explicit that daily prayer is mandatory:

⁶ Maimonides (1963, 1.58, p. 135).

⁷ Maimonides (1963, 1.57, p. 132).

⁸ For Maimonides' analysis of the Tetragrammaton, see Maimonides (1963, 1.61, pp. 147–150). Note that according to Jewish tradition, its exact pronunciation is unknown so that strictly speaking, it cannot be said.

⁹ Plotinus (1969, 5.5.6).

Every person should daily, according to his ability, offer up supplication and prayer; first uttering praises of God, then with humble supplication and petition asking for all that he needs, and finally offering praise and thanksgiving to the Eternal for the benefits already bestowed upon him in rich measure.

As for the meaningfulness of religious discourse, it is hard to see why he would write a 650 page book on the philosophy of religion if he thought that nothing of significance could be said. But to say that religious discourse has an important role to play is not to say that it culminates in a body of literal truth about God.

Consider prayer. In Book Three of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chapter 32) Maimonides argues that, like animal sacrifice in ancient times, prayer is a part of Judaism because God realized that no one would follow a religion that did not have it. To continue the analogy, just as God does not need the smell of burning animal carcasses to improve his position, neither does he need to receive constant praise. Both practices make sense only if we see them as concessions to human fallibility. We need to remind ourselves that we are creatures of God and to have opportunities where we feel the presence of God. Prayer satisfies both functions. But it does not follow from this that the formulas repeated in prayers provide literal descriptions of God or that the more sincere our prayers, the more we have cut through the problems involved in making God a subject of attribution.

To understand this point, we need to take seriously Maimonides' claim that religious language "conducts the mind to the utmost truth that man may attain." After remarking about the looseness of expression in all languages, he continues:

Thus when we wish to indicate that the deity is not many, the one who makes the statement cannot say anything but that He is one, even though "one" and "many" are some of the subdivisions of quantity. For this reason, we give the gist of the notion and give the mind the correct direction toward the true reality of the matter when we say, one but not through oneness ...

In this way, language points to something whose perfection it cannot adequately represent. It can play a corrective function by helping us rule out misconceptions of God, e.g. that God is material or possesses multiple attributes. It can play a reverential function by inducing feelings of gratitude or humility. What it cannot do is produce statements about God that have the referential clarity of "Pi is irrational" or "Water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit."

This is all a way of saying that the categories and assumptions we use to make sense of the world around us break down – not because there is a flaw that could be corrected by further investigation – but because we are dealing with something that refuses to be categorized. The Bible expresses this at Exodus 33, when God tells Moses that no mortal can see the face of God and live. The point is not that God resembles Medusa, who was so ugly that once glance turned a person to stone, but that no person can penetrate the veil of unknowing that surrounds God.

Again we face a problem. If we cannot see the face of God, and if according to Exodus 19, it is dangerous even to get close to God, what becomes of the doctrine of *imitatio Dei*? In the words of Leviticus 19:2: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord

your God, am holy.”¹⁰ In the words of Psalm 145, God is near to all those who call upon him in truth. But how near is *too* near?

Maimonides dealt with this issue by saying that when we imitate God, we are not imitating God considered as absolute but the consequences or effects of divine activity as manifested in the created order.¹¹ This opinion is supported by Exodus 33, which says that while Moses cannot see God’s face and live, he is permitted to see God’s “back-side,” which is identified with God’s goodness: mercy, graciousness, slowness to anger, etc. So when we act in a kind or merciful manner, we are imitating God as he is reflected in the created order but not as he is in himself. The obvious implication is that if we should attempt to go beyond God’s backside to God’s face, we would be destroyed – if not physically, then conceptually. In philosophic terms, this means, contra Kierkegaard, that there is no possibility of an absolute relation to the absolute – at least in this life. The only relation we can have is by inference from the things we know.¹²

What, then, is the appropriate response to God considered as absolute? I suggest it is to recognize one’s own limitations – in Socratic terms, worthlessness – in relation to it. The trouble starts at the point where we come to think that if we push ourselves to our limits, the absoluteness of God can be shared with a person, nation, or political movement. My claim is that it cannot be shared with anything, and that is what the Bible is getting at when it tells people not to get too close to God. To return to Athena, the world of mythology knows of no such problem. Gods and humans interact all the time, and the boundary between them is crossed in both directions. Although there are still significant traces of mythology in the biblical portrayal of God, a new trajectory emerges at exactly the point where God claims that close interaction is dangerous.

From a philosophic perspective, this creates a trade-off between uniqueness and intelligibility. The more we can know about God, the less awesome God becomes. Conversely, the more awesome God is, the less we can know. Strict adherence to monotheism requires that we come down on the side of awe and admit the limits of our categories and discourse. It is well known that the Kant of the *First Critique* limited knowledge to make room for faith. But as Kant would be the first to admit, faith can express the same overconfidence that reason can. As Kant conceived it, faith means a rational hope that the universe is organized in a way that allows us to fulfill our obligations as moral agents – to reflect on and imitate God’s back side. If, however, faith means that we are able to penetrate the veil of unknowing that

¹⁰Cf. Matthew 5: 48.

¹¹Maimonides (1963, 1.54, pp. 123–8). Cf. Aquinas (1945, 1.12.11): “It is written, ‘Man shall not see Me, and live’ (*Exodus* 32: 20), and a gloss upon this says, ‘In this mortal life God can be seen by certain images, but not by the likeness itself of His own nature.’”

¹²Cf. Aquinas (1945, 1.2.1): “Therefore I say that this proposition, ‘God exists,’ of itself is self-evident, for the predicate is the same as the subject, because God is His own existence as will be hereafter shown (3, 4). Now because we do not know the essence of God, the proposition is not self-evident to us; but needs to be demonstrated by things that are more known to us, though less known in their nature – namely, by effects.”

surrounds God, or, in mystical terms, achieve some kind of ecstatic union with God, then all it amounts to is knowledge by another name.

Let me close by citing a rabbinic parable that expresses my point perfectly. The parable claims that four rabbis were permitted to enter “a realm of secrets” (*parades*), which is normally taken to mean that they were introduced to esoteric subjects.¹³ With a single exception, the results were damaging: one rabbi went mad, one killed himself, and one became an apostate. Of the four, only Akiba went in and came out in peace. The lesson Maimonides draws from this is that of the four, only Akiba recognized his limits and stayed within them. As Maimonides points out, this should not be read as an anti-philosophic polemic. The point is not that the search for knowledge should stop but that there is one area where the search for knowledge comes up against a subject that insists on its inviolability, and that subject is God.

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¹³ Maimonides (1963, 1.32, pp. 68–69). The reference is to *Hagigah* 14b.

Meister Eckhart's God

Dietmar Mieth

Meister Eckhart of Hochheim (c. 1260–1328) was born near Erfurt in Thuringia, Germany. He was a learned Dominican, who held important positions in the order, a professor in Paris twice during his life, an acclaimed preacher, and a theologically and philosophically trained thinker, who passionately contemplated God. Today he is frequently—though not uncontroversially—characterized as a “mystic.” Eckhart lives on in current philosophical discourse (see Flasch 2010) and in the fascination with religious experience (see Kampmann 2010). In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Eckhart specifically describes his method of thinking about God: it entails interpreting religious belief—the mysterium entrusted to the human being—with rational reasons (see LW III, 4, 4–17). Admittedly, it is arrogant to attempt to prove the existence of God as a precondition for belief, but lazy and negligent to be unwilling to explore belief with natural reason (see LW III, 306 sq.). Eckhart goes beyond Anselm of Canterbury’s concept of “*Fides quaerens intellectum*” when he anchors knowledge in natural reason, establishing its status as an unbiased and undirected science. In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Eckhart insists that all scholarship, all science, including the disciplines of philosophy and theology, must be free of interests, free of bias and prejudice, free of direction; otherwise, it would be prostitution. Knowledge can only desire knowledge for the sake of knowledge (see In Eccl. n. 28, LW II, 255 f.). Consequently, Eckhart reads the prologue to the Gospel of John—“*In principio erat verbum*”—from a scholarly perspective, that is, as a logical philosophical discourse, in which the essence of the beginning and the emergence of being out of itself is contemplated, if it is comprehended not as a temporal becoming but as a movement, occurring in “simultaneity.” Eckhart conceives a processual

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relationship (“*relatio—widertragunge*”), in which the process first gives rise to its concepts from its own contextuality and makes them nameable, just as a birth allows the child and the parents to come into existence at the same time. Without the human being, without the human being’s faculty of knowledge and capacity for language, Eckhart asserts, it is impossible to speak of God: “God” is a name that creatures unconsciously address and that becomes “word,” language, in the human being. Summarizing an initial series of commentaries on the Johannine prologue, Eckhart says: “It is evident how the Prologue ‚In the Beginning was the Word’ … is to be interpreted by means of the ideas and properties of natural beings. It is also clear that these words of the Evangelist, if correctly investigated, teach us the natures and properties of things both in their existence and their operation, and so while they build up our faith, they also instruct us about the natures of things” (In Joh. n. 13, DW III, 12, 11–15; ESS, 126). This method implies a correlation between revelation and “nature” respectively reason, based on belief (the Gospel); however, its goal is not the instatement of reason, but the instatement of belief.

In his sermons Eckhart approached the question of God as relationship programmatically, describing it briefly at the beginning of Sermon 53: “When I preach it is my wont to speak about detachment, and of how man should rid himself of self and all things. Secondly, that man should be in-formed back into the simple good which is God. Thirdly, that we should remember the great nobility God has put into the soul, so that man may come miraculously to God. Fourthly, of the purity of the divine nature, for the splendor of God’s nature is unspeakable. God is a word, an unspoken word” (DW II, 528 f. = Sermon 22, CMW, 152).

The only one who can say this word is the one, who *is* this word. The speakability of the word presupposes a being, in which knowledge and reality are identical: “In ipso quidem idem est res et intellectus” (“Reality and intellect are the same in him”) (In Joh. n. 34, LW III, 27, 14, NL II, 518, 18; ESS, 133). “Word” presupposes a working that literally speaks for itself and creates a language that reflects this working. The word remains mystery but is evident all the same, because it not only remains within itself, but emanates from itself as well. Since the human being also emanates from himself, he reflects the generation of God in himself. This means: in both cases emanating from oneself is a remaining in oneself without loss. All creatures say God’s name, but lose themselves in the incomprehensible, the ineffable. For God does not answer to names, even if it is permissible to call on him with the name, which holy persons have used to call on him. God remains unspeakable and unnameable in the clarity of his ground. Similarly, the human soul is also unspeakable and wordless, where it is grasped in its own ground (see Sermon 77, DW III, 337 f.; NL 141; = Sermon 49, CMW, 263). God and the soul are so completely one that there is no longer a counterpart.

The unspeakability of God contrasts with his essence as self-revelation, as the one who “shares Himself most of all” (Sermon 9, DWI, 149, 11 = Sermon 67, CMW, 343), who totally emanates from himself. It can also be grasped by distinguishing God from himself, as Eckhart does in his famous sermon on poverty (Sermon 52). God works and shares himself; the Godhead, by contrast, remains silent. The person contemplating God, not as relation but in himself, must become “godless”, “free of

God" (see Sermon 52, DW II, 493, 9: "gotes ledic" = Sermon 87, CMW, 424 as well as Sermon 77, DW III, 344, 4; NL II, 145, 23 f.; Sermon 49, CMW, 262–264), must look into a silent desert. There, where knowing and willing can no longer comprehend themselves reflexively as knowledge of knowledge or as loving will, being is in itself, is the "negation of negation" (see, for example Sermon 21, DW I, 361–362 = Sermon 97, CMW, 467–468), that is, the "purum nihil" of contingent creatureliness. In this passage Eckhart is wordy, expressly using language in order to show where there is no longer a word. In this sense he goes beyond his theories of relation—relation through the language of creation, through the language of birth, through the language of self-assurance. He surpasses the conception of happiness in seeing God that was still important to Augustine (see the conclusion to the model sermon on the nobleman, DW V, 118, 13 f. = CMW, 562).

Eckhart's Scholastic contemporaries criticize him for allegedly wanting to draw God too deeply into the human being, because the entering "spark of the soul," to the extent that it emanates from God but does not remain in the human being, is "uncreated"; on the other hand, they admonish him for allegedly approaching blasphemy, because even blasphemous talk about God affirms God indirectly. These are clearly misconstruals of Eckhart's processual theories of relation. For even if God is conceived as unrelated, as relationless, this still involves a relation from the perspective of the human being, that no longer involves the criterion of consciousness. Only someone seeking a relationship can actually comprehend the termination of a relationship. Through this termination all intentions and goals are thwarted. What is to be strived for is a being, living, and knowing that no longer require a goal and a why: "If a man asked life for a thousand years, '*Why do you live?*' if it could answer it would only say, '*I live because I live*'" (Sermon 5b, DW I, 92 = Sermon 13b, CMW, 110). This indifference has revitalized the dialogue with Zen Buddhism. Indifference can also be understood as the immersion in nothingness as representative of the Absolute. Eckhart clearly knows the silent desert of the Godhead, but does not draw these conclusions; today they are occasionally drawn for him.

In Eckhart's conception of a fulfilled relationship between God and the human being there is definitely the "two in one" (Sermon 86, DW III, 484, 9 = Sermon 9, CMW, 86), difference and identity at the same time. For God is "alius, non aliud," an other, but nothing other than reality, if it is real. Eckhart calls the distinction between God and world "undifferentiatedness" or "indistinction" ("distinctio per indistinctionem," see LW II, 489, 9 as well as Heribert Fischer, Meister Eckhart, Freiburg/Munich 1974, 124 ff.). This is because, in the Dominican's opinion, it is not a categorical but a "higher" distinction, unlike a distinction between two things, which are differentiated on the basis of a "principium diiudicationis." It is far more radical: undifferentiated, indistinct in being, suspended into but separate from nothingness, a nothingness that would be all individually existent being as created in itself ("purum nihil") if being did not continually flow into it "on loan." Eckhart is striving for the "breakthrough" to a union without a difference in consciousness, but without the medium of consciousness: it is even more compelling than this "analogy," distinction through indistinction, identity and difference, a "two in one." Eckhart does not strive for a mediated but a direct union. For this union the simple

working of the working—God as pure working, the human being introduced into this working as a worker—is more decisive than seeing God (see Sermon 86, DW III, 482–486 = Sermon 9, CMW, 83–90).

In the following passage Eckhart elaborates on this idea:

One should not receive God nor consider Him as outside oneself, but as one's own and as what is within oneself: nor should one work for any 'Why,' neither for God nor one's honor nor for anything at all that is outside of oneself, but only for that which is one's own being and one's own life within oneself. Some simple folk imagine they will see God as if He were standing there and they here. That is not so. God and I are one. Through knowledge I take God into myself, through love I enter into God.... God and I are one in this operation: He works, and I come into being (Sermon 6, DW I, 113 f.; NL I, 86; = Sermon 65, CMW, 331–332).

The denseness of the union is forcibly achieved through God's self-revelation in the continual, actual working that constitutes his being ("actus purus, lüter wirken"). This force can also be reversed: "And He wants our bliss so badly that He entices us into Himself with every means at His disposal.... I will never give thanks to God for loving me, because He cannot help it, whether He would or not: His nature compels Him to it. I will give him thanks because by His goodness He cannot cease to love me" (Sermon 73, DW III, 268, 5–269, 7; NL II, Sermon 73, 97; Sermon 73, CMW, 372–373).

When Eckhart speaks about God in one of his Latin treatises, his initial assumption is: "Esse est Deus," being is God (see Prologus Generalis, NL II, 471). Outside of God, independent of him, there is nothing. He is the only "isticheit" ("a self-identity which is where God is"), the only one who can say: "I am" (see Sermon 12, DW I, 197 = Sermon 57, CMW, 296; see also CMW, xviii). But God is being in the manner of intellectual being, of thinking, and of knowing ("Deus est intelligere"). If we take the immateriality of thought seriously, then God does not *exist*. He is not a being among beings. This is why being, knowledge, and life are identical, even though a greater richness can be expressed linguistically, which allows the Trinitarian in God to be reflected anthropologically. Seen from the perspective of his unconditional self-revelation, God is love ("Deus caritas est" is the title of a number of Eckhart's sermons in Latin and German.) Experiencing God as love corresponds to his essence, which Eckhart also characterizes as "compassion" (or "mercy"), which emanates knowledge and love at the same time (see Sermon 7, DW 1, 121 = Sermon 72, CMW, 368).

How deeply Eckhart's God is involved in a correlative conception of relation becomes clear when, as often in his works, there is talk of "God's image" (see, for example, Sermon 16b DW I, 263 sq. = Sermon 14b, CMW, 114 f.). There, however, "image" does not refer to a reflected image in the human being, whether shining or distorted; instead, it refers to a process of imaging or, conversely, of "dis-imaging." The basis is an occurrence that can only be expressed as a verb: the to-and-fro of a movement, in which the image of God arises in himself and the image of God arises in the human being simultaneously. Since it is a process, nothing can be fixated. It is not necessary to forbid images, because as such they are merely fleeting, replaceable impressions. Naturally, according to Eckhart, the human being cannot create an

image of God and must “dis-image,” that is, deconstruct the images. Neither human reason nor loving human will are images of God in the human being. The process of imaging is imageless, because the image is unclear and cannot be fixated. The human being generally reacts to this process with ignorance and unwillingness: it takes place automatically as the expression of the unconditional self-revelation of God (see Wilde 2000, particularly pp. 288–310).

How can we explain Eckhart's God in the language of contemporary theology? It is obvious that Eckhart presupposes a correlation between God and the soul. God is the presupposition—in this sense, all of nature is grace. Human nature presupposes the grace of unconditional self-revelation, accepts, comprehends, and continues it. From this perspective, God's justice is already present in the source; the human being is integrated into it by accepting it. God is self-commitment in freedom; the self-liberating human being discovers his own deeper inner state.

Without this conception of grace God would be a formula, according to which the human being understands himself, in the philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, his “I” and his “Not-I” (see Mojsisch 1983 and Quéro-Sánchez 2004). Later in idealism the human being is “graceless,” self-aggrandizing, self-thinking: “giftless” being. With Schleiermacher the dependency becomes less rational, more emotional, and is no longer an experience of thought itself. What links Eckhart with idealism is that he uses not only grace as a formula for the gift of being. As Kurt Flasch demonstrates particularly concisely (49 ff.), Eckhart even discusses God as “justice.”

In Sermon 6, mentioned above, we read:

The just are so set on justice that if God were not just they would not care a bean for God: they are so firmly established in justice and so thoroughly self-abandoned that they reck not the pains of hell or the joys of heaven or anything at all. Indeed, were all the pains of those in hell, men or devils, and all the pain that has been suffered or ever will be suffered—were all this to be set beside justice, they would not care a jot, so firmly do they stand by God and justice.... Whoever understands about the just man and justice understands all that I am saying. (Sermon 6, DW I, 103 ff. = Sermon 65, CMW, 329)

The attitude of the just persons established in justice remains the same in joy and in suffering. Justice is the expression of their essence; they cannot be otherwise. Comprehension of the difference between the just person and justice is crucial (here Walshe's translation is very free). This statement by Eckhart, in which the word “underscheit” (a Middle High German word for “difference”) connotes both distinction and relation, is a programmatic formulation of his thinking about God and, at the same time, a lifelong project. During his trial before the Inquisition in Cologne in 1326, Eckhart says that he is being persecuted because of his “zeal for justice”. It is of existential importance for him to think of God and himself in this way. With “justice” Eckhart, who is otherwise extremely cautious about naming, gives God a pars pro toto name that captures the transparent being of God in itself, similar to another passage, though neither as dominant nor significant, in which he calls God “compassion.” Being is God, God is being in the manner of thinking, and he appears as the one who shares himself, emanating from a ground, which he demonstrates as compassion and love. However, if we take Eckhart's emphasis seriously, he shows it, to be even more precise, as justice. For justice fulfills the highest criterion for reason:

justice is delegated to the will, which holds together what belongs together rationally. In Flasch's interpretation, God is "worthy of recognition" before the forum of reason as justice. This is not interchangeable. Since justice is transcendental, almost tantamount to God, and expresses him from the perspective of being, human descendants originate in this source and its manifestation. Given that the just human being is equally a son of justice, he is suspended in a relationship that sustains his own justness on justice. Flasch writes: "What is essential is the capability of the soul to actively form itself, to shape itself ... Justice is its God, a living God, not a God merely conceived intellectually. The participation of the soul in justice is, metaphorically speaking, its birth in it" (54 f.) Unlike Flasch, I read the birth of God so central to Eckhart's thought not as a metaphor, but as a word connoting being as a process, as a series of occurrences, in the course of which the relational magnitudes allow themselves to mutually arise from the relationship being lived: an occurrence of correlation. Theologically speaking, the correlation God-justice – human being-just person produces the dynamics of Eckhart's answer to the question how the human being *becomes* just. The human being becomes just, because he is innately just; he has always been just. God's justice is redeemed in the reversal of the direction of life: "He [God] works, and I come into being" (see above).

The apparent differences in Eckhart's conception of God like compassion and justice are explainable as characteristics of his perspectivism. Conspicuously, his reflection on God always entails the question of the human being about his own self. God is never an object; like the human being, who is searching, God is always a subject. The self-revealing God meets the self-assuring human being. At the same time, Eckhart's God is freed from burdensome artefacts: from the burden of the external, authoritarian lawgiver, from the burden of the frightening fear of God, from the threat of fire and brimstone, from the anthropomorphic incidentals of sovereignty, from representation by offices and ecclesiastical power. This is a God of trust and security, a God of great closeness, and of self-opening vastness.

How can we talk about Eckhart's God today?

Together with Eckhart we can ask: Does God only work to his honor? Are we merely the means for facilitating this? Are we essentially superfluous or "useless" (cf. Luke 17.10)? The modern, pragmatic human being reacts in a countermove to his instrumentalization for God by considering God superfluous. He is exasperated with the long tradition of the instrumentalization of the human being through belief in God. That we abandon ourselves in order to be assimilated into God "as in an ocean" (Willigis Jäger) is a longing central to the new longing for mysticism. However, God is then relatively vague in the new religiosity, even too vague.

But isn't Eckhart's God also affected by self-instrumentalization and self-abandonment? The adventure known as humanity, on which he embarks, does not withhold and retain anything from God in a cosmic or celestial zone, in a fifth or sixth dimension. Like the Apostle Paul, Eckhart asserts that God did not retain anything of himself in his son, in order to deliver himself to our fate (see Philippians 2). He is himself by being in the other. He has bound himself to a place freely: his autonomy is self-obligation in freedom and in the revelation of his nature as compassion and justice (see above).

Did the “placeless” God intentionally choose this as a place where he can be found: in the heart of the human being? Did God, as Meister Eckhart maintains, flow out of himself so extensively that he can only return to himself through us? Can we block God out of our obstinate hearts? Does he need our openness for his flowing, in order that it can spread from and through us into the world?

Is he as helpless as a child when confronted with the flood of violence, which human beings inflict on the world? Is God’s power actually powerlessness? Is he so helpless that he would first have to destroy the chains of our malice in order to be God? Did he transform us so thoroughly through the humanness which he adopted that humanness, humanism constitute his way? Are the hidden powers, which he gives us for this way, so strong that hope is born through us, even though we destroy it? Was God annihilated and simultaneously saved in Auschwitz, in the Gulag, in Hiroshima? Annihilated through the actions, and saved through the memory of them?

Whoever bears God in himself emanates from himself together with God. God is the powerful ecstasy of the human being, whose inwardness he opened by locking himself within it. It is a matter of drawing on the love of God in oneself and overflowing with it. In Eckhart’s Sermon for the Feast of St. Augustine of 1303, we read: “On the first level, secrets and futures are announced; on the second, things that are commendable are put into practice; on the third, the divine sweetness is savored.” The first way is prophetic, the second consists in the gratuitously conferred virtues and their consequences, the third in the productive ecstasy of the intellect. The second and third were perfected in him (Augustine) (n. 6; LW V 94, 14 f.–95, 2). In a Latin sermon (Sermo XL/2, n. 398, LW IV 340, 13 f.) Eckhart says: “Love produces ecstasy and places the one who loves outside of himself as well as in the one whom he loves.” The ecstasy of love, the elevation of the intellect, the enrapturement are considered the same in the writings (of the masters) (see Sermo XXII n. 216, LW IV 203, 1–4).

Rainer Maria Rilke expressed this poetically:

Er ist das Wasser: bilde du nur rein/die Schale aus zwei hingewillten Händen, / und kniest du überdies—: Er wird verschwenden / und deiner größten Fassung über sein. (Rilke 1986, p. 1021)

(Paraphrased unpoetically: He is the water; your two willingly outstretched hands are to form the pure bowl. If you kneel, he will be overly generous and exceed your greatest capacity).

The God, who becomes superfluous in the world, because we look for him behind, in front of, and above as well as around ourselves is at the same time the God overflowing in our hearts. Correspondingly, the famous theologian Edward Schillebeeckx considered him both superfluous and overflowing. This is not a paradox, not an irresolvable contradiction, because becoming superfluous and overflowing are meant differently:

... modern men and women do not need God to explain the cosmos; far less do they need God in order to establish a meaningful anthropology or ethics. But precisely in this Western social climate of secularization and religious indifference, of the spread of science, technology and instrumental thinking in terms of a means to an end, the question of God becomes the freest and most gratuitous question that one can ask, and the way to God also becomes the freest career to choose.... God is not there as an ‘explanation’ but as a gift. (Schillebeeckx 1987, pp. 5–6.)

For Schillebeeckx it is a relief not to need God in order to prove or justify something else: the world order, morality, the particular sovereignty in the Church. Ideally, God should remain free of what we make of him and what we make out of him. We should remain free of having to “think” God in order to explain something that is otherwise inexplicable. The freedom of those who love makes love an unearned gift. This experience, as a perpetual memory and renewal, is the mystery of fulfillment, not a force binding human beings. God’s freedom extends to us, if we receive it groundlessly. It can manifest itself in us as a freedom, which we do not need to appropriate for ourselves, because it is already there.

Schillebeeckx is referring to the connection between Meister Eckhart and the current (non-) religious experience, that is, the experience on the borderline between unlimited secularity and equally free willingness to believe. Eckhart taught that thinking and living “out of God” are a thinking and living without an external “why” or “goal.” The ground does not come from without, first becoming discernible through the scholarly and scientific deciphering of the world; instead, it comes from within, as unearned, gratefully adopted memory and experience.

That God is “within” and thus closer to the human being than the human being to himself is a thought taken from Augustine. The Church Father also comprehended the inner realm of the human being as the place where God is present and where we must first awaken his power through ourselves. As Eckhart says: by “oversleeping” the interests that seem to be decisive. Or by being awakened by it like the prophets, who experience God as an inner call to awaken during sleep. When God sleeps in us, we are not vigilant. If we oversleep God, his power does not become manifest.

But isn’t God outside us? Don’t we deprive him of his absolute independence? Indisputably, he is outside us, since he continually enters us. And since he emanates from us in the ecstasy for the other human being, in which we forget ourselves, like parents who realize themselves in their children without consideration of the scope. God’s unconditionality in the acceptance of the human being becomes evident in the unconditionality of the human being. This ecstatic sheen of emanating inner closeness is characterized as “holiness.” Holiness, Eckhart says, does not consist in acting, but in being. How we “are” determines how the actions “are.” The actions, which we want to divert from our being are our bad actions, our wrongdoings, our improprieties; they never should have happened. They reflect a false self, pour out of our inherently imperfect being, out of our finiteness, out of everything that God’s being negates in us. We block our own access to what we are and what we can then become. We are corroded by negation. However, God negates this negation, because his power is not passive, but extraordinarily active. God works incessantly, and we can endure his working through us, if we extend it into our acting.

Both the human being working out of God and the human being working out of a nothingness mistaken for “God,” quasi replacing God, relying on his own actions, claim power. However, only the former embodies in and of himself as well as out of himself what Christ calls “the kingdom of God.” The latter only cultivates his God complex. “Playing God” is an extremely appropriate image, because it reveals something like the surface appearance of this claim to God. This is the wrong God:

the God, who tramples everyone and everything, destroying everything, as the contemporary German writer Botho Strauß writes in his essayistic novel “Tumult” (“Rumor” is the title of the German original), the God, whom we— influenced by biblical texts—imagine as an apocalyptic monstrosity, is the dark side of our own inability to encounter God. We contribute to the development of this horror, this catastrophe by basing our own interference and intervention in creation on our own authority, without considering finitude and creatureliness. Creation, violated, degraded, and left to chaos, answers with the apocalypse of Hiroshima, Chernobyl, New Orleans. In the apocalyptic catastrophe and horror, which we, too, have caused, God “appears,” whom we have failed to encounter. He is not only “set free” in good but also in evil; the powerlessness and nonviolence, with which he enters our hearts, break open. Trust in our own individually appropriated and unearned power leads to the suppression of God in us, and the gentle God does not tolerate suppression: he counteracts it and appears in the distorted image of our own terribleness or in the destructive power of degraded “nature.”

But does God’s working only take place through the human being, breaking out of him? Aren’t there enough counterexamples: devastating, deadly volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, hurricanes, deluges? Hasn’t there recently been a great deal of reflection on what harm and destruction nature causes and what this says about God’s will for creation?

One conceivable response to this objection is that God’s creation is only inherently “good,” that the human being has been specified to assume permanent responsibility for this promise not only as an origin, but also as a goal. Would a natural disaster— provided that we do not cause it ourselves through environmental degradation—then be the difference or the distance between origin and goal, between promised and fulfilled creation? It does not exactly diminish the self-esteem of the human being if this is expected of him: a titan achievement, a Promethean accomplishment, which can only succeed when God’s powerlessness in the human being becomes a productive power, a power drawn from the experience of the individual’s own finiteness and limitation, a willingness to recognize and confront the individual’s own imperfection.

Accordingly, in the transformation of a God, who is “superfluous” in the externality of the globalized world, into a God who is “overflowing” from the internality of the human being in working, it is not a matter of dis-heartening or dis-couraging the human being or of reducing his obligation toward creation or toward society. However, it becomes apparent that a different kind of principle of responsibility, of ethics arises from the tension between the proper exercise of power and the improper appropriation of power—expressed in the image of God “from the inside to the outside,” simultaneously internal and ecstatic—than the usual search for the good and the right without insight into (theologically comprehended) contingency, finitude. This principle does not supplant our faculty of reason, but corrects it gently, strengthening it through the memory of God and religious experience and consequently facilitating protest against the abuse of belief.

The ethical motivation is purified of false conceptions of certainty. Reason clarified in this way is then aware of itself and its scope. As an instrument for justifying the good and right action it develops the power of thought from the depths of experience.

Advocacy of this motivation, that, theologically speaking, draws its power from the Incarnation, the idea of God becoming man, seems very pretentious. Eckhart, whose God I am presenting from a contemporary perspective, is a Christian theologian, even though a “philosopher of Christianity.” Thirty-five years ago, in 1975, I had the honor of discussing Eckhart’s God with Erich Fromm (see our correspondence published in *Fromm Forum* 5/2001). Fromm comprehended Eckhart’s unspeakable “Godhead” agnostically, as a necessary peaking of the self-understanding of the human being, as a necessary project but a projection, necessary as humanistic therapy. When I broached the question of the applicability of this thesis to Meister Eckhart, Fromm replied that he was too old for such conversations. I think highly of the wise therapist, but could not accept his understanding of God in Eckhart. In my understanding, Eckhart’s God remains a perceptible, effective power, when—through his inviting presence—he does not subordinate the human being but elevates him together with himself.

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Kierkegaard's Model of God and the Importance of Subjective Experience

Aaron P. Smith

Part I

Kierkegaard's model of God is essentially existential. To understand what it means to have this model requires not that we spell out its dictates by examining Kierkegaard's positive claims about the nature of God, his negative theology, or another of his ideas.¹ Rather, it requires that we understand what it means for the individual to have a relationship with the divine. Kierkegaard is of course Christian and argues that we should be Christian, and the simplest answer would be to give a model of God that fits within his Protestant background. Yet it is not a simple task to understand his model of god. In fact, this complex endeavor could yield many different models. Kierkegaard focuses on the individual, and to have an existential model means that it is crucial to make it meaningful for the individual. To have faith, love our neighbor, and understand what it means for there to be a God for whom all things are possible are truths that, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, are tasks for a lifetime.

I acknowledge that attributing ideas that Kierkegaard wrote under different pseudonyms to him does violence to his work. These pseudonyms have different points of view, beliefs, and arguments from each other as well as significant differences from material that Kierkegaard published under his own name. Nevertheless, in such a short paper where I use material published under his own name and by several different pseudonyms, I simplify matters, just referring to them as by Kierkegaard for clarity's sake.

¹ There is a wealth of resources that address different perspectives on these claims. For example, see: Evans (2004), Law (1993), Mooney (2008a, b), Rae (2010), and Walsh 2009

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I. a

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard writes, “In order to perceive the prodigious paradox of faith, a paradox that makes a murder into a holy and God-pleasing act, a paradox that gives Isaac back to Abraham again, which no thought can grasp, because faith begins precisely where thought stops” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 53). What does it mean for faith to be a paradox or for faith to begin where thought stops?² This is the conundrum that Abraham presents. Though held as an exemplar of faith, he did something that by any ordinary standard is monstrous.

Kierkegaard’s explanation of faith is not just an irrationalist³ claim that faith is beyond reason; rather, faith beginning where thought stops means that we cannot fully understand faith because it is a subjective experience.⁴ Kierkegaard argues that to understand Abraham requires understanding the anxiety of what it means to be Abraham, but this is where we fail in trying to think ourselves into Abraham’s position. To see what sets Abraham apart, Kierkegaard gives the example of those who “knew the story of Abraham by heart, word for word, but how many did it render sleepless” because “what is omitted from Abraham’s story is the anxiety” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 28). In trying to understand Abraham from an objective perspective,⁵ it is not a sufficiently rich description of Abraham’s anxiety that is missing, but rather the actual anxiety inherent in being Abraham as he is commanded to sacrifice Isaac.

To outline Kierkegaard’s position for the nature of Abraham’s faith, I focus on several of his examples, which show the impossibility of determining what faith is. He argues that Abraham is not just following the ideas from the written word or he would be like a man who mistakes insomnia for a divine command; that he is not a tragic hero⁶ whose choices can be explained by reference to an ethical quandary; and that he is not just resigning himself to a fate commanded by God; rather, he has faith.

² It is impossible to completely answer this question here. For more detailed discussion I suggest the wealth of secondary literature on *Fear and Trembling*. For example: Lippitt (2003), Mooney (1991), and Perkins (1993).

³ For more detail on the relationship on subjectivity, reason and the limits of ethical see: Davenport and Rudd (2001), and Rudd (1993).

⁴ Kierkegaard contrasts this understanding of faith with the ancients’ understanding of faith as something that would take a lifetime to achieve. (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 7) For the ancients, faith required experiential knowledge; it had to be lived and practiced and could not be taught in a classroom. Kierkegaard presents this idea as an alternative to the way in which he sees faith portrayed in philosophy. Without it, there is no need for Abraham, or it could be argued—as Kant famously did—that Abraham failed his test. We can read Kierkegaard as offering a *reductio* of Kant’s view showing that if we accept it, then faith is a meaningless term.

⁵ This should bring to mind the classic Nagel discussion of the differences between subjective and objective experiences. For more on how this fits within Kierkegaard’s ideas see: Mehl (2005, pp. 67–68).

⁶ There are a large number of secondary sources that address these ideas in *Fear and Trembling*. For a general analysis of the knights of infinite resignation and faith, see: Mooney (1991). For a discussion of the tragic hero specifically, see: Lippitt (2003, pp. 97–107).

Kierkegaard asks the reader to imagine a man who “suffers from sleeplessness—then the most terrifying, the most profound, tragic, and comic misunderstanding is close at hand” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 29). This man, who mistakes a little insomnia for real anxiety and faith, goes home and wants to follow in Abraham’s footsteps in sacrificing his son. If he is serious in following Abraham, then his outcomes are “to be executed or sent to the madhouse” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 28). If this is the normal and expected reaction to a contemporary person who kills his son, then it would be faith that exempts Abraham from being “sent to the madhouse.” But if it is possible to mistake insomnia for faith, how does one know that one has faith? On the surface there seems to be no way to distinguish between sleep-deprived inspiration and the divine commanding voice without presupposing faith. Ethical rules and norms cannot allow for any distinction, but there must be one if we accept that Abraham had faith.

Kierkegaard claims that “the ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 30). The absolute horror and fear in knowing that one was commanded to sacrifice one’s child is the fear and trembling that anyone with faith would face. The impossibility of *knowing* that one is taking the correct, morally permissible action is the root of the anxiety. Abraham does not know; he has faith that he is choosing the right course. The difference between Abraham and the man is not the act of faith, but rather the faith itself. Abraham is not a sleepless man and is someone who has faith. But this still doesn’t tell us exactly what faith *is*.

A second characteristic that differentiates Abraham is that he is not a tragic hero and his actions are not communicable. His choice of whether to sacrifice Isaac is not viewed in the same way as the tragic hero who decides between two equally unpalatable but understandable choices (e.g., Agamemnon’s choice to sacrifice Iphigenia). Unlike the public nature of the tragic hero’s choice, Abraham’s fear and trembling is not seen or spoken; it is hidden, and the nature of the choice is that it is not communicable.

Kierkegaard distinguishes Abraham from someone who is resigned to a fate and has “faith” that all will turn out fine (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 34–35). The resigned person would accept the loss of Isaac, but how that person could both accept giving him up and believe that God would provide is impossible to uncover. This problem stumps speculative thought. The person could resign himself infinitely, and we would still not grasp faith. Abraham believed not only that he should sacrifice Isaac but also that God would not require Isaac. He held two contradictory beliefs in the outcomes of mutually exclusive actions and did not waver or question the situation’s absurdity. Resignation can be grasped, perceived, and understood intellectually, but that is not enough. Kierkegaard argues that the next step is the baffling one, the one that can be seen from the outside but not grasped because it is hidden. Abraham renounces Isaac, which anyone could do (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 48–49).

Abraham stands apart because even though he completely accepted having to sacrifice Isaac, meanwhile he neither doubts nor wavers that he will get him back. Kierkegaard does not fully articulate Abraham’s faith, explaining it only as something that occurs by virtue of the absurd; the nature of faith cannot be fully illuminated in

language without removing the fear and trembling that make faith, faith (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 40–41). This final aspect of faith is completing the paradoxical movement of infinite resignation and of having faith. Hidden and internal with no external marker, faith is inherently subjective just as the anxiety that marked the tension in Abraham's action is only there for him; no observer can detect this fear and trembling.

To flesh out this idea of the subjectivity in faith, I want to supplement it with an idea from one of Kierkegaard's later works, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, in which he writes that, "faith is the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness, which is the relation of inwardness intensified to its highest. This formula fits only the one who has faith, no one else, not even a lover, or an enthusiast, or a thinker, but solely and only the one who has faith, who relates himself to the absolute paradox" (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 611). The claim that faith is an objective uncertainty highlights faith's subjective nature and that it cannot be understood externally. It is also not enough to have a subjective experience: it is crucial to *become* subjective, which is "the highest task assigned to every human being, a task that can indeed be sufficient for even the longest life, since it has the singular quality that is not ever until life is over" (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 159). It is not gained quickly or easily; rather, it comes with time and is the process of reinvesting ourselves in the movements of faith. Becoming subjective means accepting and embracing the uncertainty in faith, knowing that we cannot fully explain or articulate our ideas to another, and trying to fulfill a task that does not end until life ends.⁷

We are left with a literally paradoxical understanding of faith because in the act of making the claim that we cannot directly articulate what faith is, he has said quite a bit about faith's nature. Kierkegaard claims that we cannot make strong claims about faith or that we really cannot grasp it outside subjective experience. Similarly, Kierkegaard's model of God suggests what such a model could be. He rejects the idea that it can teach us because it is just a bastardized intellectual understanding of God. Yet following his own ideas, forming a model of God can make the idea of God meaningful subjectively, leaving the paradoxical conclusion that we can both reject it and find value in it.

I. b

The second facet of Kierkegaard's model is that God is love or more precisely God as love.⁸ The danger in the former is that the individual's experience of that love is turned into an abstract point that may or may not be true depending on how we

⁷ This is not to say that, by subjectivity and faith, he means that we are supposed to achieve an inward withdrawal to discover an Archimedean point of absolute certainty; rather, this faith requires action and engagement with the world. Mooney makes the point that this understanding of subjectivity is not Cartesian and also entails an ethical obligation for engagement to others (Mooney 2008a, b, pp. 39–47).

⁸ Walsh makes the point that we might consider God to be Love (Walsh 2009, p. 67).

logically parse the discussion. While a fine topic for philosophers and theologians, it misses the crucial existential aspect of the question, which is to consider its significance for the individual. To find this meaning, I turn to Kierkegaard's book *Works of Love*. There he provides a long analysis of love and claims that we should love our neighbor, with God as the middle term.

Addressing the idea from Paul of love's being the fulfillment of the law, Kierkegaard writes in *Works of Love* that "worldly wisdom is of the opinion that love is a relationship between persons; Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: a person—God—a person, that is, that God is the middle term" (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 106–107).⁹ To love our neighbor and that God is the middle term are both seemingly simplistic ideas. Human love without this middle term "has not been love but a mutually enchanting defraudation of love" (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 107), and in Christianity, God makes this purer love possible. To truly love another person, we need more than just the human version of love, and God as the middle term makes this possible.

The idea of having God as the middle term might suggest that we should not love others directly, a limitation on the requirement to love others, or that it removes the responsibility of responding to others. Instead, the most generous understanding is to read the argument as claiming that God as the middle term enriches our loving our neighbor. God infuses our love as something more than what we would have on our own. Through God's love, we can love in the fullest sense of the word, open ourselves to our neighbor, and love the neighbor as ourselves. Through this love, we can gain of unity of self.¹⁰ God as the middle term implies an equality in love, both that we are equal before God and that we are both required to love each other (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 60).

Loving our neighbor also gives a "fulfillment of the law." It means that God does something more than the merely possible. God does the impossible; God is doing something for us that we are unable to do for ourselves.¹¹ God doing the impossible allows us to reach the fulfillment of the law, which could mean many things (such as freedom). The strongest reading is that the individual becomes authentically free. The command to love our neighbor is the fulfillment of the law and requires the authentic choice to follow the law. To make this choice authentically warrants more than just the act of choosing or loving another through human means; rather, it requires God's love. God is the middle term and as such is necessary to have the

⁹ Italics removed.

¹⁰ Evans makes this point quite clearly when he writes, "both the self I must become and the divine command I must obey are specified in terms of biblical teachings about love. I am commanded to love my neighbor as myself, and it is only when I learn to love in this way that I can become the self I was created to be and truly want to be (though in my sinfulness it is also the self I am fleeing from). I can only love my neighbor as myself when I have a relation to God, who becomes the 'middle term' in every true love-relationship. Neighbor-love is not exhausted by it nor is it reducible to such natural human forms of love as erotic love and friendship. Rather, these merely human forms of love require neighbor-love if they are to become transformed and purified from selfishness" (Evans 2004, p. 112).

¹¹ See, Malantschuk (2003, pp. 203–225).

fulfillment of love.¹² God gives human relationships a depth to love that is not present for just humans. Kierkegaard is claiming that God is necessary for love to reach its highest satisfaction.¹³

I. c

Kierkegaard's later work, *The Sickness Unto Death*, takes up the idea from the book of Matthew "that for God everything is possible" (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 39).¹⁴ This claim for the nature of God as omnipotent is more than a traditional philosophical or theological claim. Placed in the same framework from which we saw the ideas of faith and love, that for God everything is possible assumes new import from individual's perspective. It changes the focus from an academic question to an existential reality, when "is God omnipotent?" becomes a statement about the existential reality of God. Claiming that God is omnipotent frames the question such that the import moves from the individual's experience to the realm of academic arguments. Instead, while God just may be omnipotent, the claim is that if for God all things are possible, then God becomes existentially vital. God gives the possibility of faith and love. More than just the idea of omnipotence, it suggests the presence of God in a way that becomes meaningful for the individual. Without this presence, there is no faith or love of our neighbor; they require God for whom all things are possible.

Love and faith requires that God do the impossible. Without God for whom all things are possible, there is no experience of faith and God as love, which cannot be achieved solely through human means. God doing the humanly impossible gives the chance to complete that which is impossible. It is the love that comes as a gift from God as the middle term. It is the faith that gives fear and trembling and marks the difference between having a sleepless night and having faith. Claiming that God is a being for whom all things are possible cannot be proved or established through argument; it has to be subjectively experienced. Claiming that this is true without argument or evidence seems inherently suspect, but no argument or evidence could be provided without emptying the terms of meaning. The absurdity of accepting these ideas highlights the difficulty of the claim and the paradoxical elements in Kierkegaard's arguments.

¹² "Each one individually, before he relates in love to the beloved, the friend, the loved ones, the contemporaries, must first relate to God and to God's requirement. As soon as one leaves out the God-relationship, the participants' merely human definition of what they want to understand by loving, what they want to require of each other, and their mutual judgment by virtue of that become the highest judgment" (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 112).

¹³ This does open the challenge as to whether this love exists or if Kierkegaard is making the assumption that God is required for it. If God doesn't exist, then it could be that humans have a desire to achieve some sort of personal unity yet are unable to because they are constitutionally incapable of doing it, and this is an unsolvable problem. Nevertheless, given that the paper contends with the nature of Kierkegaard's model of God, this is not a criticism that is within the scope of this paper to address.

¹⁴ For more analysis of this idea, see: Walsh (2009, pp. 74–76).

Part II

The three elements from [Part I](#) together assemble a Kierkegaardian model of God based on faith, love, and a being for whom all things are possible, each crucial elements in a model of God that is meaningful not in the abstract sense, but by them being lived existentially. Yet Kierkegaard would argue against articulating a model of God from his writings as antithetical to his work and leaves the reader in the same position as the man who mistook sleeplessness for real anxiety; as one who could read the claims, think that she grasped them, but instead lacks the ability to experience the overall meaning because the words are not sufficient. In [Part II](#), I first use his ideas to show that Kierkegaard would argue against the model of God. Second, I argue that paradoxically he might be in favor of crafting such a model, and then I will push him on the possibility of multiple models of God.

II. a

In a pair of quotations from *Fear and Trembling*, we can see the type of objections that Kierkegaard would raise.

The cause for which the hero strives is my cause, and when I consider it, I cry out to myself: *jam tua res agitur* [now your cause is at stake]. I think myself *into* the hero; I cannot think myself into Abraham; when I reach that eminence, I sink down, for what is offered me is a paradox. I by no means conclude that faith is something inferior but rather that it is the highest, also that it is dishonest of philosophy to give something else in its place and to disparage faith. Philosophy cannot and must not give faith, but it must understand itself and know what it offers and take nothing away, least of all trick men out of something by pretending that it is nothing (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 33).

And

Not only in the business world but also in the world of ideas, our age stages *ein wirklicher Ausverkauf* [a real sale]. Everything can be had at such a bargain price that it becomes a question whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid. Every speculative monitor who conscientiously signals the important trends in modern philosophy, every assistant professor, tutor, and student, every rural outsider and tenant incumbent in philosophy is unwilling to stop with doubting everything but goes further (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 5).

In the former, we see the objection against making ideas of faith and God too easy to understand. Creating a model of God takes the ideas that Kierkegaard has layered into different pseudonyms, excises them from their context, and objectifies them. In this text, I have done what Kierkegaard attacks philosophy for doing. In the latter quotation, faith loses its meaning because it is made into a commodity that can be purchased at bargain price, a process analogous to the idea of making a model of God. It reduces God to an aspect of intellectual discussion and turns the subjective experiences of faith, love, and God for whom all things are possible into objects. The danger in articulating a subjective experience into words to communicate it to others is that it strips the meaning from that experience.

We can imagine his critique going further, with him pointing out the absurdity in the idea that an individual could read papers on models of God and use this knowledge as a reason to challenge views of the divine and come to know greater truth. This sort of intellectual dilettantism is just hedging our bets, and we are just speculators in the realm of faith as we try to get something on the cheap. Reading a text or hearing a paper will not lead us to real faith that adds to the individual or real love that pushes us to love our neighbor in the richest possible way. Only when we are willing to commit everything we have, to infinitely resign, and then somehow get to faith, we come to a meaningful model of God.

II. b

Given what I have just argued, it seems clear that Kierkegaard would reject what I have done. Nevertheless, it seems possible that we could form a model of God acceptable to him. First, I argue that he would be amenable to a model that fits his notions of Christian faith. A second more difficult point would be to uncover if he would be amenable to one that suggests pluralism, or the possibility of multiple models of God. In the latter, if we take his ideas on faith seriously, he would seem to commit to the pluralistic view though it clearly does violence to his beliefs, with which it would seem impossible to reconcile. More damning to this view, if there was a pluralist approach, it would violate his Christian ideas used to construct the model of God. The final difficulty is that if his ideas about faith are predicated on a Christian view and if they in turn show that we might have to reject that perspective, then we have just made a *reductio* of the initial claim.

To address the first concern of producing a Christian model of God, it seems that if making this model allows individuals to deepen and widen their experiences—to take on a faith and belief in God that fits closer to Abraham than the sleepless man—then the idea of the model of God makes the process meaningful for the individual. While seemingly a banal point—that as academics we must always be careful not to drain the power of ideas by making them mere topics of discussion instead of lived—this common occurrence makes it a worthwhile rejoinder, especially considering that for any model of God to be significant, the individual must be able to make it significant for her. This is a strong Kierkegaardian reminder for us; that we are tasked with creating meaning, value, and purpose in our lives.

We can find support in the paradoxical nature of *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard decries our ability to gain a detailed understanding of faith from reading his book, yet paradoxically after reading it, we have a much more nuanced experience of faith. Similarly, this could happen for someone who reads this model of God. We might also conclude that the act of making an explicit commitment to a singular model of God forces us to commit to what it would mean for ourselves. Kierkegaard, by using familiar Socratic techniques, challenges us to come to terms with the idea for ourselves without relying on an expert to tell us what to think, and, in doing so, makes an idea meaningful for us. Thus, if the act of modeling God helps the individual gain faith, it would be hard to see how he would not, at least, grudgingly accept its value.

Second, would Kierkegaard be amenable to a model of God that suggests pluralism? Inherent within the idea of modeling God is that there might be more than one model, especially if adopting an existential perspective of an individual's lived experience. This question fundamentally differs from the idea that we have a singular model because it broaches the possibility that there is more than one that is correct or that the model of God doesn't lead to Christian beliefs. It is possible that other models that are not Christian are true or that different people with different subjective experiences of faith, love, and other values, could all be correct. While the danger is still there in turning this subjective experience into a moot academic point, there is also the paradoxical moment that this connection to other ideas and beliefs would give a greater experience of the divine. We must ask, is it possible under a Kierkegaardian framework to have these different elements?

Kierkegaard would have to reject this possibility given his commitments to Christianity, but paradoxically his ideas show that it could work. Given that the experience of God could come to us in many ways suggests at least the possibility of pluralism. We can imagine the acceptance of the idea based on his notion of choosing oneself with passion and energy¹⁵; that if God contacted us as revealed through non-Christian means, then many of Kierkegaard's ideas about how one should live would fit in this framework. To have a marketplace of ideas where we can exchange them and learn from one another gives us the opportunity to encounter not just a concept that we can "purchase" for ourselves, but one that we make into truth—an idea that gives us fear and trembling and not just mere sleeplessness. If we never examine our own ideas and search for a truth that is valuable to us, we never have the possibility of learning the truth.

A slightly different approach would be that even if we could be the type of person who could subjectively broaden our understanding of God through having these sorts of experiences, it might not mean that the pluralist approach is the right one. We could also have models of God and still be Christian because we could be the type of Christian who encounters other models of faith and, in doing so, deepens faith. Learning could strengthen our commitment to our beliefs, even if they are objectively uncertain in the way that Kierkegaardian faith is. Of course, while easier in theory than in practice, even given the difficulties, this possibility is still consistent with Kierkegaard's ideas.

For example, imagine that a Christian who meets all of Kierkegaard's criteria encounters a counterpart to this paper, reads, and *understands* an Islamic interpretation of Abraham. This reading gives more depth, meaning, and value than the one the person had; it also makes new claims about Abraham that weren't considered from the Christian perspective; yet the ideas add to the person's Christian faith. Thus, it would be reasonable to think that encountering different models could make an impact on an individual's faith, which gives us reason to argue for a pluralistic account.¹⁶

¹⁵ Kierkegaard (1987).

¹⁶ I recognize that this is an overly simplistic example, but it serves a point. The way that people encounter other religions and religious beliefs is a complex issue that is beyond the scope of this paper.

What happens instead when what is learned from this encounter is not just that we have a model of faith or that we have gained a more nuanced understanding of a story, but what is challenged is the core belief? It seems paradoxical to claim that we should have these sorts of encounters with other religions, and, yet at the same time, that we could discover the truth in a subjective experience.

Can we, in the project of modeling god, connect to other belief systems? If not, why? But if we truly believe and have the type of Abrahamic faith that Kierkegaard writes about, experience the love he describes, know that we have a God for whom all things are possible and these are parts of our subjective experience, then it seems that we would have to accept this pluralistic model. This challenge arises when we put the idea of faith on the individual. The rejection of nonexistential models of God forces the discussion to focus on the individual's subjective experience. But these claims quickly move the argument into a paradox. His ideas about subjective faith are predicated on a Christian view,¹⁷ and if they in turn show that we might have to reject that view because the model could lead us away from Christianity, then it seems impossible that we could have the ideas to begin with. Worse, it would seem that this is a *reductio* of Kierkegaard's ideas. Perhaps it is a *reductio* and an objective refutation of these ideas. Or, in what I see as the most charitable reading, this could be a paradoxical challenge to decide for ourselves if this subjective truth could be meaningful for us.

Part III

In conclusion we can see that the idea of the model of God suggested by Kierkegaard gives an emphatic call to become subjective. The individual has the chance to gain faith and love one's neighbor with the knowledge that for God all things are possible. But in the act of suggesting such a model, I run the danger of turning the challenge to become subjective into a sentence read in a paper but not grasped, which violates a key point of the model in the first place, one that Kierkegaard would use against the creation of such a model. He would also argue against a rejection of Christianity or being pluralist in our religious views. While Kierkegaard would be against this idea, there is also significant value in such a model. Emphasizing subjectivity broadens the idea of what it means to have a relationship with God to religions beyond Christianity. If we accept that the truth is what builds up the individual, then we would be naïve to limit it to Christianity. The truth could be found anywhere, and the individual has to have the freedom to experience it, whatever its form. Here we can critique Kierkegaard for giving too narrow a set of views and accepting Christianity. It also might be the point where his own arguments for being subjective undermine themselves, but showing that would require us to reject the idea of subjective truth that provided them

¹⁷ Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* does not leave us much room to make claims about the possibilities of differing models of God as he explicitly limits the highest form of religious understanding (faith, love) to Christians. This is the difference between Religious A and B discussed in the final sections of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

in the first place. In the end, we have perhaps the most Kierkegaardian result. We can say a great deal about his model of god, yet paradoxically we cannot definitively say what his model of God is. Thus, we are left with the existential challenge to make whatever answer we arrive one that is subjectively meaningful for us.

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Transcending the World: Wittgenstein, God, and the Unsayable

Mario von der Ruhr

Introduction

“I know nothing of religion,” Wittgenstein once told his friend Heinrich Groag, “but there is surely something right in the concept of a God and of an after-life – only something quite different from what we are capable of imagining.”¹ The comment dates back to the period 1916–1917, when Wittgenstein was attending a Reserve Officers’ School in the Czech town of Olmütz, and it reveals an attitude towards belief in God and immortality that is just as much grounded in personal experience as it is informed by prolonged and serious *philosophical* reflections about the nature of religious belief. Indeed, for Wittgenstein, the two vantage-points or perspectives are closely connected, not because the meaning and practical import of personal convictions about religious matters invariably depend on the deliverances of impartial philosophical analysis, but because the desire for clarity and the fear of falling into (intellectual and/or spiritual) confusion inevitably demand openness to critical inquiry. How far such inquiry, including the request for rational explanation and justification, should be carried, is a matter of controversy – in the philosophy of religion, for example, irreconcilable methodological disagreements about how to approach the so-called ‘problem of evil’, are a case in point – and will depend in large measure on the interlocutors’ respective conceptions of philosophy’s *telos*, scope, and method. In this connection, Wittgenstein frequently reminds his readers that, as with all endeavors to plumb the foundations of such phenomena as human knowledge, the nature of meaning and thought, or the objectivity of aesthetic, moral, and religious judgments, “justification comes to an end”,² not because of the adage ‘*ars longa, vita brevis*’, but

¹ McGuinness (1988, pp. 255–256).

² Wittgenstein (1979, §192).

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because the temptation to ask too many questions about these phenomena can so easily lead to metaphysical confusion and pseudo-understanding.

Hence Wittgenstein's insistence that there comes a point where "we must do away with all *explanation*, and description must take its place",³ lest abstract theorizing get in the way of appreciating the complex ways in which distinctly human significances are bound up with very concrete and *particular* forms of life and their respective modes of discourse. To be sure, Wittgenstein's emphasis on 'description' raises difficulties of its own – e.g. How does it differ from the kinds of description provided by anthropologists or sociologists? What criteria determine whether a philosophically sensitive 'description' of a given practice or belief is accurate? If the said criteria are culture-specific, do they not engender the kind of relativism that obviates the distinction between subjective opinion and objective truth? – and I have addressed some of these elsewhere,⁴ but his more general point about the limits of (rational) explanation is clearly of independent interest, not least to professional philosophers.

Among other things, it implies that (a) the philosopher who transcends these limits is no longer speaking *qua* philosopher, i.e. as someone whose proper métier is to provide disinterested conceptual clarification to the perplexed, but merely *autobiographically*, as *this* individual with *these* particular (religious, ethical, aesthetic, etc.) beliefs and convictions; (b) philosophers must be careful not to (unwittingly) confuse their personal views on a given subject matter with the deliverances of 'pure reason' or the conclusions of philosophical analysis *tout court*, since this would turn philosophy into a rhetorical handmaiden of the ego's intellectual predilections; and (c) in reviewing a philosopher's *Weltanschauung*, including her attitude towards the transcendent, it is easy to overlook the difference between pronouncements that could legitimately be regarded as a contribution to philosophy, and articulations of a personal *credo* in the face of which philosophy can only remain silent.

That Wittgenstein himself was well aware of this difference comes out, not only in the contexts within which his remarks about religion are set – there are *lectures* on general issues relating to religious belief, on the one hand, and private confessions in notebooks and *diaries*, on the other – but in the recognition that his skeptical rejection of particular religious beliefs or articles of faith may be due, not so much to the demands of sober philosophical inquiry, but to deficiencies in his own understanding. In so far as Wittgenstein believed – and hoped – that at least some of these shortcomings might be remedied over time, his scattered remarks on religion also reflect mere stages in the evolution of his thinking about the subject. Indeed, he would have thought it plain *hubris* to assume that the results of his investigations were inimical to refinement, development, or change.⁵

Now, what is most striking about Wittgenstein's engagement with religious subject matter is that, apart from his 1938 *Lectures on Religion*, several paragraphs in *Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus* (1921), and various remarks in *Culture and Value* – an anthology of comments covering the period 1914 to 1951 – his observations are not easily subsumable under the category of "philosophical inquiry". As the late Gareth Moore rightly observed:

³ Wittgenstein (1999, §109).

⁴ Von der Ruhr (2007, pp. 55–75).

⁵ Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 201).

Very many of the remarks of Wittgenstein which are held to constitute his contribution to the philosophy of religion have in reality little to do with the philosophy of religion; they are rather expressions of a particular religious sensibility, or expressions of a religious point of view.⁶

Thus, when Wittgenstein notes in his 1937 diaries: “Like the insect around the light, so I buzz around the New Testament”,⁷ or “I don’t have a belief in a salvation through the death of Christ”,⁸ he is recording the (provisional) results of a comprehensive spiritual self-assessment or *credo*, rather than philosophical theses about the conceptual tapestry or ‘grammar’ of religious belief. This does not mean that Wittgenstein’s readers cannot learn anything from his elaborations on these confessions, or that they may not philosophize about the questions these raise, for example, about the nature of religious testimony, divine incarnation, personal salvation, and the like. What they do need to remember, however, is that they are not being presented with fragments of a philosophical ‘position’ on the subject of religious belief. In fact, even a cursory survey of Wittgenstein’s œuvre reveals, not only that he *has no* philosophical account of religion, but that he expresses no interest in producing one. It seems to me that his reluctance to do so is partly motivated by a deep-seated aversion to generalization – as his exploration of the relation between language and world (in *Philosophical Investigations*) had shown him, there was no such thing as the *essence* of a concept, hence nothing that could legitimately be identified as *the grammar* of religious faith, either – and partly by his contention that, when it came to one’s personal attitude towards ultimate reality or, more specifically, belief in such things as the Incarnation, the Last Judgment, or immortality, one could only speak for oneself or remain silent. Indeed, Wittgenstein was well aware that, in certain contexts, silence may be the only form a personal confession *can* take: “The only thing *I* could do is make a gesture which means something similar to ‘unsayable,’ & say nothing.”⁹ Most of his predecessors, including Plato and Kant, would no doubt consider such reticence intellectually indefensible and accuse him of shirking his responsibilities *qua* philosopher. After all, if Kant could write a whole book about *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, why does Wittgenstein leave us hanging in the air with a few exasperating hints or fragments, especially on such an important topic as religious belief?

But the complaint is surely misguided, not merely because Wittgenstein’s (linguistic) approach to philosophical inquiry is quite radically at odds with Kant’s aspiration towards an architectonic theory or explanatory system, but because it falsely assumes that a philosopher who declines to comment on some of the more ineffable – or *unsayable* – dimensions of human existence must *ipso facto* be failing in his duties as a critical thinker. On the contrary, Wittgenstein’s fear of lapsing into fashionable yet idle chatter about the meaning of life and his respect for the *sui generis* character of moral and other kinds of value could equally be seen as Socratic humility in the face of personal limitation. In this regard, even the late Wittgenstein

⁶ Moore (2005, p. 220).

⁷ Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 177).

⁸ Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 201).

⁹ Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 180). My translation.

remained true to his earlier exhortation (in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) that “what we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence”.¹⁰

In what follows, I shall revisit Wittgenstein’s remark to Groag with which I began, and try to throw further light on its meaning by briefly reviewing various moments in the development of Wittgenstein’s conception of the transcendent, from the time of his early *Notebooks* and the *Tractatus* to some of his last remarks on God in *Culture & Value*. Hopefully, this will also clarify Wittgenstein’s relation to traditional Christianity, on the one hand, and to atheism or secular humanism, on the other.

Ethics and Transcendence

When, in the spring of 1930, Wittgenstein subjected his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to retrospective evaluation, he found that, “aside from the good & genuine”, the book “also contains kitsch, that is, passages with which I filled in the gaps so-to-speak”, though he does not provide any examples and merely notes that “it is difficult to fairly evaluate now” just how much of the *Tractatus* does amount to kitsch.¹¹ Irrespective of whether this critical self-assessment is justified – the *Philosophical Investigations*’ explicit correction of the “grave mistakes”¹² contained in the *Tractatus*’ treatment of such topics as the logical analysis of a proposition, the relation between a word and its meaning, the notion of complexity, or the structural isomorphism between language and thought, certainly confirms this appraisal – it can be safely assumed that Wittgenstein would *not* have regarded as kitsch any of the following claims:

4.113	Philosophy sets limits to the much disputed sphere of natural science.
6.41	The sense of the world must lie outside the world.
6.421	Ethics is transcendental.
6.432	God does not reveal himself <i>in</i> the world.
6.4312	The solution of the riddle of life ... lies <i>outside</i> space and time.
6.52	We feel that even when <i>all possible</i> scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched.
6.522	There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words.... They are what is mystical. ¹³

¹⁰ Wittgenstein (1974, §7).

¹¹ The entry is dated 16 May 1930: “Aside from the good & genuine, my book the Tractatus Log.- Phil. also contains kitsch, that is, passages with which I filled in the gaps and so-to-speak in my own style. How much of the book consists of such passages I don’t know & it is difficult to fairly evaluate now.” Reprinted in Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 39).

¹² Wittgenstein (1999, p. ix).

¹³ Wittgenstein (1974).

The philosophical intent behind these remarks is multi-layered. (a) On the one hand, they are designed to shake the naive expectation – evident in certain kinds of popular science writing – that “the problems of life”, including questions about ethical orientation or religious belief, could possibly be resolved through the kind of inquiry whose natural investigative domain is that of *facts* or *states of affairs*. The point bears on the scientist’s self-understanding, too: for all his undeniable contributions to the stock of human knowledge, and thus to the furtherance of *one* important mode of understanding, he is no more qualified, *qua* scientist, to issue a verdict on the meaning of life than he is in a position to tell his interlocutors what stance they ought to adopt with regard to religious belief. If he does happen to speak with any depth about life, death, and the transcendent, then this will not be due to his powers of inductive or deductive reasoning, the methodology informing his particular discipline, or anything “one” might be able to infer from a series of empirical data. More likely, it will be because of the distinctive way in which his reflective engagement with life finds expression in what he says. But since there are no necessary or sufficient conditions of what it means to speak deeply (as opposed to shallowly) about life, it would be misguided to ask for an account of what that “distinctive way” consisted in.

(b) It is precisely because talk of value transcends the familiar categories of space, time, and the network of cause/effect relations, that it can successfully elude positivist or other kinds of reduction. For this reason, Wittgenstein would *not* describe as ‘higher’ a conception of moral value whose ultimate credentials lay exclusively in (physiological, psychological, or other) *facts* about human beings. In his view, only a properly transcendent notion of ethics will accurately reflect the complexity of our moral phenomenology, including the objectivity of moral value, the sense of unconditional obligation and commitment, the meaning of moral transgression, and the experience of remorse. Given the *Tractatus*’ self-imposed boundaries of meaning and intelligible discourse – only that which expresses at least a possible state of affairs or fact can, strictly speaking, be *said* – the finer contours of Wittgenstein’s conception of the ethical are necessarily left undrawn. However, his emphasis on its transcendent dimension and his reference to the equally transcendent nature of a God who “does not reveal himself *in the world*”, already gesture towards a view in which a certain conception of the *absolute*, viz. as an unchanging reality that is both independent of, and irreducible to, subjective human attitude – figures as an essential ingredient. Wittgenstein is loath to say too much here, but his remarks in the *Tractatus* and the general tenor of his 1929 *Lecture on Ethics* – among other things, he notes there that “What is Good is Divine too. That, strangely enough, sums up my ethics.”¹⁴ – strongly suggest that his conception of the ethical is much closer in spirit to Kant’s notion of duty than it is to a utilitarian or consequentialist construal of moral value.

This does not make Wittgenstein a Neo-Kantian deontologist, of course – in fact, he would have rejected Kant’s rationalist foundation of morality just as vigorously as Kant would have objected to Wittgenstein’s mysticism – but it does reveal a close

¹⁴ Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 41).

affinity with Kant's contention that a *Weltanschauung* whose parameters are set by a staunchly empiricist approach to human experience is likely to engender, not just a distortive or implausible account of moral value, but a hasty dismissal of religious sentiment and belief in the transcendent as wishful thinking or intellectual aberration. Conversely, only a philosophical perspective that, like the *Tractatus*, "sets limits to the ... sphere of natural science" can leave any room for the mystical and, by implication, the more ephemeral dimensions of morality and religion.

(c) Thus, Wittgenstein's refusal to join the chorus of those who regard religious belief as unintelligible, confused, or delusional, is not simply motivated by personal predilection or temperament, but by a particular philosophical account of meaning. Though he subsequently came to abandon the picture-theory of meaning presented in the *Tractatus* – where the structure of language was rigidly determined by the order of the world – as implausible and insufficiently attentive to the complexities of concept formation and linguistic practice, he nevertheless continued to hold that (i) belief in a transcendent reality was no more irrational or confused than the practice of moral judgment, and that (ii) there was no Archimedean vantage-point from which either of these phenomena could be given a reductive – e.g. a purely emotive – analysis.

God and Transcendence

It is tempting to think that, in so far as the *Tractatus* locates ethics and God in the same conceptual terrain – both are transcendent and equally representative of the absolute – it is laying the foundation for the kind of "moral argument" for God's existence suggested, for example, by Kant in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason*, according to which

there exists meanwhile a practical knowledge ... which we need but name to find ourselves at once in agreement with everyone else regarding its authority, and which carries with it in everyone's consciousness *unconditioned* binding force, to wit, the law of morality. What is more, this knowledge leads ... to belief in God.¹⁵

However, the subsequent development of Wittgenstein's thought about religious belief, to which I shall turn next, leaves no doubt that this interpretive temptation should be resisted. The point of *Tractatus* 6.421 ("Ethics is transcendental") and 6.432 ("God does not reveal himself *in the world*") is not to demonstrate, however obliquely, that there is a god, but simply to clarify something about the *kinds* of belief that are being expressed in moral judgments and religious assertions, respectively. In Wittgenstein's view, many of the standard objections to religious belief, including the charge of irrationality and the claim that it lacks convincing proof or proper evidential support, are rooted in a failure to distinguish between different types of discourse or 'grammar' and, closely connected with this, an overly simplistic conception of meaning. The *Tractatus* makes a point of preserving that

¹⁵ Kant (1960, pp. 169–170).

distinction by, amongst other things, highlighting the contrast between the other-worldly category of value and its worldly counterpart, the *proposition*. This is, of course, not to deny that the former may not overlap or intersect, even considerably, with the latter. Indeed, if the language of faith and the vocabulary of ordinary and everyday life constituted self-contained and mutually exclusive spheres of discourse, it would be hard to see why religion, for example, should make any difference to the religious believer's life at all. What one observes is, of course, the opposite: a believer who affirms that "God sees everything", or that "God will punish the wicked", is not merely referring to the attributes of a transcendent being, viz. omniscience and omnipotence, but acknowledging that all human thought and action necessarily falls under a certain kind of judgment, hence that his belief in the transcendent has genuine and pervasive significance for practical life.

At the same time, our believer knows that it would be just as absurd to construe God's "seeing" by analogy with a CCTV camera observing his every move, as it would be to insist that, since God is omniscient, He must also know his social security number. For what would be the religious significance of *that* affirmation? Clearly, a very special context would be required for such an utterance to carry any spiritual resonance, let alone guide the speaker's actions. What this shows is that the grammar of divine omniscience and omnipotence, while conceptually related to that of human perception and knowledge, is also importantly different. Again, it is to these *differences* that Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is drawing our attention.

The question, "What does it mean to believe in God?" had already occupied Wittgenstein's thinking well before the publication of the *Tractatus*. In his 1914–1918 *Notebooks*, for example, he connects its answer with seeing, not only that life has meaning, but that "conscience is the voice of God", that "the facts of the world are not the end of the matter", and that "we are in a certain sense dependent".¹⁶ Somewhat surprisingly, he goes on to describe this dependence rather broadly, in terms of a general subjection to an "alien will" or power, concluding that "in this sense God would simply be fate, or, what is the same thing: the world – which is independent of our will".¹⁷ On a cursory reading, the remark evokes a sense of transcendence that would appear to most religious believers to be seriously underdescribed, one that advocates of *Vienna Circle* positivism, for example, would have endorsed just as readily as atheists like Bertrand Russell or Albert Camus. Who, after all, would deny that natural and other kinds of contingency "transcend" an individual's will by lying outside its control? But, so the believer might object, such transcendence surely fails to do justice to the idea of God's *independence from the world* and has, in fact, a great deal more in common with pantheism than it does with a theistic understanding of life. Thus, Wittgenstein's idea of a transcendent God appears to be at best a variation on Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*, at worst the analogue of a pagan attitude concealed behind the façade of religious language.

Similar difficulties arise for the claim that "conscience is the voice of God". For if "God" were merely elliptical for "whatever is independent of a particular human

¹⁶ Wittgenstein (1961, p. 74).

¹⁷ Wittgenstein (1961, p. 74).

will or desire”, then the resulting notion of conscience would be seriously impoverished since, in that case, *any* morality grounded in cultural consensus or tradition would *ipso facto* qualify as ‘divine’. The difficulty has been forcefully articulated in Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*, where the latter eventually decides to run away with a slave called Jim: as a direct consequence of this decision, Huck suffers pangs of *conscience*, not least because of his realization that it is a crime to make off with other people’s property. Mark Twain’s point here is that, if Huck nevertheless gives in to his sympathetic feelings for Jim and refuses to return him to his rightful owner, this is not because he has experienced a moral *aggiornamento* and come to see that what his conscience had previously told him was wrong; it is rather because he has, by his own admission, displayed a serious weakness of will.¹⁸ The same issue rears its head in Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks*, for if the meaning of “God” was identical with that of “the world”, then an individual’s conscience, too, would be little more than “the voice of the world”. In Huck Finn’s case, deafness to that voice prompts our applause; for a devout believer, by contrast, deafness to the word of God can only elicit pity.

Now, all these observations are important and worth reiterating, but the objection to Wittgenstein still seems to me too quick. This is not only because the latter’s well-known lamentations about the decline of Western culture – e.g. in *Culture and Value* – depend for their force on a standard of assessment that must inevitably *transcend* the ideas and attitudes that are prevalent in that culture. There is, in addition, the whole tenor of Wittgenstein’s subsequent remarks on the topic. Consider, for example, the following series of comments, recorded over a period of 16 years (1930–1946):

I would like to say ‘This book is written to the glory of God’, but nowadays that would be chicanery, that is, it would not be rightly understood.¹⁹

You can’t call Christ the savior without calling him God. For a human being cannot save you.²⁰

God let me be pious but not eccentric!²¹

Believe that at any moment God can demand everything from you! Be truly aware of this! Then ask that he grant you the gift of life!²²

To God alone be praise!²³

May God help me, & may I be able to come to Swansea at Christmas as usual.²⁴

Wittgenstein would surely have rejected as misguided the suggestion that the occurrences of “God” in these remarks could, without any loss of meaning, have

¹⁸ Bennett (1974, pp. 123–134).

¹⁹ Wittgenstein (1990, p. 7).

²⁰ Letter dated 21 November 1936, in Wittgenstein (2004).

²¹ Letter dated 31 January 1937, Wittgenstein (2004).

²² Letter dated 16 February 1937, in Wittgenstein (2004).

²³ Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 243).

²⁴ Letter dated 15 October 1946, in Wittgenstein (2004).

been replaced by “the world”. If anything, he would have thought such substitution a *reductio* of the very intentions that informed them. His *Philosophical Remarks* were *not* written for the glory of the world, any more than the world could be asked to grant gifts, implored for spiritual sustenance, or praised – except, perhaps, in the rather banal sense in which “Praise the Lord !” might be uttered by, say, a religiously insensitive beer drinker who has just been handed another free pint of his favorite lager.

Furthermore, it would be highly unconvincing to suggest that, whenever Wittgenstein closed his personal correspondence – the *Gesamtbrieftwechsel* contains numerous examples – with the words “God bless you !”, he was doing so merely out of deference to his recipients’ religious sensibilities and would otherwise have thought a phrase like “Good luck, mate !” to be just as adequate. This does not mean that there may not be contexts where the expression “Thank God!” *would be* equivalent in meaning to exclamations like “Great !” or “What a relief!”, but only that there *are* contexts where it is not. To take a different example, in some situations the phrase “I love you!” may be shorthand for “Thanks a lot !” or “Well done!” – e.g. a plumber has managed to fix a serious problem with the washing machine – but then there are just as many contexts in which the assertion simply means what it says, viz. a sincere declaration of love.

Independently of these considerations, it is also worth noting that Wittgenstein showed himself to be well aware of the conceptual connections between the ideas of God as *creator* and God as *sustainer* of creation. Struck by the fact that many religious believers seem to emphasize the former at the expense of the latter, Wittgenstein records in his diary on February 24, 1937:

It is strange that one says God created the world & not: God is creating, continually, the world. For why should it be a greater miracle that it began to be, rather than that it continued to be.²⁵

The continuity of God’s creative act is easily lost sight of, especially if one is misled by a false analogy:

One is led astray by the simile of the craftsman. That someone makes a shoe is an accomplishment, but once made (out of what is existing) it endures on its own for a while. But if one thinks of God as creator, must the conservation of the universe not be a miracle just as great as its creation, – yes, aren’t the two one and the same?²⁶

On this account, the relation between God and the world is considerably more intimate than that between an artisan and his artifacts. Whereas God continues to be creatively *immanent* in his creation, in the sense of sustaining it in existence, the artisan’s condition is always one of detachment, both from the raw materials of his creations and from the finished product. Echoing the Biblical insight that “in Him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28), Wittgenstein’s observation about God’s *immanence* in the world not only adds another dimension to the sense of dependency already recorded in the *Notebooks*, but lays the foundation for the

²⁵ Diary entry dated 24 February 1937. See Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 215).

²⁶ Diary entry dated 24 February 1937. See Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 215).

kind of meditation on which a theologian like Thomas Aquinas was engaging as he wrote:

Thus the Holy Spirit, in so far as He is the source of all motion, *is life*. “With Thee is the fountain of life” (Ps. 35:10). And because He *is* life, He therefore *gives* life. Great then is the Holy Spirit in all things that are, and move, and live. “In him, we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). All things therefore have motion and being from the Holy Spirit.²⁷

Life’s Tribulations and Belief in God

It should be clear from the above mosaic of Wittgenstein’s reflections on the transcendent that, for him, belief in God is not the product of Sherlock Holmesian deduction, philosophical argument, probabilistic calculation, or the kind of *a posteriori* confirmation that would support a scientist’s hypothesis about the existence of some object, event, or process. Recollecting his own religious education at the hands of a Catholic priest in Vienna, Wittgenstein says in his 1938 *Lecture on Religion*: ‘If I even vaguely remember what I was taught about God, I might say: ‘Whatever believing in God may be, it can’t be believing in something we can test, or find means of testing’’.²⁸ The point is reiterated in 1950, a year before Wittgenstein’s death, together with a pertinent reminder of our tendency to justify and defend our deepest convictions through retrospective rationalization:

A proof of God ought really to be something by means of which you can convince yourself of God’s existence. But I think that believers who offered such proofs wanted to analyze & make a case for their ‘belief’ with their intellect, although they themselves would never have arrived at belief by way of such proofs. ‘Convincing someone of God’s existence’ is something you might do by means of a certain upbringing, shaping his life in such & such a way.²⁹

Those who come to believe in God, in other words, don’t do so for a *reason*. It does not follow from this that their changed perspective and the new linguistic register in which it is most naturally expressed are *irrational*, but rather that the altered *Weltbild* is connected with experiences that elude the standard dichotomy between the rational and the irrational. Wittgenstein puts the point by saying that there is a sense in which the concept of a transcendent or ultimate reality may force itself on us by *life* itself:

Life can educate you to ‘believing in God’. And experiences too are what do this but not visions, or other sense experiences, which show us the “existence of this being”, but e.g. sufferings of various sorts. And they do not show us God as a sense experience does an object, nor do they give rise to conjectures about him. Experiences, thoughts, – *life* can force this concept on us.³⁰

Unfortunately, this remark from *Culture and Value* is not elucidated by concrete examples of the kinds of experiences and thoughts that may be instrumental in leading

²⁷ Aquinas (2010).

²⁸ Wittgenstein (1966, p. 60).

²⁹ Wittgenstein (1980, p. 85).

³⁰ Wittgenstein (1980, p. 85).

one to a theistic understanding of life, but Wittgenstein's 1937 and 1941 diaries contain a number of supplementary reflections. In one, which is dated 15 February 1937, he asks himself: "Do I find it right that a person suffers an entire life for the cause of justice, then dies perhaps a terrible death, – & now has no reward at all for this life?", and goes on to wonder whether the righteous man's awful death does not retrospectively render his self-sacrificial actions worthless or "stupid".³¹ Would a religious believer not refuse to draw that conclusion? Indeed, would he not point to the promise of eternal life as a final vindication of the just man's wretched life? Wittgenstein, rightly suspicious of the tendency to conflate divine *assurance* with divine *insurance*,³² and to justify the sufferings in this world by reference to compensations in the next, replies:

But consider now that I answer: 'No he was not stupid since he is doing well now after his death.' That is also not satisfying. Of such a person I want to say '*This human being must come home.*' Mustn't he receive the 'crown of life'? Don't I demand nothing but this for him? Don't I demand his glorification?! Yes! But how can I imagine his glorification? In accord with my feelings I could say: not only must he see the light, but get immediately to the light, become of one nature with it now, – and the like.³³

Thus, the contemplation of injustice goes hand in hand with a demand for rectification or restitution, even when it transpires that the latter will not be forthcoming in this life. "It therefore seems", so Wittgenstein goes on, "that I could use all those expressions which religion really uses here. These images thus impose themselves upon me."³⁴ On the other hand, he must confess that this does not (yet) resolve matters, since it is still unclear what, exactly, those religious images represent: "I am reluctant to use these images & expressions. Above all these are not similes, of course."³⁵ The difficulty, in other words, is to give a sense to the just man's "homecoming" or "glorification" that is *neither* reducible to human applause or moral approbation, *nor* yet equivalent to what the late D. Z. Phillips has aptly censured as a "transcendentalised version of 'see you later'", according to which death is but a gateway to an endless temporal continuity from whose perspective all earthly sufferings, however great, will seem insignificant.³⁶ The question, therefore, is whether there is an understanding of immortality that preserves the significance of death and, at the same time, "elevates" or "raises" the selfless defenders of justice in more than a merely symbolic sense. It seems that, for many believers, that sense is given in an eternal life construed as a temporal progression *post mortem*; for Wittgenstein, it has yet to reveal itself:

Suppose someone said: 'What do you believe, Wittgenstein? Are you a sceptic? Do you know whether you will survive death?' I would really, this is a fact, say 'I can't say. I don't know', because I haven't any clear idea what I'm saying when I'm saying 'I don't cease to exist', etc.³⁷

³¹ Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 177).

³² I am indebted to the late Dewi Phillips for putting the point this way.

³³ Klagge and Nordmann (2003, pp. 178–179).

³⁴ Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 181).

³⁵ Klagge and Nordmann (2003, p. 181).

³⁶ Phillips (1996, p. 247).

³⁷ Wittgenstein (1966, p. 70).

Another – and rather more personal – example of the way in which certain experiences may prompt a religious response to life is the death of Wittgenstein's friend Francis Skinner (1911–1941). The two first met in 1932, when Francis was a mathematics undergraduate at Trinity College in Cambridge, and soon became close friends; so close, in fact, that Wittgenstein ended up moving into Francis' apartment in the late 1930s, and living with him there for well over a year.³⁸ Unfortunately, the intimacy of their relationship did not last, though they continued to keep in touch through correspondence. Francis' tragically early death in October 1941 – he had been suffering from poliomyelitis and was only 30 years old – affected Wittgenstein deeply. Among other things, it prompted him to re-assess his attitude and demeanor towards his friend during the previous 2 years. As he noted in his diary a few months later, in December 1941:

Think a lot about Francis, but always only with remorse over my lovelessness; not with gratitude. His life and death seem only to accuse me, for I was in the last 2 years of his life very often loveless and, in my heart, unfaithful to him.³⁹

What troubled Wittgenstein was not merely the fact that, through his detachment, he had failed Francis as a friend, or that he could not see how he could ever think of him without a sense of self-reproach. It was also the discrepancy between what Francis *deserved* and what even the latter's closest friends were either willing or able to give him. The issue was still on Wittgenstein's mind 5 years later, in 1946, when he returned to it in his diaries:

Ask yourself this question: When you die, who will grieve over you; and how deep will the grief go? Who is grieving over Francis; how deeply am *I* mourning for him, who have more reason to be in mourning than anyone else? Does he *not* deserve someone who will grieve over him for the rest of his life? If anyone deserves it, then he does. Here, one would like to say: God will raise him up and *give* him what a bad man is denying him.⁴⁰

The quotation is illuminating, not merely for what it reveals about the moral integrity of its author, but for the more general questions it raises about our relation to the dead: What are they owed? Who, if anyone, is giving them their due? Wittgenstein's response to the latter is sober, not to say disheartening, and strongly reminiscent of Simone Weil's analogous comment on the fragility of human love:

Human love is not unconditional.... I can become much dearer to the vultures than to any human being, and any human being, even the most beloved, can become much dearer to the vultures than to me.⁴¹

But now, what is one to conclude from all this? That, in so far as human beings are necessarily imperfect and incapable of perfect justice or unconditional love, there *must* be a God who 'glorifies' the virtuous and remembers the dead when no human being does? The inference, as Wittgenstein is well aware, would be both a

³⁸ Monk (1990, p. 402).

³⁹ Quoted in Monk (1990, p. 428).

⁴⁰ From Manuscript 133, p. 32. See Wittgenstein (2000). My translation.

⁴¹ Weil (1970, p. 323).

non sequitur and an exercise in self-deception, viz. the postulation of a transcendent being, prompted by the longing for a metaphysical guarantee of ultimate justice and personal immortality. This is why his reflections on the requirements of friendship, love, and justice, no less than his more general comments on belief in God, are more plausibly read as attempts to gain clarity, not only about the (general) nature of religious belief and the meaning of another person's life, but about his own, personal relation to the Transcendent.

Wittgenstein, God, and Christian Orthodoxy

At this point, one would like to ask, “What, then, *did* Wittgenstein believe in regard to God or the Transcendent?” And while the question is not entirely misguided – he did, after all, raise it himself – the answer is likely to disappoint anyone who is hoping for easy categorization or the convenience of a label like “theist”, “anonymous Christian”, “lapsed Catholic”, “enlightened pagan”, “qualified heretic”, or the like. Indeed, Wittgenstein himself would have insisted that his spiritual orientation *shows* itself in his writings, whether they be philosophical or autobiographical. What *more* is there to be said, especially about one who is still *en route*, both intellectually and spiritually? Why, indeed, should Wittgenstein’s attitude towards the ineffable require the *imprimatur* of a particular – *ism*, if it is to make a serious contribution to discourse about religious belief? One of the lessons to be learnt from the *Tractatus* is precisely that “there are … things that cannot be put into words”, that “*make themselves manifest*” (6.522), including beauty, goodness, and the existence of God. All that *can* be said about Wittgenstein’s conception of God or ultimate reality is that, in so far as it contains substantial resonances of Aquinas’ doctrines of divine simplicity and creativity – God is not in space or time, not an object among objects, does not change, creates and sustains all that exists, etc. – it also reflects *one* important feature of orthodox Christianity.

On the other hand, Wittgenstein also confesses that he does *not* believe in the Incarnation or in Jesus’ resurrection – though he admits to having once “played” with the thought, in so far as it made him aware of what the denial of Christ’s reality would mean for the state of his own (lost) soul and his need for salvation⁴² – any more than he believes in the Second Coming or, as we saw earlier, an endless personal existence *post mortem*. Thus, he writes:

I cannot utter the word ‘Lord’ meaningfully. Because I do not believe that he will come to judge me; because that says nothing to me. And it could only say something to me if I were to live quite differently.⁴³

⁴² “What inclines even me to believe in Christ’s resurrection? I play as it were with the thought. – If he did not rise from the dead, then he decomposed in the grave like every human being. He is dead & decomposed. In that case he is a teacher, like any other & can no longer help; & we are once more orphaned & alone.” See entry for 12 December 1937 in Wittgenstein (1980, p. 38).

⁴³ Diary entry of 12 December 1937. Wittgenstein (1980, p. 38).

The confession is part of a more elaborate personal *credo* and represents the culmination of a long period of intense reflection and spiritual self-assessment. Wittgenstein made it in 1937, the same year in which he inserted in his diary a paragraph appropriately headed, “What I believe *now*”:

I believe that I should not lie; that I should be good to people; that I should see myself as I really am; that I should sacrifice my comfort when something higher is at stake, that I should be cheerful in a good way when it is granted to me and when not, that I should then endure the gloom with patience & steadfastness.⁴⁴

However, the firm conviction that *this* was what was demanded of him did not come with the comforts or consolations afforded by traditional Christianity:

I don't have a belief in a salvation through the death of Christ; or at least not yet. I also don't feel that I am on the way to such a belief, but I consider it possible that one day I will understand something here of which I understand nothing now, which means nothing to me now & that I will then have a belief that I don't have now.... In my soul there is winter (now) like all around me. Everything is snowed in, nothing turns green & blossoms. But I should therefore patiently await whether I am destined to see a spring.⁴⁵

There is no indication in Wittgenstein's later writings that he ever did come to a belief in a salvation through Christ, but the “spring” for which his soul was hoping back in February 1937, was not long in coming: on 11 April 1937, he expressed his gratitude for it by writing in his diary: “To God alone be praise!”⁴⁶ To those who have come to appreciate the depth of Wittgenstein's religious sensibility more generally, it will not come as a surprise to learn that he wrote this sentence in code.

Concluding Comment

It seems to me that, if Wittgenstein's philosophical reflections on religious belief are interpreted in the light of his autobiographical remarks on the subject, scattered though they are across his diaries and letters, the meaning of his remark to Heinrich Groag, too – “There is surely something right in the concept of a God and of an after-life” – becomes more transparent than it would otherwise have been. Thus, what is “right” about the concepts of God and immortality – and, by implication, about the language of those whom Richard Dawkins and other paragons of modernity have so condescendingly described as “faith-heads” – are their connotations surrounding the meaning of life, truth, beauty, dependency, the preciousness and irreplaceability of individuals, ethical judgment *sub specie aeternitatis*, and a ground of all being that, together with all its earthly manifestations, necessarily eludes the

⁴⁴ Diary entry of 21 February 1937. Klagge and Nordmann ([2003](#), p. 201).

⁴⁵ Diary entry of 21 February 1937. Klagge and Nordmann ([2003](#), pp. 201–202). My emphasis.

⁴⁶ Klagge and Nordmann ([2003](#), p. 243).

grasp of our language. As for Wittgenstein's contribution to the current debate about religion, Caleb Thompson summarized it well when he said:

Wittgenstein is ... interested in the distance between a religious point of view ... which does not presume to grasp what is beyond human reach, and the point of view of someone who thinks that in fact he has managed in language to do just that. For the latter is a person who has not only failed to grasp with super-concepts a super-order, but in thinking that he has, has disconnected himself from the only reality that is available to him.⁴⁷

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⁴⁷ Thompson (2000, p. 47).

Schleiermacher and the Negative Way: Implications for Inter-Religious Dialogue

Wendy Farley

Religious philosophers and theologians inhabit a vocational paradox: their subject matter evades conceptual representation and yet requires linguistic expression. Without conceptual paradigms, religious thought and practice could not exist. But the conflation of a particular paradigm with reality itself limits understanding and compassion. Religions hold certain ideas about reality dear and often tacitly grant a greater share of humanity to those who share these views. Engaging the practice of the *via negativa* in the context of religious dialogue can address limitations of mind and heart.

Though Christianity recognizes that ultimate reality transcends thought and experience, it is still *God* that enjoys this transcendence. Even through the acts of cognitive negation, God remains the basic conceptual device for interpreting reality. Saying that God is beyond being seems to only modestly disengage our ideas about God from language and concepts. Interreligious dialogue can deepen the practice of the way of negation by conceptualizing ultimate reality within entirely different frameworks. If we understand the *via negativa* purely conceptually or academically, this might mean that we honor other religions by taking seriously their conceptual universe. But if we construe the way of negation in its more ancient sense as a religious practice, we entertain the possibility that a more radical form of apophatic theology serves as a resource for the generation of universal compassion. From this point of view, the more primary significance of negation is not a conceptual claim *about* reality. Negation modifies awareness by promoting proximity to reality. As Gregory Palamas emphasized, we practice negation because it makes possible “the highest state of all, the love of God” though which one “will put in practice and acquire a pure and perfect love of neighbor” (Palamas 1983, p. 55). From this perspective, the teleology of the negative way is not toward more correct ideas about reality but toward transformation.

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Extending the way of negation through religious dialogue exposes the subtle conceptual clinging theologians retain in their ideas about God and thus also about humanity. The consequence of religious dialogue will not be to arrive at a conceptual reality that is the “same” among the various traditions (or even within one tradition) but rather to experiment with the possibility that the theory and practice of radical negation contributes to possibilities for transformation. This essay suggests a prolegomena to this dialogue based on Schleiermacher’s non-dualistic theology.

Schleiermacher and the Cultured Despisers of Religion

Friedrich Schleiermacher was a towering figure of nineteenth century German thought, revered and vilified as the “father” of modern theology. A dedicated scholar and preacher, his circle of friends consisted predominantly of young romantics who eschewed religion because of its rigid orthodoxy and repressive morality. Part of the pleasure of reading him comes from observing his attempt to translate the existential power of religion into terms these despisers of religion might appreciate. Anticipating features of phenomenological method, he turned to a description of mind itself as a way to display the unique quality of religion.¹ Although he boldly translated religion into contemporary terms, the central role he gives apophatic theology binds him to theology’s classical texts. He distinguishes himself from pre-modern practitioners of the negative way, however, by using mind to explore the non-dual, non-conceptual abyss of nameless divinity.

Schleiermacher discusses the nature of mind and its openness to ultimate reality in various ways, depending on his audience. When writing to his religion-despising friends, he draws out the distinctive *eidos* of religion so that his skeptical friends can recognize the beauty in it. Not unlike contemporary writers for whom meditation is a way of making religion more attractive to twenty-first century despisers, Schleiermacher focuses attention on the “touch and taste of the Infinite.” He uses terms like Whole or Infinite to dismantle associations of the term God with a personal, sovereign, not necessarily very nice deity. He turns to the effect of non-duality on the mind instead of arguments about the existence of God to capture the essential quality of piety. At one point he describes this unity as it arises through a focus on a single object. “The more definite your image, the more in this way, you become the object, and the more you lose yourselves. But just because you can trace the growing preponderance of one side over the other, both [subject and object] must have been one and equal in the first, the original moment that has escaped you” (Schleiermacher 1994, p. 42). Here we have his initial description of single-pointed attention which dissolves self-consciousness and opens upon the original unity of subject and object which underlies everyday conscious awareness. The dissolution of subject-object awareness arises as “the Whole” becomes one’s object of attention.

¹ For an interpretation of Schleiermacher as a proto-phenomenologist, see Williams (1978).

That is, pure unity, which defies conceptual understanding, becomes an object of contemplation. He uses the metaphors of dew breathing on a blossom, of a maiden's kiss, a bridal embrace to evoke the simultaneous experience of unity and bliss. "It fills no time and fashions nothing palatable. It is the holy wedlock of the Universe" (Schleiermacher 1994, p. 43). The paradox of describing this or even experiencing it is that it ceases with discursive awareness of it. "The incoming of existence to us, by this immediate union, at once stops as soon as it reaches consciousness" (Schleiermacher 1994, p. 44). It is possible to be so absorbed in this unity that consciousness of subject-object duality fades, but to become consciously aware of this absorption is already a return to the dualistic structure of ordinary awareness. But for Schleiermacher, the point is not to generate an interesting "experience." Like many great contemplatives, he is not interested in isolated experiences, however blissful. "Piety" for Schleiermacher is not exotic experiences but the integration of consciousness of the Whole with everyday life: "the more you are absorbed in it, the more our whole nature is concerned to retain for the memory an imperishable trace of what is necessarily fleeting, to carry over to what you may engage in, its colour and impress, and so unite two moments into a duration" (Schleiermacher 1994, p. 42). As we become "lost in the Infinite" we are actually becoming more conscious of the universe; as we become more unified with this Whole our personality becomes richer, more vivid, and less anxious (Schleiermacher 1994, p. 100).

One part of this account is a description of what happens when anything becomes an object of single-pointed attention. Focusing the mind on a single object causes the experience of subject-object duality to diminish. A second part of this account evokes the effect of non-duality on consciousness. It is not a dry, cognitive awareness of a philosophical position. His descriptions of timelessness and of sexual union suggest a kind of ecstasy. But the task of religion is not to seek isolated experiences; it is an effort to integrate the awareness of non-duality into everyday life. Subject-object awareness returns, but modified by the "color and impress" of the Whole.

From this perspective, the usual mental furniture we associate with religion may sometimes be harmless, sometimes not, but is in itself irrelevant to true religion. "The usual conception of God as one single being outside of the world and behind the world is ... only one manner of expressing God, seldom entirely pure and always inadequate" (Schleiermacher 1994, p. 101). A deity that is another being among beings may console but it has little to do with religion. The same is true of immortality. The unending prolongation of the ego is as irreligious as is a personal deity. The religiously important meaning of immortality is to dwell simultaneously in the Whole and in the concrete details of everyday life. "The true nature of religion is neither this idea nor any other, but immediate consciousness of the Deity as He is found in ourselves and in the world ... It is the immortality which we can now have in this temporal life ... In the midst of finitude to be one with the Infinite and in every moment to be eternal is the immortality of religion" (Schleiermacher 1994, p. 101). Early in his career, Schleiermacher negated the literal meaning of root Christian symbols to open up sensitivity to an underlying non-duality that gave to religion whatever genuine significance it contained.

Immediate Self-Consciousness

What Schleiermacher describes in informal and poetical terms to his friends, he explores with more technical precision in his philosophical and theological writings.² In *The Christian Faith* he distinguishes three strata of mind that permit different qualities of awareness (Schleiermacher 1928, Section 5). An initial quality of consciousness is the confused awareness in which subjects and objects are only dimly distinguished and therefore a distinct sense of selfhood is minimal. This is the form of sentience he attributes to animals, pre-linguistic infants, and to the dreamy state between waking and sleeping. A second dimension of consciousness is the emergence of consciousness of a self inhabiting an exterior world. This he designates as sensible self-consciousness and understands it to be the normal mode of everyday human awareness. It includes “the gradual accumulation of perceptions which constitute the whole field of experience in the widest sense of the word, and … all determinations of self-consciousness which develop from our relations to nature and to man [sic] … so that by the word ‘sensible’ we understand the social and moral feelings no less than the self-regarding, since they all together have their place in that realm of the particular which is subject to the above mentioned antithesis” (Schleiermacher 1928, p. 19). Through sensible self-consciousness we interact with the world. We are free in that we are able to act on the world but we are not utterly free because our actions always occur within a context that is given to us: “For if the feeling of freedom expresses a forthgoing activity, this activity must have an object which has been somehow given to us, and this could not have taken place without an influence of the object upon our receptivity” (Schleiermacher 1928, p. 15). Duality between self and world, between activity and receptivity, and between pain and pleasure is crucial here. It is the structure of sense experience, language, thought, and personal existence. It allows us to be aware of ourselves as persons able to interact with the world and enter into community with others. Sensible self-consciousness is the mode of awareness appropriate to this life.

But for both philosophical and theological reasons, he identifies another aspect of mind that is structured differently: immediate self consciousness. From a philosophical point of view, immediate self-consciousness solves a problem left over from Kant by describing an underlying unity that creates coherence out of the flux of sensible self consciousness. But this formal function arises from a pre-conscious or immediate awareness of a mode of reality that is distinct from the totality of relationships that constitute the universe. In some sense the universe depends upon a Whence which is neither anything within the totality nor the totality itself

² In Schleiermacher's *Lectures on Dialectic*, which are primarily philosophical, immediate self-consciousness's role in accounting for the unity of consciousness is emphasized. In the *Glaubenslehre* (*Christian Faith*, 1928), immediate self-consciousness as the location of God-consciousness and therefore the sphere of spiritual transformation is the primary concern. *Christian Faith* thus provides a more carefully developed anthropology to clarify the poetic descriptions of religious consciousness in his earlier work, *On Religion* (republished 1994).

(Schleiermacher 1928, pp. 16–17). For Schleiermacher, mind in its fullest sense includes awareness of being a person in a world as well as immediate awareness of a mode of reality non-identical to the world. The capacity for apophatic practice is built into the very structure of consciousness. It is the source of the fullest expression of human personhood that allows us to inhabit natural and social environments in life-giving ways.

Immediate self-consciousness is not structured by antithesis between self and other or between action and receptivity or between whole and part or any other duality that qualifies ordinary awareness. Sensible self-consciousness is a constant fluctuation: various thoughts come and go, our emotional states constantly change, the sense data we receive shimmers with endless variety, our moods and dispositions, our views, our commitments are all relentlessly moving, wandering, arising, passing away. Nothing about our “self” and its experiences, nothing about the world around us remain permanently fixed. Immediate self-consciousness, by contrast, provides an underlying unity that is independent of outwardly given objects and is therefore immune to the fluctuations of sensible self-consciousness. It is the region where “the antithesis again disappears and the subject unites and identifies itself with everything which, in the middle grade, was set over against it” (Schleiermacher 1928, p. 20). We see here the “colour and impress of the Whole” revisited in more didactic language, but still serving as the key to religious consciousness.

Immediate self-consciousness is non-dual awareness that precedes and grounds consciousness of world. Immediate self-consciousness does not fluctuate but it can become more stably integrated with sensible self-consciousness. It is on the basis of this integration that it becomes meaningful to translate abstract philosophical terms into the language of religious symbol. That is, non-dual awareness remains a structure of consciousness but interpreted religiously we can say that the drawing of this awareness more directly into conscious (sensible) awareness is redemptive. Immediate self-consciousness can be called God-consciousness as it modifies sensible consciousness. Consciousness of ultimate reality becomes more available to thought, feeling, action, community. It is not a distinct moment of awareness that arises and passes in the flow of sensible experience. It is the perennial underpinning of consciousness by non-duality. If immediate self-consciousness were a moment of experience, it would not be different from sensible self-consciousness. It would merely be a particular sort of experience. Even “mystical” experience is still experience. Schleiermacher emphasizes that he is not talking about an experience but about the interdependence of sensible and immediate modes of awareness: “It is impossible to claim a constancy for the [immediate] self-consciousness, except on the supposition that the sensible self-consciousness is always conjoined with it ... This relatedness of the sensibly determined to the higher self-consciousness in the unity of the moment is the consummating point of the self-consciousness. For to the man [sic] who once recognizes what piety is, and appropriates it as a requirement of his being, every moment of a merely sensible self-consciousness is a defective and imperfect state” (Schleiermacher 1928, p. 21).

In its formal qualities immediate self-consciousness provides the unifying structure of consciousness that is itself beyond antitheses. But it is also an “enhancement

of life.” Schleiermacher characterizes the infiltration of sensible self-consciousness by immediate awareness as a “blessedness” that accompanies the fluctuations of pain and pleasure but is itself neither. To the extent immediate self-consciousness is able to enter into relation with sensible self-consciousness “with ease” life bears “the stamp of joy” (Schleiermacher 1928, p. 24). He gives the example of a feeling of suffering that is combined with trust in God. That is, immediate self-consciousness is not itself a distinct emotion, thought or act. But as it more vividly accompanies emotions, thoughts, and acts, life takes on a different quality. Equanimity through life’s difficulties and ever more inclusive love for humanity are the characteristic marks of stable integration of God-consciousness with sensible self-consciousness. Suffering is a negative emotion but when modified by immediate awareness of non-duality (given linguistic expression as trust in God) it becomes less tyrannical. Equanimity is accompanied by an ever-intensifying and more inclusive love for humanity. Schleiermacher rejects the possibility of hell on the grounds that it would undermine the blessedness of the redeemed: “if the perfecting of our nature is not to move backward sympathy must be such as to embrace the whole human race and when extended to the damned must of necessity be a disturbing element in bliss” (Schleiermacher 1928, p. 721). Ultimate reality defies linguistic or conceptual expression: concepts do not have the power to break the power of sin. But as reality, already resident in immediate self-consciousness, is integrated with sensible self-consciousness ever more inclusive compassion naturally arises.

Universal love is the natural expression of non-dual awareness. But for Schleiermacher, religion is not primarily about believing or doing the right things; it is about dwelling every more vividly in reality and integrating this reality into everyday life. The place this dwelling occurs is not primarily in ideas, actions or emotions, though it is expressed in them. All of these things occur in the sphere of sensible self-consciousness: they are real; they have their place and importance but are not immediate awareness of ultimate reality. Ideas about God, whatever their relative merit, have little to do with immediate awareness that we are constituted by a mode of reality that is not reducible to anything within the totality of finite existence. “The transference of the idea of God to any perceptible object, unless one is all the time conscious that it is a piece of purely arbitrary symbolism, is always a corruption” (Schleiermacher 1928, p. 18). This is the paradox and tragedy of religion. According to the logic of sensible self-consciousness, God is an object. Schleiermacher attempts to disengage the habit of dualistic thinking by examining the structure of immediate self-consciousness itself. Since *The Christian Faith* exists in the dimension of sensible self-consciousness, it must articulate the awareness of non-duality in the language of duality. When immediate self-consciousness is expressed from the subjective side, it has the quality of blessedness or, in Christian terms, consciousness of redemption. If it is expressed from the objective side, Schleiermacher says God is love because “we have the sense of divine love directly in the consciousness of redemption, and as this is the basis on which all the rest of our God –consciousness is built up, it of course represents to us the essence of God” (Schleiermacher 1928, p. 732). Schleiermacher can inhabit Christian symbols because he has a kind of out-clause: religious people know that “it is only in speech

that they cannot avoid the anthropomorphic: in their immediate consciousness they keep the object separate from its mode of representation" (Schleiermacher 1928, p. 26). That is, because the effect of a more stable integration of immediate and sensible self-consciousness is "blessedness," Schleiermacher finds a basis for affirming the doctrinal characterization of ultimate reality (God) as love and as the cause of cosmos and of human freedom. But the logic of causality pertains to sensible self-consciousness and Schleiermacher seems to be only hesitatingly comfortable with it. Causality is not directly given in immediate self-consciousness because it already presupposes duality. "I do not think that God can be placed in such a relation as a cause" (Schleiermacher 1994, p. 103).³ The way of negation severs even this link between ultimate and sensible reality, allowing us to focus on the effects of immediate awareness rather than attachment to ideas about ultimate reality. Schleiermacher did not seriously engage in dialogue with other religions but in our own time this is a natural extension of his approach.

Beyond Apophysis

Schleiermacher argued that, since individuals are receptive to different kinds and intensities of religious expression, religion requires "an endless number of different forms" (Schleiermacher 1994, p. 218). Ultimate reality, "itself" non-dual and non-conceptual likewise requires multiple modes of expression. And yet when people find their beliefs about God challenged, they often feel obliged to relinquish religion altogether, as if ultimate reality were dependent upon those beliefs. But Schleiermacher suggests an alternative, one which in our own time can be extended toward inter-religious dialogue. Our minds, if not the contents of sensible self-consciousness, are already structured by and for ultimate reality: "nothing can separate us from the love of God" (Romans 8:38). On the basis of our utterly dependable "dependence," we are free, even obliged, to continuously displace our attachment to ideas about God by integrating non-dual awareness into ordinary life. Meditating on emptiness, chanting the names of the goddess, reading Sufi poetry are practices which expose the infinite flexibility and depth of reality, unconstrained by the wisdom lineage in which we find ourselves. As we unchain our minds from the "arbitrary symbols" that first structured our thoughts about reality, the immediate awareness of reality might seep upward into sensible self-consciousness, modifying not just thoughts but our root experience so that joy in others flows more spontaneously. Deep and serious encounter with other religious traditions need not cause us to reject either religion itself or the religion of our birth but rather ease the strangle-hold of a particular paradigm so that immediate self-consciousness might integrate with sensible self-conscious "with ease" and our life will better "bear the stamp of joy."

³This quotation occurs in "Explanations," added to the text in 1821.

As a personal aside, I have found study of mahamudra to be a fruitful extension of the *via negativa*. Since I am not a scholar of Buddhism, I eliminated a comparison from this paper. But I was encouraged to at least allude more directly to the dialogue that was in fact the basis of my argument. Mahamudra is a particular philosophical expression of emptiness combined with meditation strategies that focus on mind itself. The First Panchen Lama describes meditation on mind which is “non-obstructive lucidity and clarity … bare absence, which, like space, allows anything to dawn and be vivid” (Dalai Lama and Berzin 1997, p. 99). While many meditators from the land of snow believe this is itself the path to Buddhahood, the Panchen Lama says “that this is a wonderous skillful means for beginners to accomplish the settling of their mind and is a way that leads you to recognize [merely] the conventional nature of mind that conceals something deeper” (Dalai Lama and Berzin 1997, p. 99). He describes further meditation practices that disclose emptiness as the actual mode of existence of all things in samsara and nirvana. He acknowledges that even when meditation experience delivers a full awareness of emptiness mind continues to give rise to appearances as if they had inherent existence. The purpose of these meditations is not to generate interesting experiences and then return to everyday life. Rather, “when the time comes that you can perceive simultaneously the appearance of things without this causing their voidness to be obscured to your mind, and their voidness without your mind ceasing to make their appearance dawn, you have directly manifested the excellent pathway mind that perceives everything from the single, integrated point of voidness and dependent arising … The attainment of the resultant two unified Buddha bodies comes from the unified practice of wisdom and method” (Dalai Lama and Berzin 1997, p. 101).

Schleiermacher and the Panchen Lama inhabit entirely diverse symbolic universes, but I am intrigued at resonances between them. Mind itself serves as an opening onto non-dual awareness. That this awareness falls into expression as emptiness in one tradition and God in another continues to fascinate me. That such divergent expressions can be employed for ultimate reality seems to be itself an important clue. Both men point out that it is easy to over-value relative experiences, so it is important to continue beyond clinging to any idea or experience. Both eschew attachment to experience and concepts in favor of integration of ultimate and conventional modes of awareness.

These brief remarks suggest only that encounter with the philosophy and practice of a non-theistic paradigm provided me with another way of interpreting the negative way. The *practice* of dialogue itself has been fruitful to me as a constructive theologian, regardless of how one conceptualizes relationships among diverse paradigms.

There continues to be a lively discussion concerning whether the objects of the different religions are “the same” or not. But the concept of sameness resides in the sphere of duality and is unlikely to speak directly to the dimension of non-duality. The principle of the *via negativa* may provide another way of considering this issue. Any paradigm for interpreting the “mysterious darkness of unknowing” both makes it accessible and betrays it (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, Chapter 1.1001A). Attachment to conceptual paradigms may encourage reifications that are inappropriate to their

subject matter. What is delivered in immediate self-consciousness is not an idea of God or the correct conceptuality for emptiness. What is delivered is a changed way of experiencing reality. Whatever conceptual and symbolic universe they inhabit, philosophers and practitioners of all traditions might note that if we do not find ourselves calmer, more compassionate, more joyous then it is unlikely that we have been contemplating reality. All of the philosophical subtly and all of the exotic meditative experiences in the world do not count for much in the absence of these. Incorporating the negative way into religious comparison and dialogue might turn our attention beyond concept to effect. We might inhabit the religious symbols closest to home more lightly, more openly. In this way we might gain freedom to open to the suffering and beauty of the world. As Nagarjuna concludes:

I prostate to Gautama
Who through compassion
Taught the true doctrine,
Which leads to the relinquishing of all views.
(Nagarjuna 1995, Chapter XXVII.30).

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Feyerabend on the Ineffability of Ultimate Reality

Ian James Kidd

‘Ultimate reality’ in the Later Feyerabend

Paul Feyerabend is best known as a philosopher of science. From the 1950s to the mid-1970s, he was an important figure in the ‘historical turn’ in philosophy of science, and made seminal contributions to the study of scientific methodology and pluralism in the sciences. These interests eventually resulted in his now-classic *Against Method* (1975), an ‘outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge’. Although this book was much misunderstood, owing partly to Feyerabend’s own provocative literary and intellectual style, its general thesis subsequently became accepted within philosophy of science: namely, that there is no singular, formalised ‘scientific method’, present in every scientific research activity, and which lends science its special cognitive authority.¹ Science, and reality, is far more complex than the inherited logical positivist philosophy of science had suggested. After *Against Method*, Feyerabend began to pursue the implications of his thesis, and he took seriously the idea that, if science lacks the special methodological credentials it has assumed, then one must reassess the cognitive and cultural authority of scientific knowledge—and of our understanding of reality.

Into the late-1970s onwards, much of Feyerabend’s work consisted of reappraisals of the merits of ‘non-scientific’ beliefs and practices, such as indigenous medical and environmental knowledge. Such studies earned Feyerabend a reputation for being ‘anti-science’, exacerbated by his ill-advised flirtations with ‘cultural relativism’, but such charges are unfair: the aim of Feyerabend’s engagement with non-scientific beliefs and practices was not to undermine ‘Western science’, nor to urge a return to pre-Enlightenment ‘superstition’, but, rather, to effect an assessment of

¹ On Feyerabend’s career and philosophy, see Preston (2009).

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the epistemic merits of the diverse modes of inquiry that have been generated by human cultures over the course of their histories.

Feyerabend gradually concluded that the cognitive and cultural hegemony of the modern sciences has unfairly denigrated other modes of inquiry and forms of knowledge. Consequently, in the process, not only have Western cultures unwisely deprived themselves of rich empirical and epistemic resources, but also increasingly lost their sense of the striking capacity of reality to sustain multiple meaningful and intelligible ‘conceptions of reality’. Consonant with his earlier pluralistic philosophical concerns, the later Feyerabend concluded that the cognitive and cultural authority of the sciences has progressively narrowed our sense of the many ways in which human beings can make sense of and live within the world: we have lost—indeed, are still losing—our sense of the ‘richness of Being’ and, in the process, are participating in, and indeed facilitating, the ‘conquest of abundance’.

The aim of the later Feyerabend was therefore to rehabilitate our sense of the ‘abundance’ of reality. Throughout his later writings, this often took the form of asserting the limitations of particular modes of inquiry, such that no one set of ‘epistemic activities’—those of the modern sciences, say—could claim priority over any other. This does not amount to a denial of the superlative merits of any particular epistemic activities, nor does it authorise an ‘anything goes’ attitude of the sort that Feyerabend is sometimes accused of (see Tsou 2003). Instead, Feyerabend’s point is that our ‘epistemic activities’ always reflect contingent and local values, interests, and ‘projects’, each of which shape and delimit our ‘engagements’ with reality. Our ‘approaches’ to reality always rely upon what Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1989) called ‘pre-judices’, certain ‘prejudgemental’ commitments and beliefs which are preconditional for our being able to engage in certain forms of inquiry at all.²

Following in a long tradition of continental European philosophical criticism of the priority of scientific inquiries, Feyerabend maintained that science did not—indeed, could not—provide ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ accounts of reality (see Gutting 2005).³ Instead, the ‘scientific worldview’ reflects practical and cognitive values peculiar to modern Western cultures. Therefore, the ‘manifest realities’ generated by *our* preferred epistemic activities have, *prima facie*, no greater claim to describe ‘ultimate reality’ than do those of, say, the Homeric Greeks, medieval European Christians, or contemporary indigenous peoples. The thought motivating Feyerabend’s generous appeals to ‘non-scientific’ historical and cultural traditions is to urge us to take seriously the idea that reality is amenable, or ‘receptive’, to a radical diversity of ‘epistemic activities’, including but by no means limited to those of the contemporary natural sciences (see, for instance, 2001, 202ff).⁴ Once these traditions are thus admitted, our ideas about the ‘ultimate reality’ underlying or animating the radical epistemic diversity Feyerabend gestures to must change dramatically.

Later in this chapter, these changes to our conceptions of ‘ultimate reality’ will be discussed in depth, but before considering Feyerabend’s arguments, it is important to

² Jeff Malpas (2009, §3.1) felicitously describes these as ‘anticipatory structures’.

³ This criticism is especially prominent in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Husserl. See the references and discussion in Cooper (2002, 186–202ff).

⁴ All references are to Feyerabend unless otherwise stated.

note also his motivations. Feyerabend (2010, xxi) once remarked that the ‘main motive’ behind his work was ‘humanitarian, not intellectual’, since his aim was to challenge the displacement and destruction of the ways of life of global indigenous peoples by Western scientific and political agencies. The belief that the Western sciences enjoy special or unique cognitive and practical authority can, properly interpreted, justify their imposition onto global indigenous peoples—for instance, the presumption that ‘non-scientific’ beliefs and practices are automatically or necessarily ‘inferior’ to the available scientific alternatives. Feyerabend maintained that such presumptions are untenable, given the ‘disunity’ of the sciences, and argued that judgements regarding the efficacy of both scientific *and* ‘non-scientific’ knowledge and practices should be ‘a matter of empirical record, not of philosophical definitions’ (2001, p. 240).⁵ Global epistemic and cultural diversity therefore demonstrates the ‘receptivity’ of reality to a multiplicity of ‘approaches’, scientific or not.

Feyerabend’s position is as follows: since reality ‘responds’ to all ‘approaches’, whether ‘scientific’ or not, to limit ourselves solely to the epistemic activities represented by the modern Western sciences not only narrows our epistemic engagement with reality but also, perhaps more disturbingly, excludes the values, interests, and ‘projects’ upon which the material, social, and existential wellbeing of the majority of the world’s people depend.⁶ The doctrine of the ‘abundance’ of reality—the ‘richness of Being’—is therefore an attempt to provide epistemological arguments for preserving global cultural and epistemic diversity. Since this may sound rather exotic, or abstruse, the following section provides a developed account of Feyerabend’s later metaphysics—of ‘Being’, epistemic activities, and so on—after which I turn, in part four, to the ‘doctrines’ of ineffability and abundance.

‘Being’, Epistemic Activities, and Metaphysical Realism

Feyerabend began to develop a metaphysics only in the very last years of his life. The main source for the metaphysics is *Conquest of Abundance*, upon which my discussion concentrates.⁷ Before beginning, however, two caveats are in order. First, I will not, for reasons of space, and except in passing, be concerned with other influences upon Feyerabend’s metaphysics.⁸ Second, although much of the literature on Feyerabend’s ‘realism’ relates to the vexed question of whether he is a

⁵ Compare Feyerabend’s general argument here with John Dupré’s remarks on ‘disunity’ and ‘epistemic excellence’ (Dupré 1993, Chaps. 10–11; 2003, 115–116f). Note, too, that Dupré explicitly affirms his debts to Feyerabend and his commitment to the value of cultural and epistemic diversity (Dupré 1993, p. 263, 2003, p. 116).

⁶ This concern has recently been developed by ‘postcolonial science and technology studies’ scholars, of which Sandra Harding (2008) is perhaps the leading figure.

⁷ Feyerabend died before completing *Conquest of Abundance*, which was subsequently edited by Bert Terpstra (2001), who augmented the manuscript with contemporaneous papers germane to its main themes.

⁸ But see Preston (1998) and Farrell (2001) for (divergent) discussions of Feyerabend’s metaphysics.

‘scientific realist’ or not, this is not my interest either; although, for the record, he seems to be a metaphysical realist but not—at least in any conventional sense—a scientific realist.⁹ Indeed, Feyerabend’s ‘doctrine of ineffability’ would preclude this, as he states that scientific theories may indicate ‘how certain sections of the world respond’ to epistemic activities, but ‘give us no clue about the structure of reality as a whole’ (2001, p. 142).

Feyerabend’s later metaphysics centres on ‘Being’. This term was often used interchangeably with ‘reality’, ‘Nature’, ‘God’, and other variants thereof, such as ‘objective’, ‘basic’, or ‘ultimate’ reality.¹⁰ Being is never described, except in the loosest terms; for instance, since it ‘resists’ our epistemic activities, to greater or lesser extents, it cannot be ‘something formless’ but, instead, something which ‘by its resistance reveals its properties and laws’ (2001, p. 238). This quasi-Kantian line suggests that Being has some structure and properties, it is ‘malleable but not entirely yielding’ and therefore ‘more pliable than is commonly assumed’ (2010, p. 234, 2001, p. 145). Determining just how ‘malleable’ is difficult, but Feyerabend offers two thoughts. First, the history of human cultures indicates that Being ‘responds’ to a radical diversity of ‘approaches’, including a whole host of magical, theological, and philosophical cosmologies, of which the modern ‘scientific worldview’ is only the latest (even if, in certain respects, it enjoys superlative successes). The historical and empirical record, then, indicates that Being ‘seems to respond positively to many approaches, not [only] to [the] one[s]’ consonant with scientific modes of inquiry (2001, p. 212). Since Being ‘*offers resistance*’, it sometimes happens that certain approaches ‘simply collapse’, or, perhaps, they meet with only limited ‘response’, ‘linger for a while … and then disappear’. It is certainly the case that Being is ‘more complex than a belief in the uniformity and [alleged] unique excellence of science would suggest’ (2001, pp. 145, 215, 195).¹¹

Second, our knowledge is always confined to the ‘manifest realities’ generated by our epistemic activities and does not, therefore, embrace ‘ultimate reality’. As Feyerabend puts it, ‘we have evidence *how Being reacts* when approached in different ways, but *Being itself and the conditions of its acting* in a certain way remain forever shrouded in darkness’ (2001, p. 213). The ‘mechanisms’ or ‘processes’ which underlie Being’s responsiveness and ‘resistance’ cannot be identified, since our experience of them is mediated by our manifest realities. It is this latter point which underscores the doctrine of ineffability, as Feyerabend asserts that, ‘Being as it is, independently of any kind of approach, can never be known’ (2001, p. 205). Knowledge only becomes possible when certain concepts, theories, or lan-

⁹ Preston (1997) makes the case for Feyerabend as a scientific realist, which is criticised by Oberheim (2006, Chapter 6).

¹⁰ For typical examples, see (2001, pp. 196, 214, 239).

¹¹ Incidentally, these degrees of ‘responsiveness’ preclude Feyerabend’s metaphysics from lapsing into social ‘constructionism’ (as Preston (2009, §2.16) suggests he does); as Feyerabend puts it, the ‘mere existence’ of a society or culture with certain epistemic activities—whether rain-dancing or physical science—is not sufficient for establishing a manifest reality’. It also necessary that Being ‘reacts in a positive way’ (2001, p. 215).

guages are in play; and, as human beings, we cannot help but operate with the conceptual and other resources bequeathed to us by the very fact of our living within certain social and historical contexts.

Feyerabend's idea here is, as with Heidegger (1962), that we 'always already' initiated into a certain mode of experience—of 'being-in-the-world'—such that a 'world' is already 'disclosed' to us, even before we begin to engage in complex epistemic activities like scientific research.¹² As David E. Cooper puts it, one cannot 'ascend' from these practices and activities to an 'absolute' account of the world—such that scientific realism pretends to provide—because, in the absence of those practices and activities, there are no 'engaged descriptions' of the world. However, since human beings are not capable of rendering themselves 'so radically ... disengage[d] from involvement in the world', we cannot 'imagine what the experience ... of a "pure witness"' to Being might be (2002, pp. 173, 179, 186).

Although Feyerabend does not use Cooper's vocabulary, borrowed as it is from existential phenomenology, it does help to articulate his position. Consider, for instance, Feyerabend's remark that 'ultimate reality (God, Being) is ineffable. Trying to grasp it directly we face darkness, silence, nothingness' (2001, p. 233). Interpreted using the resources of existential phenomenology, even on the brief account just given, such declarations become far clearer: one cannot have 'positive knowledge' of Being because the very conditions of our having knowledge and experience of it—indeed, of anything—simultaneously function to 'delimit', 'shape', or, in Gadamer's term, 'pre-judge' our engagement with it. However, the result of these interactions between our practices and Being are, of course, 'manifest realities', which owe as much to human values, interests, and 'projects' as to Being itself. Manifest realities indicate the 'complex ways' in which Being 'acts in the domain ... of human life', and it, says Feyerabend, 'simply a mistake' for any culture to 'identify the particular manifest reality they have developed with Ultimate Reality' (2001, p. 214).

Feyerabend explicitly rejected the claim that certain objects and entities are 'independent' of the epistemic activities and historical contexts within which they appear. Cultures or communities which attempt to "objectivise" their ontology do so by disregarding the material, intellectual, and social contingencies from which their epistemic activities emerged, in flat denial of the fact that their 'manifest reality' 'makes no sense outside the historical stage' it arose in (139). There is, Feyerabend argued, no good reason to suppose that the manifest realities and epistemic activities associated with Western modernity are any more or less 'resonant' with Being than those of, say, Homeric theogony or Hindu cosmology. Since Being is 'responsive' and 'malleable', when approached 'in one way, we get elementary particles; proceeding in another, we get a nature that is alive and full of Gods' (2001, 145).

Feyerabend notes that many philosophers and scientists, faced with such 'abundance', often default to some form of 'monistic realism'. 'Confronted with such a variety', he writes, 'most philosophers try to establish one approach to the exclusion of

¹²For Heidegger's critique of science, see further Rouse (2005).

others. As far as they are concerned there can only be one true way—and they want to find it' (2001, p. 84). Indeed, this 'monistic' imperative, in the form of a 'search for reality', plays a central role in the 'conquest of abundance' narrative which Feyerabend intermittently developed throughout his later period (see Feyerabend 2001, pp. 3–19).¹³

A key aim of the criticisms of the 'conquest of abundance' is to defend epistemic pluralism. One main argument Feyerabend uses is that it is 'mistaken' to reject or eradicate a diversity of theories on the grounds that (some? most?) of them do not successfully 'correspond to' or 'cohere with' reality. To make these judgements, one would have to enjoy special epistemic access to *Being*, such that comparisons and assessments of the various competing epistemic activities and their associated manifest realities could take place. As Cooper argues, if one could occupy a 'cognitively privileged' perspective upon all such 'manifest realities', then one could indeed 'sit in magisterial judgement on different world views'; however, no human individual or community does or could possess the 'exalted cognitive capacity' that such an overview would require, and claims to the contrary are 'hubristic' (Cooper 2002, pp. 149, 197, 174).¹⁴

Feyerabend is therefore correct when, in response to the question, 'Does it follow that our world contains particles and [electromagnetic] fields side by side with demons and Gods?', he replies that 'queries like these don't even count as genuine questions' (2001, pp. 10, 134). The reason, of course, is that such questions about the nature of 'ultimate reality', of how it is 'in itself', lie beyond the scope of human epistemic capacities. Instead, our scientific theories, like the magical and theological cosmologies of other cultures, reflect certain prevailing values, interests, and 'projects' current within Western modernity. These meet with differing degrees of 'resistance' and 'success'—but that is all one can say, and questions of 'realism' need not be invoked.¹⁵ And, given the (perpetual) absence of a cognitively-privileged perspective upon the extinct, extant, and future 'manifest realities' generated by human cultures, Feyerabend concludes that we are faced with two claims.

The first is the 'raw fact' of the historically and culturally variant cognitive diversity of human being, which reflects not just idle curiosity but, more urgently, all

¹³ See Feyerabend (2009) for a more ambitious attempt to provide a fuller history of the 'conquest of abundance'.

¹⁴ Feyerabend's argument here resembles the 'perspectivism' of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche, each of whom maintain that human knowledge is 'perspectival', and non-privileged. Against claims about the privileged status of human perspectives, Zhuangzi (quoted in Soles and Soles 1998, p. 158) retorted that our language and concepts no more pick out 'real' objects in the world than do 'the peeps of baby birds', whilst, for Nietzsche (1979, pp. 79–80), it is no less 'puffed up' for humans to suppose that their perspectives represent reality any more than it would be for 'gnats'. Incidentally, Feyerabend (2001, p. 145) also remarks that 'dogs and monkeys' engage with *Being* in the same way that humans do. Such bestial comparisons are surely intended to encourage in us a sense of intellectual humility.

¹⁵ As Eric Oberheim (2006, p. 192) remarks, Feyerabend's 'anti-realist' (or 'non-realist') position is that 'scientists do not discover objective truths about a mind-independent reality. They invent theories to contribute to the creation of how they experience the world'. Oberheim does not, I imagine, intend Feyerabend's pluralism to extend to radically 'non-scientific' epistemic activities and manifest realities, but, given that *Being* is 'unknowable', there is no good reason to exclude them.

those ‘structures’ that are ‘needed for a meaningful existence’ (2001, p. 13). The ‘abundance’ that Feyerabend praises—and bemoans the loss off—is, therefore, the richness and diversity of values, interests, and ‘projects’ in which and through which human beings conceive of and live their lives. The second is the ineffability of Being, the fact that the epistemic diversity of human cultures ‘points beyond itself to other types of knowledge and, together with them, to an unknown and forever unknowable Basic Reality’ (2001, p. 196).

In the following, and final, section, I discuss the relationship between the ‘doctrines’ of abundance and ineffability, and judge whether they can fulfil Feyerabend’s aim of preserving global epistemic diversity by precluding any one culture or community from ‘objectivising’ their own ‘manifest reality’ and identifying it, ‘mistakenly’, with ‘ultimate reality’.

‘Abundance’ and ‘ineffability’

Feyerabend’s ‘metaphysics’ breaks down into two ‘doctrines’ of ‘ineffability’ and ‘abundance’ which I suggest are, if not identical then, at the least, intimately related. A brief recap is, however, in order. A key aim of the later Feyerabend is to defend global epistemic and cultural diversity and he identifies the modern Western sciences as a major threat to this, owing to the enormous cognitive and cultural authority. There are many ways in which Feyerabend thinks that the sciences, and their allied political and cultural agencies, pose a threat to epistemic and cultural diversity; however, the most prominent is the ‘scientific realist’ claim that the sciences alone enjoy unique epistemic license to describe reality. Feyerabend argued that this ‘realist’ movement allowed scientists to assert the trans-cultural validity of their own manifest realities, since science applies and ‘works’ regardless of cultural, religious, ethnic, or linguistic particularities.¹⁶ Of course, such ‘universalism’ is not the case, since our sciences are rooted, not only in particular historical contexts, but also reflect the prevailing values, interests, and ‘projects’ of their home cultures. The same is true for other ‘manifest realities’ and the ‘forms of life’ associated with them; for instance gods, ancestor spirits, and magical forces play little to no role in Western cultural and epistemic practices. Feyerabend concluded that since a manifest reality is ‘tied to individuals and groups’ it ‘cannot be “Platonized”’, that is, presented as being independent of ‘the individuals and the communities that are affected by it’ (2001, p. 170).

The doctrine of ineffability is intended to foreclose the possibility of any given culture or community ‘Platonising’ its ‘manifest reality’ by identifying it, ‘mistakenly’, with ‘ultimate reality’. It therefore has a ‘strategic’ role in Feyerabend’s later philosophy, serving his wider ‘humanitarian’ concerns. The doctrine of ineffability asserts that ‘ultimate reality’, or ‘Being’, has and will never be known to or by human beings. Feyerabend repeatedly affirms that Being is ‘ineffable’ insofar as one can assert nothing positive about it; one can, at most, infer from its varying degrees of

¹⁶ For critical discussions of claims regarding the ‘universality’ of Western scientific knowledge and practices, see Harding (2006, Chapters 1–6; 2008, Chapters 4–6).

‘resistance’ that it has some structure and properties. Beyond this, however, nothing can be said, a conclusion which invites two points. First, Feyerabend only argues that we cannot determine which, if any, of our manifest realities approximates to Being; and this point, coupled with the earlier point about degrees of ‘resistance’, surely suggests that certain manifest realities closer resemble ‘ultimate reality’ than others (otherwise it is hard to explain why some ‘succeed’ and others ‘collapse’).

Second, in the absence of any detailed knowledge of Being, there is no good reason to suppose that it would be best described by some one theory, or set of theories. Since Being is ‘unknown’, there is little obvious basis for the ‘monistic’ imperative which seeks ‘one true theory’ to the exclusion of other: ‘the world which we want to explore is a largely unknown entity. We must, therefore, keep our options open and ... not restrict ourselves in advance’ (Dupré 1993, p. 12). This prescription for methodological pluralism finds its roots in Feyerabend’s early work in scientific methodology but also functions well in the broader context of scientific and non-scientific epistemic activities. If we are to ‘keep our options open’, and to respect the empirical record of successful non-scientific cultures, then our best strategy is to consult the ‘abundance’ of epistemic activities and manifest realities evidenced by global cultural diversity.

The doctrines of ineffability and abundance arguably converge in Feyerabend’s emphasis upon the ‘richness of Being’. ‘Abundance’ arises through the interaction of human epistemic activities, on the one hand, and ‘Being’, on the other, a process which generates a plurality of quasi-stable manifest realities, which can be ‘constantly ... enlarged and rebuilt’ as our values, practices, and interests change (2001, p. 234). As human cultures change, developing novel languages, practices, values, and aspirations, so their ‘approaches’ to Being will change, and, with careful attention to its ‘resistance’ and ‘responses’, the manifest realities thus generated will persistent and evolve. Crudely put, human beings can conceive of and live within the world in a startling diversity of ways, which Being can and does respond to with greater or lesser degrees of resistance; this, I take it, is the meaning of Feyerabend’s remark that ‘[a]bundance occurs in history, not in the world’ (2001, p. 139). The world is not ‘abundant’ because it consists of a radical plurality of ‘things, events, [and] processes’—‘trees, dogs, sunrises ... justice, beauty, love ... the lives of people, Gods, entire galaxies’, and so on (1987, p. 104). These diverse entities are not features of the world *in itself*—they are not ‘out there’—since they owe their existence to the ‘responses’ of Being to human practices. Recalling the earlier point from Heidegger, the whole plurality of entities which populate our manifest realities ‘do not simply *exist*—period’, rather, they *appear* only under well-defined and rather complex conditions’ (2001, p. 142).¹⁷ Since one cannot ‘step outside’ of these ‘conditions’, the correlation, or not, of the entities we encounter with Being itself can never be determined.¹⁸

¹⁷ In the vocabulary of existential phenomenology, they are features of a ‘life-world’, which Husserl (1970, p. 121) described as the ‘intuitive surrounding world of life, pre-given for all’ (for ‘all’, that is, who belong to the culture which that life-world sponsors).

¹⁸ Compare Feyerabend’s argument here with that given by Zhuangzi, who argues, as Hansen (2000, pp. 276–277) puts it, ‘we can never get outside’ our own epistemic commitments in order to ‘check on’ their coherence, or not, with ‘ultimate reality’.

Being is ‘abundant’ than insofar as it can and does sustain a multitude of meaningful and intelligible ‘manifest realities’ in response to the diverse ‘approaches’ generated by differing human cultures. And it is ‘ineffable’ because its own ‘essence’, including the ‘mechanisms’ underlying its ‘responsiveness’, can never be known. The most we can say about Being is that it is receptive to a diversity of epistemic activities and so can sustain a multitude of ‘forms of life’—and the activities and ‘forms’ represented by Western modernity are but a small sample of these. Feyerabend’s great worry was that the cognitive and cultural hegemony of the Western sciences would gradually displace and destroy ‘non-scientific’ beliefs and beliefs—whether magical, theological, or whatever—to the point where our appreciation, and even awareness, of the ‘richness of Being’ is lost.

The ‘conquest of abundance’ therefore refers to what Feyerabend sees as a long-standing erosion of global cultural and epistemic diversity which results from the ‘mistaken’ belief that the manifest realities generated by Western scientific and cultural practices are identical to, or at least, successfully converging upon, ‘ultimate reality’. One could compare this with the later Heidegger’s warning that the hegemony of Western scientific and cultural practices, in the guise of ‘technology’, was tending to ‘drive out’ alternative ‘ways of revealing’ the world, and that, in so doing, ‘we moderns’ were ‘forgetting’ that our own conceptions of reality were just one amongst a multitude of others—magical ones, say—and that our failure to retain our ‘openness’ to Being would result in it ‘oblivion’ (Heidegger 1962, 26–27ff).¹⁹ Exotic as the prose may be, Feyerabend and Heidegger, in their ‘later’ period, both surely share the legitimate worry that, so great is the material and cognitive power of the sciences in the modern world, that the ‘very possibility of there being other mature and intelligent forms of life, other ways of experiencing and encountering the world, is lost to the modern imagination’ (Cooper 1997, p. 120).

There is a final point worth offering. Although Feyerabend said little about what Being is, in correspondence and interviews he did offer his private thoughts about it. Interestingly, many of these indicate sympathy for a ‘mystical’ or ‘theological’ interpretation of Being. In a 1990 letter to a correspondent discussing his nascent metaphysics, he admitted that his views ‘sound quite mystical’ but stated his faith that it could be ‘worked out to sound more plausible’ (quoted in Ben-Israel 2001, p. 98). ‘Ineffability’ itself is associated with mystical traditions, and Feyerabend credits the fifth-century Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite as a major influence upon his metaphysics.²⁰ Furthermore, in an unpublished ‘Letter to the Reader’, presumably intended for inclusion with *Conquest of Abundance*, he warned us that ‘Reality, or Being, or God, or whatever it is that sustains us’ will not be ‘captured [so] easily’ by our theories. The real puzzle facing us, he suggested, is ‘why we seem to possess useful and enlightening knowledge’ about the world at all, and he declared his willingness to describe his position as ‘mysticism’ (2010, xvi). What are we to make of these remarks?

¹⁹ See Young (2002) for a vigorous discussion and defence of the later Heidegger.

²⁰ See Feyerabend (2001, 195f and 214f).

A tentative proposal might be this: Feyerabend's thoughts about Being had a 'mystical' dimension insofar as he seemed open to the idea that Being was, in some meaningful sense, theological. Certainly Feyerabend's language often implies intentionality; he writes that Being 'sustains' and 'responds to' us, it can 'send scientists on a wild-goose chase', it 'provides' some of us with manifest worlds to 'expand, explore, and survive in' and 'permits' us 'partial independence' to do so, and can also 'mock and, perhaps, punish' communities who conceive of it in, say, a 'crudely materialistic way' (2001, pp. 204, 240). Such remarks are ambiguous—they may simply reflect his characteristically casual prose style, or, perhaps, they are intended simply as gestures towards the possibility of a theological interpretation of Being.²¹ I include them here partly to acknowledge Feyerabend's apparent speculations upon such interpretations, and partly because it is, of course, quite possible to interpret Being—or 'ultimate reality'—in the way that so many other cultures have, namely, as some form of 'divinity' or 'mystery'. Whether such identifications are warranted is another question, and of course one that the doctrine of ineffability is intended to foreclose; human life, knowledge, and concern is limited to the many manifest realities, such that we neither have nor need any articulate understanding of 'ultimate reality'.

Conclusions

This paper articulated and examined the account of 'ultimate reality' in the later philosophy of Paul Feyerabend. After locating his concerns in the context of his earlier work and his 'humanitarian' concerns, my discussion moved to *Conquest of Abundance*. I argued that, in this book, Feyerabend sought to defend the 'ineffability' of Being as a strategy to prevent any one culture or community identifying its own 'manifest reality' with 'ultimate reality' itself. Such 'Platonisation' poses many dangers, but prime amongst them for Feyerabend was the consequent tendency to dismiss 'rival' manifest realities—denigrating them as 'false', 'primitive', 'non-scientific', or whatever. By affirming the 'ineffability' of Being, one preserves a vigorous epistemic pluralism, and one, furthermore, which respects the efficacy and legitimacy of the vast array of historical and contemporary manifest realities quite divergent from those of the Western sciences. The 'ineffability' and 'abundance' of Being therefore consist in its receptivity to a radical plurality of modes of inquiry and forms of knowledge. Feyerabend therefore praises the diversity and complexity of human cognitive and creative agencies, on the one hand, and the 'richness of Being' on the other, thus offering a positive and humane vision of 'ultimate reality'.

²¹ And, of course, Feyerabend was an enthusiastic for Homer, and his half-nurturing, half-capricious Being is not so far from the inscrutable will of the Olympian pantheon.

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Aperture of Absence: Jean-Luc Marion on the God Who ‘Is Not’

Donald L. Wallenfang

ζητεῖν τὸν θεόν, εἰ ἄρα γε ψηλαφίσειαν αὐτὸν καὶ εὑροιεν,
καί γε οὐ μακρὰν ἀπὸ ἐνὸς ἑκάστου ήμῶν ὑπάρχοντα.

ΠΡΑΞΕΙΣ ΔΓΙ, ΔΔΓII

...so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him
and find him, though indeed he is not far from any one of us.
Acts of the Apostles 17:27 (NAB)

One (Plotinus). That than which nothing greater can be thought (Anselm). *Actus purus* (Aquinas). *Prima Verità* (Catherine of Sienna). *Causa sui* (Descartes). The feeling of absolute trust and dependence (Schleiermacher). Ultimate Concern (Tillich). Ultimate Reality (Hick, et al.). She Who Is (Johnson). Mother, Lover, Friend (McFague). *Jesucristo liberador* (Sobrino). Augustine’s trepid question remains as relevant today as it was at the end of the fourth century CE ‘What do I love when I love you, my God?’ (*Confessiones* X, vi). Ultimate reality persists in its obscurity inasmuch as its lucidity. Divine immanence is incessantly met with divine transcendence: *kataphasis-apophasis*, *exitus-reditus*, dialectical *chiaroscuro*. Every attempt at comprehending ultimate reality withers in its own inadequacy: “Of God, we say: what wonder is it if we do not comprehend him? For if you comprehend it, it is not God.”¹ Ultimate reality eludes every name, every predicate, and even every denial. Infinity, mystery, and the question of being confront the human person in every generation.

¹ Augustine, *Sermo* 117, 3 [*De Deo loquimur; quid mirum si non comprehenderis? Si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*].

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Contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion (1946–) approaches the question of ultimate reality with much trepidation inside a hope that ultimate reality ‘is not far from any one of us.’ In order to liberate ultimate reality from models and heuristics framed in a supposedly panoptic ‘metaphysics of presence,’ Marion introduces a nuanced distinction between the ‘conceptual idol’ and the ‘phenomenological icon.’ By pushing through the limits of ontic and ontological ‘conditions of possibility’ for experience, Marion effectively opens phenomenality to the further possibility of *impossibility*. Marion, in effect, liberates (1) human subjectivity, (2) all phenomena that may appear as such, and (3) ultimate reality and the possibility of its communicativeness to humanity. This threefold liberation takes place by introducing a third phenomenological reduction – one beyond objectivity (Husserl), beyond ontology (Heidegger) – that anterior to anteriority: givenness (*Gegebenheit; donation*). By reducing a phenomenon to its (unconditioned) a priori dynamic of givenness, a phenomenon assumes its due right to show *itself* in the measure that it gives *itself* by *itself*. Ultimate reality, thereby, can be named precisely the impossibility of possibility – the ultimate in-breaking of givenness that saturates any horizon assigned to that which may appear, in the end giving itself in the form of a shortage.

From Conditions of Possibility to (Im)Possibility Without Condition

In addition to his erudite scholarship on seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes, Marion has stretched the phenomenological method to its assurgent application in theology. His trilogy on the phenomenological method – *Réduction et donation* (1989), *Etant donné* (1997), *De Surcroît* (2001) – has caused a wave of consternation among some (philosophers?), and elation among others (theologians?).² While Marion is not alone in employing the phenomenological method in the theological realm (cf. the work of Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, et al.), his contributions directly stretch the phenomenological method as developed by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.³ Even though Husserl and Heidegger identified and worked along (but without crossing) a distinct border that separated theology from philosophy, Marion regards such a fissure as unwarranted. For Marion, the question of divine revelation remains pertinent in the realm of critical philosophy inasmuch as the question of divine revelation is a question about *possibility*. For “higher than actuality stands *possibility*. We can understand phenomenology only by seizing upon it as a possibility.”⁴ While

²Cf. Janicaud (2000) for a general presentation of the issues at stake.

³Cf. Marion (1998, pp. 203–205) on Marion’s proposal of a third phenomenological reduction: an *epoché* that discloses the original form of givenness in phenomena; ‘so much reduction, so much givenness.’

⁴Heidegger (1962, p. 63, para. 7).

Fig. 1 General phenomenological heuristic

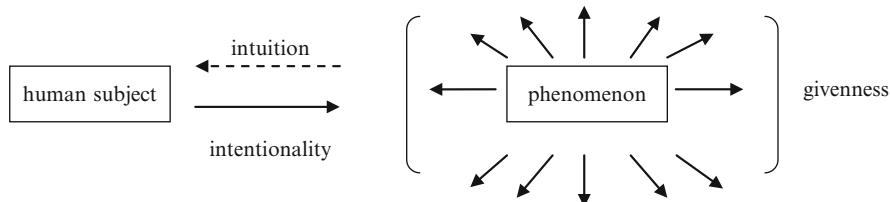
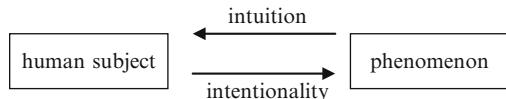


Fig. 2 Marionian phenomenological heuristic

Marion is careful to draw the distinction between the phenomenon of revelation and that of Revelation – ‘Revelation’ appears in the figure of a specific language of faith and religious tradition – he seeks to challenge and subvert the notion of sufficient reason as authoritative for phenomenality.

At this juncture, it may be helpful to make explicit the basic heuristic structure of the science of phenomenology. Phenomenology ultimately refers to the science of interpretation of any and all phenomena-data: “any act of interpretation involves at least three realities: some phenomenon to be interpreted, someone interpreting that phenomenon, and some interaction between these first two realities.”⁵ This complex process of interpretation can be described in two primary movements: (1) the movement of the human subject toward the phenomenon (called ‘intentionality’), and (2) the movement of the phenomenon toward the subject (called ‘intuition’) (Fig. 1).

Though overly simplistic, this heuristic is helpful for understanding what is at stake within the polemics of phenomenology, especially when considering the question of ultimate reality. Further, this heuristic must be modified to demonstrate Marion’s phenomenological reduction to givenness (Fig. 2).

In this modified heuristic illustration, the many arrows surrounding the phenomenon indicate its abundant and multidimensional givenness. The dashed arrow signifying a giving intuition is modified to indicate that, for Marion, intuition is ultimately a function of intentionality and can even be a limiting factor for a phenomenon’s originary givenness.⁶ Thinking phenomenality in terms of givenness expands possibility to include the possibility of phenomena that saturate the intentional aim of the human subject. Marion directly challenges the primacy of the transcendental ego: “in the realm of givenness, (the transcendental ego) no longer decides the phenomenon, but receives it; or else, from ‘master and possessor’ of the phenomenon, it

⁵ Tracy (1987, p. 10).

⁶ Cf. Marion (2002a, pp. 184–187).

becomes receiver.”⁷ Marion’s primary polemic is against the so-called principle of sufficient reason inasmuch as such a principle strips the phenomenon of its agency for its own appearing and reduces it to a function under the rubric ‘intentionality.’ In other words, emphasizing subjective intentionality as the primary (if not only) operation in phenomenality robs the phenomenon of its possibility of appearing according to its own particular genius, design and mode of givenness.

The principle of sufficient reason, itself a product of the Western Enlightenment, establishes necessary exigencies for human experience through metaphysical schemata and language whose roots extend as far back as thinking itself. The legacy of such figures as René Descartes (1596–1650), Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), David Hume (1711–1776), Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781), and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) bequeaths a brand of thinking that takes nothing for granted and virtually outlaws the possibility of divine revelation as such – at least a type of revelation that would transgress the established boundaries set by the principle of sufficient reason. For this principle demands all phenomena to be reckoned according to *a priori* conditions of possibility – metaphysical boundaries that constitute the supposed playing-field of phenomenality, boundaries sketched in terms of universality (over against particularity), causality, presence, substance and accidents, necessity and contingency, horizons of consciousness. A sufficient reason for the postulate of ultimate reality is even demanded: ‘Ultimate reality, please tell me your cause.’

Marion finds that such conditions set undue limits on *phenomenological* possibility insofar as they determine a phenomenon prior to its possible appearing. This mode of transcendental idealism is evident in Husserl’s work as well. Marion notes that for Husserl “the intention always anticipates what it has not yet seen, the result being that the unseen has, from the start, the rank of a pre-seen, a merely belated visible, without fundamentally irreducible novelty, in short a pre-visible.”⁸ This is to say that anything that could appear can sufficiently be predicted to appear vis-à-vis that which has already appeared and has thus established a probable, universal and reasonable panorama within which a particular phenomenon may appear as such. For Marion, such *a priori* boundaries are insufficient and limiting. Marion contends that sufficiency is not a ‘range-for-viewing’ to be set by subjectivity, but rather that which is determined by phenomena as they give *themselves* by *themselves*. In such manner does Marion introduce the notion of ‘counter-intentionality’ in which the phenomenon determines the subject rather than vice versa.⁹ Likewise does Marion introduce the notion of the ‘saturated phenomenon’ – a phenomenon that saturates subjective intentionality with a burst of phenomenal intuition, a phenomenon that bedazzles by its supreme degree of givenness, e.g., the saturated phenomena of the event, the idol, the flesh, and the icon.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., p. 188.

⁸ Ibid., p. 186.

⁹ Cf. ibid., pp. 266–267.

¹⁰ Cf. ibid., pp. 225–233.

Iconicity as Gateway to Ultimate Reality

Taking one form of the saturated phenomenon as posited by Marion, let us turn to the efficacy of the icon as a portal to ultimate reality. In his early work, *L'idole et la distance* (1977), Marion proposes a thoroughly apophatic theology in response to Nietzsche’s pronouncement, ‘God is dead!’ For Marion, the key question from which to frame a response to this tremendous proclamation is, ‘What God?’ Marion replies, ‘The God of metaphysics is dead.’ In Marion’s assessment, the god of metaphysics is not the one, true and living God about whom the scriptures testify, but an idol to be razed. Whereas the god of metaphysics can only appear in terms of substance, causality and concepts that satisfy the strictures of the principle of sufficient reason, the God who lives ‘is not’ but rather loves and gives. For Marion, the juxtaposition of the idol vis-à-vis the icon is a key paradigm for approaching and understanding the question of divine denomination, or (un-)naming God. The idol is fashioned according to humanity’s attempt to envisage the divine whereby “human experience precedes the face that (a particular) divinity assumes in it … the idol fixes the divine for us permanently, for a commerce where the human hems in the divine from all angles.”¹¹ The idol, formed strictly according to human determination, acts not as a translucent mediator that discloses divine mystery, but as a mirror reflecting only the human gazer, exhausting every aim, allowing no invisibility to illuminate the gaze – in effect burying the gaze through narcissistic inversion.¹² As such, a philosophical or theological thought that “expresses a concept of what it then names ‘God’” functions precisely as an idol:

The concept consigns to a sign what at first the mind grasps with it (*concipere, capere*); but such a grasp is measured not so much by the amplitude of the divine as by the scope of the *capacitas*, which can fix the divine in a specific concept only at the moment when a conception of the divine fills it, hence appeases, stops, and freezes it.¹³

A prime example of such an instance is Descartes’s naming of God as *causa sui*, i.e., God as the cause of Godself.¹⁴ In this particular example, Descartes superimposes the category of causality onto ‘God,’ thus determining ‘God’ qua ‘God’ within the limits of human reason and understanding. The human gaze remains transfixed upon its glamorous idol that merely confirms a particular mode of

¹¹ Marion (2001, p. 5); cf. Marion (1991, pp. 9–10): “The idol presents itself to man’s gaze in order that representation, and hence knowledge, can seize hold of it … it captivates the gaze only inasmuch as the gazeable comprises it.”

¹² Marion *God Without Being* (1991, pp. 12–13).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16; 35–36. A more recent metaphysical construal of the divine, to serve as an apt sparing partner for Marion’s project, is Robert Cummings Neville’s ‘indeterminate Being-itself.’ Cf. Neville (1968).

knowledge and the presuppositions of its neat and tidy logic, viz., a sterile rendering of ‘more of the same.’ If God is conceived and approached in solely human terms and categories, God is reduced to a supreme being among all beings, a primordial cause among causes, the God of onto-theology – essentially an existent among existents, a creature among creatures.¹⁵ Such is the fate of the conceptual idol of ultimate reality.¹⁶

The icon, on the other hand, “does not result from a vision but provokes one.”¹⁷ The icon maintains the presentation of the invisible by summoning the gaze to surpass itself by preventing a freezing of the visible, instead “giving rise to an infinite gaze.”¹⁸ In the icon, the human gazer is met by the counter-gaze of the re-presentative icon; the icon bears an “intention that envisages,” coming to it from an “elsewhere whose invisible strangeness saturates the visibility of the face with meaning.”¹⁹ When one gazes upon the icon, one must “(renounce) all grasping (*aisthesis*)” and “(submit) to an apocalyptic exposure”: “we become a visible mirror of an invisible gaze that subverts us in the measure of its glory.”²⁰ Unlike the idol which fixes the concept as the ‘essence’ of God, “the icon obliges the concept to welcome the distance of infinite depth … indeterminable by concept.”²¹ The concept is no longer employed to determine an essence but rather to determine an *intention*: “that of the invisible advancing into the visible and inscribing itself therein by the very reference it imposes from this visible to the invisible.”²² In the event of the mutual beholding between the prosopic icon and the human person, a profound union occurs, which “increases in the measure of distinction, and reciprocally.”²³ Distance obtains through the course of prosopic other-ing and mutual reciprocity. The icon thereby becomes the paradigmatic figure of distance and a communion of persons.

¹⁵ Cf. Tracy (1981, p. 409): “For these reasons, the major explicitly analogical traditions in theology have correctly insisted that in the theological use of analogies, the dissimilarities between God and world are as great as the similarities; the *via eminentiae* is possible only on condition of its constant fidelity to the *via negationis*.¹⁷

¹⁶ Even the fate of the predicate ‘ultimate reality’! It, too, can quickly devolve into a conceptual idol.

¹⁷ Marion, *God Without Being* (1991, p. 17).

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

²¹ Ibid., p. 23.

²² Ibid., p. 23.

²³ Ibid., p. 23; cf. ibid., p. 104: “Distance: the gap that separates definitively only as much as it unifies, since what distance gives consists in the gap itself”; and Marion, *The Idol and Distance* (2001, p. 156): “Distance brings about separation in order that love should receive all the more intimately the mystery of love. Alterity grows as much as union – solely in distance, anterior and perennial, permanent and primordial.”

Plenty Good Room for Revelation

Just as distance functions as the non-reductive sine qua non for prosopic relationality, the icon functions as the authentic paradigm of agapic love – that alone which traverses the relational distance insofar as it refuses to reduce the other to the same. In both *L'idole et distance* and *Dieu sans l'être*, Marion draws from the apophatic theological construal of Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. sixth century CE), wherein Dionysius construes the notion of ‘Goodness’ ironically and thereby dissolves any a priori conditions of possibility that would otherwise occlude divine glory. Marion issues a critique of Aquinas’ prioritization of the analogical predicate ‘Being’ (*ens*) for God, and instead retrieves Dionysius’ preference for the term ‘Goodness.’ The latter term opens the necessary distance for the human person to respond with an inexhaustible offering of praise to a non-essentialized God – a ‘God without Being’:

To begin with, (Dionysius) does not pretend that goodness constitutes the proper name of the Requisite, but that in the apprehension of goodness the dimension is cleared where the very possibility of a categorical statement concerning God ceases to be valid, and where the reversal of denomination into praise becomes inevitable. *To praise* the Requisite as such, hence *as* goodness, amounts to opening distance. Distance neither asks nor tolerates that one fill it but that one traverse it, in an infinite praise that feeds on the impossibility or, better, the impropriety of the category. The first praise, the name of goodness, therefore does *not* offer any “most proper name” and decidedly abolishes every conceptual idol of “God” in favor of the luminous darkness where God manifests (and not masks) himself, in short, where he gives himself to be envisaged by us.²⁴

In effect, ‘Goodness’ does not so much *name* God, by fixing God in temporal-spatial dimensions or philosophical concepts or even biblical metaphors, as *expresses the recognition* of an opening of distance that allows lovers to pursue one another in the ‘luminous darkness’ of unfathomable manifestation.²⁵ In this case, distance indeed functions as a concept, not as codifying divinity but as proclaiming the acquiescence of the human subject to the iconic phenomenon of divine revelation – a saturated phenomenon that bedazzles the human subject with an infinite and excessive gaze of invisibility, manifest in the visibility of the face and in the audibility of the call.²⁶

²⁴ Marion, *God Without Being* (1991, p. 76).

²⁵ Cf. Marion, *The Idol and Distance* (2001, pp. 9, 24): “The icon properly manifests the nuptial distance that weds, without confusing, the visible and the invisible – that is, the human and the divine … (God) is Unthinkable, insofar as He reveals the distance of Goodness in the encounter of creation.”

²⁶ Marion, *God Without Being* (1991, pp. 95, 100–101); cf. Marion, *The Idol and Distance* (2001, p. 144): “To move from a model of language in which the speaker makes an effort to take possession of meaning to a model in which the speaker receives meaning, with the Name, through homology: ‘to say divinely.’”

Marion expands on the Dionysian notion of distance by identifying the dynamic movement that traverses the distance: agapic love. Agapic love is characterized by Marion in terms of ‘the gift’ (*le don*) and ‘giving’ (*donation*):

In the distance, only *agape* can put everything on earth, in heaven, and in hell, in giving, because *agape* alone, by definition, is not known, is not – but gives (itself). At the heart of *agape*, following its flux as one follows a current that is too violent to go back up, too profound for one to know its source or valley, everything flows along the giving, and, by the wake traced in the water, but without grasping anything of it, everything indicates the direction and meaning of distance.²⁷

In this passage Marion demonstrates how *agape* eludes the ontological categories of *ens / esse* (but rather ‘is not’) in favor of an iconic and unlimited reality – one in which “love is not spoken, in the end, it is made” (*l’amour ne se dit pas, à la fin, il se fait*).²⁸ Whereas determining ultimate reality as ‘Being,’ even analogously, freezes the divine in a stagnate metaphysical prison, Marion liberates ultimate reality according to agapic love, which alone ensures that the distance between human and divine is not filled in but promoted. For Marion, distance is not an entity, essence, cause or effect; rather, distance is that open space that facilitates the gift of communion between God and humanity.

Thus distance provokes an apophasic ‘mute decency’ (silence), admitting that “among the divine names, none exhausts God or offers the grasp or hold of a comprehension of him.”²⁹ Yet Marion is careful to qualify such a claim by negating the tempting concession of intellectual laziness or complacency:

The unthinkable, as the distance of Goodness, gives itself – not to be comprehended but to be received. It is therefore not a question of giving up on comprehending (as if it were a question of comprehending, and not of being comprehended). It is a question of managing to receive that which becomes thinkable, or rather acceptable, only for the one who knows how to receive it. It is not a question of admitting distance despite its unthinkability, but of preciously receiving the unthinkable, as the sign and seal of the measureless origin of the distance that gives us our measure. If love reveals itself hermetically as distance (which is glossed by *cause* and *goodness*) in order to give itself, only love will be able to welcome it.³⁰

This is an agapic, rather than a Gnostic, construal of the human-divine relationship, achieved according to the immeasurable order of agapic, interpersonal love: ‘to know is to love’ according to the ‘logic of love’ along the “horizon of ‘love without being.’”³¹ Here reason operates according to the power of love (not merely

²⁷ Marion, *God Without Being* (1991, p. 106); cf. Marion, *The Idol and Distance* (2001, p. 153): “Anterior distance conceives us because it engenders us. Anterior distance demands to be received because it more fundamentally gives us [the chance] to receive ourselves in it.”

²⁸ Marion, *God Without Being* (1991, p. 107 (p. 154 in original French text)).

²⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

³⁰ Marion, *The Idol and Distance* (2001, p. 155).

³¹ Horner (2005, p. 135). Cf. Marion (2008, p. 74): “But in this case, to *see* the invisible face, I must *love* it. Love, however, comes from charity. In consequence, one must hold that the natural phenomenon of the face of the other cannot be discovered except through the light of charity, that is, through

desire) that intends the good of the other and, thus, the full appearance of the other.³² Yet the other’s appearing is not based on subjective intentionality alone, but on the acquiescence of the subject to the manifestation of the other – an interpersonal *fiat* to the bedazzling iconic radiance of the other. Especially in the case of receiving divine revelation in the form of aperture, one must surrender mastery, give in to the chase, yield to the gaze and pursuit – the simultaneous appearance and absence – of the Lover.³³

In the end, Marion insists not that ‘God is,’ but that ‘*God gives*’ (thereby eschewing onto-theo-logy): “The giving, in allowing to be divined how ‘it gives,’ a giving, offers the only accessible trace of He who gives.”³⁴ God is recognizable in the manifold gifts that pour forth from God, the givenness of all reality, and ultimately the very ‘*es gibt*’ of Godself, i.e., ‘*GXd gives*.’³⁵ It is through God’s givenness and giving-ness that creation springs forth through distance: “*Because* it forever ‘remains in an inaccessible light’ (1 Timothy 6:16) the unthinkable calls to participation beings that have no common measure with it – no common measure other than a reciprocal disproportion in distance.”³⁶ This participation in divine givenness is constituted by receptivity and reciprocity on the part of humanity: “Man therefore does not receive the gift as such except in welcoming the act of giving, that is, through repetition by giving himself … Only the gift of the gift can receive the gift.”³⁷ While Marion avoids establishing a vacuously cyclic ‘economy of exchange’ (within which no authentic gift can be given and received as such due to the phenomena of debt, currency, supply/demand, etc.), he suggests that the phenomenological

the ‘auxiliary’ of Revelation. Without the revelation of the transcendence of love, the phenomenon of the face, and thus of the other, simply cannot be seen. This is an exemplary case of ‘Christian philosophy,’” and p. 152: “… only love can give access to the ‘great reason.’ The love revealed by the Word, hence by the *Logos*, is deployed as a *logos*, hence as a rationality. And a rationality by full right, because it allows us to reach the closest and most internal phenomena, those experienced by the flesh which intuition saturates … But Christ has not only shown the logic of love, he has demonstrated and proven it in facts and acts by his passion and his resurrection”; Marion (2002c, p. 87): “Loving no longer consists trivially in seeing or in being seen, nor in desiring or inciting desire, but in experiencing the crossing of the gazes within, first, the crossing of aims.”

³² Cf. Pascal (1995, p. 127 [423–424 (277–278)]): “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing: we know this in countless ways. I say that it is natural for the heart to love the universal being or itself, according to its allegiance, and it hardens itself against either as it chooses. You have rejected one and kept the other. Is it reason that makes you love yourself? It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason.”

³³ Cf. Song of Songs 7:10–12, 14: “I am my beloved’s, / and his desire is for me. / Come, my beloved, / let us go forth into the fields, / and lodge in the villages; / let us go out early to the vineyards, / and see whether the vines have budded, / whether the grape blossoms have opened / and the pomegranates are in bloom. / There I will give you my love … Make haste, my beloved, / and be like a gazelle/ or a young stag / upon the mountains of spices” (RSV).

³⁴ Marion, *God Without Being* (1991, p. 105).

³⁵ Ibid., p. 105.

³⁶ Marion, *The Idol and Distance* (2001, p. 156).

³⁷ Ibid., p. 166.

reduction to givenness, including an ‘erotic reduction,’ *lets* phenomena appear as they give *themselves in the flesh*, rather than obscuring the possibility of their giving by deciding upon a priori conditions for phenomenality.³⁸ In such a manner is a path for the possibility of the phenomenon of revelation opened, one which does not draw a line in the sand between what we can know and what we cannot, anymore than one may attempt to draw an impassable (read ‘impassible’) line between beings (*Seiendes*) and Being (*Sein*).

Opening onto a Third Way

With all of his concern for mitigating the royal prerogatives of metaphysics, as well as his overt Dionysian influence, Marion has been identified as an apophatic thinker, though he himself resists such an easy label. In his early work, *L'idole et distance* (1977), Marion develops a thoroughly apophatic theology, in response to an overly kataphatic onto-theology that suffered its demise at the hands of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century ‘masters of suspicion.’ In fact, Marion devotes an entire chapter to the thought of Dionysius in this work. Likewise, Marion’s 1982 thesis, *Dieu sans l’être*, sounds a dark and opaque Dionysian tone. However, Marion can be seen nuancing an overtly apophatic position in his 1997 presentation, *In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of “Negative Theology.”*³⁹ In this essay, Marion presents what he calls a ‘third way’ for (un-)naming the divine. Prescinding from an exclusively apophatic position (or at least the caricature thereof), Marion suggests a third way to which both kataphatic and apophatic construals must yield. In this essay Marion still refers to his position as Dionysian, but further attempts to dissolve a binary ‘metaphysics of presence’ by asserting a ternary route of de-nomination whereby language functions pragmatically and liturgically by “transporting itself in the direction of Him whom it denominates.”⁴⁰ Marion claims a pathway that is frozen neither in kataphaticism nor apophaticism, but extends through their dialectical dance in acts of prayer and praise, resulting in a ‘theology of absence,’ marked as such by the giving-ness of the saturated phenomenon.

As evinced above, the saturated phenomenon is a phenomenon which exceeds and saturates intentionality – an intentionality which tends to arrive at epistemological adequation (read ‘certainty’) through the concept, but is bedazzled in the face of the saturated phenomenon that eludes all circumscribing conceptual claims.

³⁸ Cf. Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-logical Introduction* (2005, pp. 135–146) on the ‘erotic reduction’ proposed in Marion’s *Le phénomène érotique*.

³⁹ Caputo and Scanlon (1999, pp. 20–53) (including response of Jacques Derrida). Revised in Marion (2002b, pp. 128–162).

⁴⁰ Caputo and Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (1999, p. 27).

Language here functions solely as a vehicle of an erotic intentionality of the human subject, met by the bedazzling intuitive and iconic radiance of divine glory: “excess conquers comprehension and what language can say.”⁴¹ In effect, and in the end, words are swallowed up by the Word: “*the theologian must go beyond the text to the Word.*”⁴² It is not by coincidence that Marion gives the name ‘*Hors-texte*’ (literally meaning ‘beyond the text’) to the second part of his *Dieu sans l’être*.

By citing this earlier text from *Dieu sans l’être*, one is left wondering if Marion’s position put forth in *In the Name* can in fact be called a ‘nuanced position.’ It appears that Marion is left conceding to the idol-o-clastic power of the apophatic. However, the nuance of Marion’s 1997 essay is to be found especially in his brief reference to the Heideggerian phenomenological *as*. Though Marion assesses Dionysius’ use of the preposition ‘as’ (‘hos) in *L’idole et distance*, the mention of Heidegger’s phenomenological *as* suggests a subtle inward (and perhaps subconscious) self-critique insofar as the phenomenological *as* signifies “the interpretive comprehension of what is aimed at on the basis of and to the measure of the intonation of the one who intends.”⁴³ For Heidegger, the event of appropriation (*Ereignis*) is shaped by the construction of meaning “when entities within-the-world are discovered along with the Being of Dasein – that is, when they have come to be understood.”⁴⁴ The phenomenological *as* acts in a prepositional way to mediate the distance between the perceiving subject and the self-disclosing phenomenon, especially in the instance of divine self-revelation. However, it is precisely this phenomenological *as* that opens the possibility of the ‘third way’ that Marion proposes in *In the Name*. Without the kataphatic sway of the linguistic *as*, there would be no intentionality to be saturated. The kataphatic *as* paves the way for the invisible aperture of absence to cross the threshold of visibility, only to disappear therein.⁴⁵ Distance is created as language serves as a bridge to span the distance without absolving it. Language functions pragmatically instead of predicatively or nominally: “It is no longer a matter of naming or attributing something to something, but of aiming in the direction of..., of relating to..., of comporting oneself towards..., of reckoning with ... – in short of dealing with....”⁴⁶

In spite of Marion’s proposal of a ‘third way’ beyond the kataphatic or apophatic alone, one may be left to wonder if Marion (unintentionally) claims the ‘third way’ as a guise for an ultimately covert aphophatic theology. Is not an incarnational theology (read ‘Christian philosophy’) consonant with the iconicity of *language*?

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴² Marion, *God Without Being* (1991, p. 149); cf. ibid., p. 157: “In short, the ‘progress’ of theology works only to overcome the irreducible delay of the eucharistic interpretation of the text in relation to the manifestation of the Word.”

⁴³ Caputo and Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (1999, p. 30).

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1962, p. 192, para. 32).

⁴⁵ A more recent application of the phenomenological *as* in Marion’s work can be found in his essay, “The Recognition of the Gift” in Ciocan (2009, pp. 15–28).

⁴⁶ Caputo and Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (1999, p. 30).

Must language give leave to the power of manifestation, or does not manifestation of the invisible rely on the sacramental efficacy of the written text just as the spoken word for its communicability?⁴⁷ To return to Heidegger, disclosure of meaning occurs in and through language – language as flesh of thought rather than as dispensable vessel for the transport of the subject to the ‘observation deck’ from which to behold the self-manifesting phenomenon alone in its self-givenness. If ‘language is the house of Being,’ is it permissible to prescind so rapidly and amnestically from language within a sacramental view of the cosmos? These are the questions that Marion will have to face as a similar apophatic hymn of praise to that of his, echoes from the caverns of the *ekklesia* of hermeneutics, suspicion and deconstruction.

Nevertheless, Marion proffers considerable insights for thinking ultimate reality in postmodern times. Like his sixth-century counterpart, Dionysius, Marion urges vigilance on guard against fashioning particular images or conceptions of God into idols, or reducing ultimate reality to an absolute concept. Instead, ultimate reality is permitted to be precisely ... – that denominated..., that eludes all naming and fixed images, and yet permits the employment of language for the sake of praise, blessing and prayer. Such *doxology* can only be maintained via paths of purification, conversion and contemplation. The passageway of praise is found to be the Dionysian thoroughfare of unknowing, a space of distance maintained by the agapic intercourse of countenances that gaze upon one another in utmost prosopic intimacy. *Deus absconditus. Deus revelatus.*

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⁴⁷ Cf. Chauvet (1995, pp. 190–227).

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Suggested Readings: Negative Theology

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Part XII

Diversity of Models of God and

Alternative Ultimate Realities

Introduction to the Diversity of Models of Ultimate Realities

Michael Thune

John Hick has famously argued that the spiritual and moral fruits displayed by adherents of the great religious traditions should compel us to think of these traditions as more or less equally salvific – where Hick understands ‘salvation’ to be “an actual change in human beings from self-centeredness to a new orientation centered in the ultimate divine Reality.”¹ Yet Hick acknowledges that his pluralist intuitions are challenged by the fact – and it is a fact – that many adherents across the spectrum of these traditions claim a privileged status of some sort or other for their respective tradition. This privileged status, it is often believed, is the inevitable result of propositional commitments essential to one tradition that are either not endorsed or explicitly rejected by other traditions. Clearly, this way of privileging one tradition over others proceeds along an epistemic route, as opposed to a practical or ethical route. The attempt to privilege one tradition by arguing that its adherents display significant moral gains over adherents of other traditions, is, according to Hick, a futile one. But Hick takes seriously the logical and epistemic implications of religious diversity and attempts to meet this challenge by offering a Kantian, split-level view – where the central beliefs adopted by the major religious traditions are phenomenally true but noumenally false.

Philosophical analysis of diverse models of ultimate reality must address this same challenge. In this section, several philosophers take up this task in unique ways. The main aim of this introduction will be to provide the reader with an overview of each article and the way(s) in which its author addresses the challenges presented by the diversity of models of ultimate reality. Along the way, however, we will take notice of some of the papers’ strengths and weaknesses.

¹ Hick in Quinn and Meeker (2000, p. 58).

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In “Behind, Between, and Beyond Anthropomorphic Models of Ultimate Reality,” Wesley J. Wildman notes that some religious philosophers “explain the persistence and recurrence of the great models by allowing that they are all more or less true – theoretically true as well as found to be true-in-practice in many hearts and minds” and that they “seek ways to manage the problem of plural conflicting models, usually relying on concepts of perspective-taking or inclusion, superiority or sublation to explain how truth might be one even though models are many” (p. 408). Wildman’s own favored approach is that of the ‘comparing inquirer’, where different models of ultimate reality are treated as hypotheses to be measured according to salient data sets such as those of cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, and comparative religions. Employing relevant criteria from these data sets, Wildman concludes that we can judge some models as better than others and that while the ‘highly anthropomorphic’ models (such as personal theism) are useful in their own ways, they are not among the “very great models.” In this way, Wildman’s approach is a kind of qualified pluralism, where everyone makes the team and no-one is the undisputed MVP, so to speak, but not everyone gets the same amount of playing time.

Wildman asserts that “all models of ultimate reality are anthropomorphic, strictly speaking, because they are human constructions and limited by the human imagination” (p. 410). While his own view, he tells us, is that there is no supernatural being or supernatural realm from which revelation could come, he argues that if there is such revelation, it would invariably be processed and conditioned by its human receivers, in a culturally and linguistically limited context. Many religious philosophers and theologians will acknowledge the inevitable ‘human element’ in their preferred model but will surely question whether the strict anthropomorphism that Wildman claims for all models is too restrictive. For it could be argued that Wildman’s analysis effectively rules out the possibility that the content of a given model is, at least in part, not only divinely given but divinely preserved and untainted (much like how an old stained-glass window with holes will let in both colored light and direct sunlight). And this, to continue the objection, unduly affects Wildman’s preferences for certain data sets (such as cognitive and evolutionary psychology) over other possible contenders (such as those described in Hustwit’s paper [p. 11]), when comparing models.

In “Can Models of God Compete?”, Jeremy R. Hustwit claims that if models are “pure cultural projections, then competition between them is difficult or pointless” (p. 2). He suggests that there is a continuum of responses to the question of whether God or self figures more prominently in the content of our models. He says, “At one end, the subjective pole, our own existential situation determines nearly all the attributes we assign to God. Here theology collapses into anthropology. At the other end of the spectrum, the objective pole, causal influence of the divine other determines nearly all the content we load into a model.” He then notes that “[e]very position in between these extremes entails that at least some content in a model of God can be traced back to cultural perspective, and at least some content comes from the divine reality” (pp. 1–2). Hustwit distinguishes four types of models that show up at different places on the continuum: ‘mysteriosophy’, ‘theopoetics’, ‘optimistic realism’, and ‘reticent realism’. Mysteriosophical models, he says, lean almost completely against the subjective pole and resemble Hick’s split-level Kantian view, referenced

above, and contemporary theopoetic models (which have their roots in the phenomenological and hermeneutical tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer) are not significantly less subjective. According to Hustwit, not only is it the case that both of these kinds of models cannot compete (since there are no universal or objective criteria by which to judge them), they also fail to do justice to the realistic intent found in most religious traditions. He says that “to take mysteriosophy or theopoetics as the *only* proper description of (or prescription for) God modeling would distort the religious experience of millions. As [John] Cobb observes, overly constructivist theories of religion create equality among religions by offending all religious persons equally (Cobb 1999)” (p. 9). Hustwit decides against optimistic realism because these models (e.g. A.N. Whitehead’s) underestimate the subjective influences of culture and ideology, and instead favors reticent realism as the best model of God-modeling.

With reticent realism, models can compete toward more accurate descriptions of ultimate reality. Of course, there will need to be appropriate criteria for judging – such as “internal coherence, predictability, explanatory scope, ethical consistency, etc.” (p. 11) – and, notes Hustwit, there is no universal consensus about what these criteria should be.

William C. Chittick, in “Ibn ‘Arabī on the Ultimate Model of the Ultimate,” sheds important light on a thinker that may not be as familiar to contemporary philosophers as other names from that same period in history, such as Avicenna and Averroës. Chittick sees in Ibn ‘Arabī a constructivist, pre-Kantian model in which “Ultimate Reality in itself is unknowable, unspeakable, ineffable” (p. 24) and in which “every depiction will necessarily be a constriction, a knotting, a binding, a colored lens, incapable of representing the Ultimate Reality in itself” (p. 25). But this does not mean that models cannot compete. While they cannot compete towards the end of disclosing Ultimate Reality as it is *an sich*, they can compete phenomenally. Phenomenal disclosure of the Real is ubiquitous, since the Real is “a no-thing that is thereby distinct from every thing and that gives rise to all things by its own self-delimitation” (p. 4), where this self-disclosure “assumes three all-comprehensive forms: the cosmos, the human being, and scripture” (p. 6). Thus, says Chittick, Ibn ‘Arabī emphasizes that striving for the ‘best’ model of the Ultimate will mean striving to develop the divine character traits as disclosed in these three ‘books’.

Still, Chittick sees a very robust pluralism in Ibn ‘Arabī. While the prophets are the archetypal human embodiments of the divine character traits, each prophet is “the embodiment of a perfect model of Ultimate Reality, with the understanding that no model can be adequate to that Reality, so its perfect embodiments will necessarily be diverse” (p. 24). This is why, according to Chittick, Ibn ‘Arabī strives to offer us a model of models which is at once no model at all. For, while we have no model of the (noumenal) Ultimate, we can pursue a model that accommodates the diverse forms of the Ultimate’s (phenomenal) self-disclosure – and this would be to arrive at a ‘model of models’.

According to Jerry Martin, models of ultimate reality do permit “revealing glances” of the noumenal Real, though their inherently perspectival character ensures a thoroughgoing pluralism. What is particularly interesting about his “The Many-Sided Reality: A Model of Models,” is that he attempts to do something that

Hick could not (or at least, did not attempt to do) – namely, to construct a model that accommodates the pluralist’s intuition that there is spiritual truth in more than one tradition, maintains an element of realism, and does this without splitting reality into phenomena and noumena.

Martin argues that all models reflect reality itself (hence their realist element), though they do so from a given vantage point or perspective (and this is what motivates a robust pluralism). This means that, from each perspective, some features of reality will be revealed prominently while others will be distorted or occluded. He illustrates this in its religious context by exploring five salient perspectives which are characteristically Jewish, Christian, Taoist, Hindu, and Buddhist, respectively. The elements of reality in the foreground of one perspective, says Martin, may be distorted or occluded in others, and that “[d]ifferent disclosures of Reality need not be regarded as mutually contradictory” (p. 9). For example, each perspective discloses something about the human predicament, and does this variously as “disobedience to God, a lack of attunement to the Way, or an attachment to desires” (p. 9).

One challenge facing this way of modeling can be illustrated by thinking of a car accident at a given location *l* and time *t*, which was witnessed by several people from different perspectives, each giving a partial picture of what happened. Having two or more different perspectives on a car accident is, of course, a different situation from one where one person says there was a car accident at that location and time and another person says there was no car accident at that location and time. It is also different from a situation where one person says the cars were each traveling well past the speed limit when they collided and another person says they were traveling well within the speed limit. As David Brockman tells us in his article, “*Prima facie*, coherence clearly plays at least some part. One could hardly be satisfied by a model that, say, holds *both* that God created the cosmos *and* that God did not in any way create the cosmos” (p. 1). Two or more perspectives can, of course, be: (a) different but not conflicting, or (b) different and conflicting. Martin’s account assumes that (a) is true with respect to the different religious models he considers, but making good on this assumption seems to require (in Martin’s words) that we “revise our customary ideas of what is logical, of what predicates contradict one another, and seek instead to find ways to express multiple truths” (p. 11). It also seems to require that we abandon one highly attractive desideratum of modeling, namely, that of authentically describing the self-understanding of (millions of) adherents of the major religious traditions who *do* take their respective tradition to conflict with others. Martin does not seem to regard this as too high a price. But for some readers, this will be cost-prohibitive.

In “Incoherence and Truth in Models of the Ultimate: A Badiouan Approach,” David R. Brockman suggests that internal inconsistency in a model may not be as epistemically unattractive as one might be inclined to think. Rather, says Brockman, a model’s internal inconsistency can serve to point *beyond* that model to that which is truly real. Taking a cue from philosopher Alain Badiou, Brockman attempts to show how models are “inherently limited by the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization by which they are constructed and ordered” and that it is “through their

incoherencies that models may be effective in pointing to the Ultimate” (p. 2). He explores this possibility by considering the very personal model of the Ultimate found in the Christian liberation theologians Muñoz and Richard, and the strictly impersonal Taoist model of Huajing Ni.

Brockman sees an inconsistency in Muñoz and Richard’s strong emphasis on God as the very immanent friend of the poor and the oppressed, on the one hand, and their allowance that God is “different” and transcendent, on the other. For Brockman, the apparent slippage from (very anthropomorphic) talk of a personal God to talk of God’s transcendence is “an evental site” where light from outside the model penetrates and illuminates “the ‘truth’ that the Ultimate may be *both* ‘intensely personal’ *and* beyond the personal” (p. 9). Similarly, says Brockman, Huajing Ni characterizes the Tao in very impersonal terms and attempts to marginalize or exclude any personal attributes. Yet here, too, light shines through the cracks, as it were. Brockman argues that Ni’s language on prayer slips in “highly personal characteristics in an otherwise impersonal presentation” of the Tao – an evental site which suggests the possibility that the Tao “may be both personal and impersonal” (p. 12).

Brockman thus attempts to sort out the epistemological vices and virtues of coherence as applied to models of the ultimate. He concludes that we may “reasonably expect that the Ultimate is itself internally coherent (e.g., it does not both exist and not exist),” but that some attributes of the Ultimate “may violate the standards of consistency and non-contradiction that we expect of, say, scientific theories” (p. 16). This way of modeling, says Brockman, negatively helps us to recognize the human, constructivist element that inevitably colors our concepts of the Ultimate; positively, however, this can make our models more successful at pointing beyond themselves to the Ultimate. Readers will notice one omission in Brockman’s paper, perhaps thought to be fairly significant, and this has to do with whether we should attempt to compare models and, if so, what criteria should be selected for such a task.

Finally, Samuel Ruhmkorff explores some implications that recent debates in the epistemology of disagreement may have for the present discussion about diversity of models. In “The Equal Weight Argument against Religious Exclusivism,” he argues that one popular attempt to secure the pluralist thesis in the philosophy of religion, one which makes use of the Equal Weight view, fails. Ruhmkorff’s speculative conclusion is that a better route to pluralism would proceed via ‘religious permissivism’, a view that maintains that different responses to disagreement (in this case, religious disagreement) – such as some forms of pluralism and some forms of exclusivism – may be equally rational.

Equal Weight, as Ruhmkorff explains it, is the claim (notably defended by philosophers such as Elga and Christensen) that “one should give the credences of epistemic peers as much consideration as one’s own credences, and therefore adjust one’s credences in response to learning of one’s disagreement with one’s peers” (p. 2). The notion of an ‘epistemic peer’ has been variously formulated but, as Ruhmkorff employs the term, it refers to “someone whom you judge to be as rational, intelligent, and unimpaired as you and to have the same evidence as you” (p. 3).

The Equal Weight view about disagreement is thought by some to secure pluralism over against exclusivism, since the realization that one has epistemic peers across the various religious traditions should motivate one to give equal credence to one's own religious beliefs and the religious beliefs of those in the other traditions. Ruhmkorff spends several pages exploring ways that exclusivists might try to evade the implications of Equal Weight for their position, and argues that they all fail (some of his arguments here are likely to be quite controversial²). The only way for exclusivists to steer clear of these implications, he says, is to reject Equal Weight altogether.

Perhaps ironically, exclusivists are on the same team as pluralists with respect to Equal Weight. For, according to Ruhmkorff, “the universe of epistemic peers disagreeing about religion is larger than peers of different religious faiths” and that, since pluralists will have epistemic peers who are agnostics and atheists, pluralists “will be compelled by Equal Weight to lower their credence in the truth of all religions and raise their credence in the nonexistence of God” (p. 10). Because agnosticism is the (perhaps unhappy) medium here, Ruhmkorff argues that pluralists should likewise reject Equal Weight.

Ruhmkorff then proposes that, given their “admirable desire to validate the thinking and beliefs of reasonable people in the area of religion,” pluralists should embrace *Epistemic Permissiveness*, the view that “[t]here is sometimes more than one rational credence for a given proposition relative to a given body of evidence” (p. 11). Citing White (2005) and Feldman (2007), Ruhmkorff acknowledges that this principle is controversial. But he suggests that both pluralists and exclusivists have an interest in embracing an application of this principle toward religious disagreement, one that he calls ‘religious permissivism’. With religious permissivism, it is “within the bounds of proper belief to hold that one’s own religion is correct and others are incorrect; it is also within the bounds of proper belief to hold that there is truth within a multiplicity of religions” (p. 12).

The contentiousness of epistemic permissiveness is not the only matter of concern for Ruhmkorff’s project here. For presumably, as Ruhmkorff says, permissivists will not want just any belief to be credited with rationality and will therefore need to delineate rational boundaries of some sort. Such a task doesn’t seem easy from within a permissivist framework. But without seeing our way clear toward articulating plausible boundaries for rationality, Ruhmkorff will have to be content with having established, at most, the following conditional: if epistemic permissiveness is true,

²For example, he says that “[e]ven if we bracket off all of the religious points of difference between, say, a Christian and a Buddhist, there will be enough shared religious beliefs such that the two parties have grounds to consider themselves epistemic peers” (p. 8). This claim will no doubt strike some readers as hard to sustain. One can imagine a classical Buddhist saying to a Christian, “You’ve got a long way to go towards reaching enlightenment, for you have not yet overcome the illusion of permanence (viz. your belief in an eternal God) when all is impermanent. So I respectfully deny that you are my epistemic peer.” And we can likewise imagine a Christian saying to a classical Buddhist, “You insist that all is impermanent and thereby deny the eternal and immutable Author of all things. Since you fail to grasp a rather essential piece of the storyline here, I must respectfully refrain from taking you to be my epistemic peer.”

then it *might* also turn out that at least some exclusivists and at least some pluralists can be equally rational in their respective positions (the scenario Ruhmkorff desires). This modest conditional has an antecedent that is left undefended in the paper. As Ruhmkorff himself acknowledges, there remains much work here to be done. Thus, it may be that Ruhmkorff has underestimated the severity of the challenges to permissivism given by White and Feldman, and/or that the range of permitted disagreement in religious matters is not wide enough to allow for interesting disagreement (e.g. disagreement where both pluralism and exclusivism are rational). In other words, it may be argued that permissivism is not very plausible, or, if permissivism is plausible, it is only when the range of permitted disagreement is narrow, whereas Ruhmkorff needs the range to be wide to get an interesting result.

In conclusion, a major thread running through the articles in this section involves sympathy for Hick's (and others') pluralist intuitions when it comes to modeling ultimate reality. The articles offer a range of ideas on how to confront the relevant challenges associated with pluralism, and they do so in interesting ways. Though the authors disagree with each other on some important points, their work enables us to pull together insights from diverse academic perspectives and provides a much-needed resource for future dialogue and research on this very significant topic.

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Behind, Between, and Beyond Anthropomorphic Models of Ultimate Reality

Wesley J. Wildman

Introduction

The phrase “models of ultimate reality” (or “ultimacy models”) immediately suggests the plural, constructed, and approximate character of all thinking about ultimate realities.¹ That such thinking produces manifold theories and portrayals of ultimate reality is the first fact of comparative religious ideas and a central problem for religious philosophy. The people who make these models are curious and creative, gripped by fascinating instincts and motivations, and typically immersed in great traditions of religious philosophy.

These imaginative constructions are also conditioned by the prodigiously diverse contexts in which they are first created and then received and transformed. Their social embodiment leaves models of ultimate reality vulnerable to exploitation for the sake of the social control for which religion is justly famous. Witness the likelihood that, if a model of God as a black man had been widespread in the early American colonies, African slavery in America would have been impossible to rationalize the way it was by some sincere theologians. Yet the embodiment of religious ideas also allows models to illuminate and liberate questing souls in generation after generation. Witness the frequency with which artists portray Jesus with the facial features of local cultures.

¹ I will speak of “ultimacy models” rather than “God models” because I am most interested in ultimate reality and think that God is a valuable but potentially parochial name for it. Of course, sometimes God is treated merely as a component of ultimate reality, as in Alfred North Whitehead’s thought, rather than synonymous with it. And in some traditions, reflection on ultimate reality is regarded as secondary, and as a distraction from pursuing the ultimate paths that lead to liberation; this is true of some forms of Buddhism.

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Because of social embodiment, models of ultimate reality are subject to correction in a disorganized process of practical and conceptual testing against the ultimate reality that is actually engaged and registered in human life (such as it is). Some models fail under the stress of what amounts to a process of natural selection of ideas. For example, the shadowy yet potent idea of God as a white man shattered under the weight of experience. That is slightly encouraging for empirically minded philosophers who prize referential adequacy in their models. Some models survive the tests of time and experience. They are not always popular—witness mystical theologies of ultimacy as blinding darkness, God beyond God, reality beyond comprehension—but they are imaginatively stimulating, conceptually robust, flexible, plausible, and practical to a superior degree. They can be theoretically elaborated into comprehensive and consistent systems of thought. They are repeatedly rediscovered within a single tradition, and their core instincts almost always appear, re-configured and re-weighted, in every tradition of religious philosophy. These are the great models, the ultimacy models with which every student of religious philosophy must come to terms. This essay addresses how to manage the plural and constructed character of the great models.

Some religious philosophers explain the persistence and recurrence of the great models by allowing that they are all more or less true—theoretically true as well as found to be true-in-practice in many hearts and minds. They then seek ways to manage the problem of plural conflicting models, usually relying on concepts of perspective-taking or inclusion, superiority or sublation to explain how truth might be one even though models are many.

Other religious philosophers reject inquiry into ultimate reality as fatuous and futile. They argue that inquiry exchanges existentially vibrant engagement with ultimate reality for an absurdly arrogant evaluation process in which philosophers decide on matters that necessarily lie beyond the powers of human reason. Either pick a tradition and invest in it and its internal intellectual debates, they urge, or else make a museum of models that, like an art gallery, permits the capacious soul to appreciate each one as a unique testimony to the depth and wonder of life. In fact, I prefer to think of this Museum in more dynamic terms, as an array of excellent dancers, representing both living spiritual insights and ideas preserved in philosophic traditions whose members are devoted to commentary and debate. Investing in a single tradition and appreciating many traditions can be practical and honorable ways to manage the problem of plural models. In either case, however, the comparing inquirer's theoretical and existential problem of reconciling conflicting models remains unresolved.

Still other religious philosophers feel dismayed by the moral priorities of the comparing inquirers, the mono-traditional investors, and the multi-traditional appreciators. These responsible worriers see the after-effects and side-effects of religious ideas as they are embodied in institutions and activated in social contexts. They decry all impractical philosophy, and impractical religious philosophy above all, as wrongly putting the philosopher's pleasurable pastime before the world's pain, or as blindly supporting the vested interests of religious institutions when trenchant critique would be more appropriate. And they particularly hate having their viewpoint

labeled, framed, and hung in the museum of models where steely critical edge yields to the infinite nausea of perpetual legitimate contrasts.

Finally, some religious philosophers take a maximally modest road. They avoid inquiry and morality, and scrupulously confine themselves to analysis. These analytical ascetics try not to construct anything. They aim instead to police the constructions of others, looking for signs of structural weakness and making design refinements. They are often mono-traditional investors engaged in intricate logical analysis and defense of their local tradition's beliefs. Some are comparativists moving around the museum of models like art critics. However they operate, they remain faithful to their modest creed and deny themselves the dangerous thrills of imaginative construction and inquiry.

Most religious philosophers cannot help themselves. Each just tends to be a comparing inquirer, a mono-traditional investor, a multi-traditional appreciator, a responsible worrier, or an analytical ascetic. The best of them can see virtues in every way. But most have a way, emerging from the exquisite tangle of nature and nurture that defines preference in human beings, even philosophers. Such philosophic preferences run deep and rarely change more than once in a lifetime, if at all. For better or worse, I am drawn most strongly to the way of the comparing inquirer. I recognize the viability of other ways and appreciate their virtues. But I experience the plural, constructed, and approximate character of all models of ultimate reality intellectually as a puzzle to be solved, and existentially as an invitation to engage ultimate reality through thinking and feeling and acting toward a solution.

I consider this preliminary confessio essential for avoiding wasteful conflicts about God talk within religious philosophy that arise due to stylistic variations. Openly acknowledging our preferences as such honors the wisdom of other ways and prompts us to take seriously their criticisms of us. In my case, I need to deal with criticisms of comparing inquiry as a futile and fatuous effort to control the uncontrollable, a tiresome and ugly attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible, and a morally confused evasion of philosophic responsibility. Here I merely acknowledge the plurality of approaches and associated criticisms and proceed.

The three prepositions in the title of this essay correspond to its three major sections. Looking behind anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality refers to evaluating them through understanding their origins as imaginative constructions. This will involve assessing the prodigious capabilities and subtle liabilities of human cognition, and taking account of evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and social-historical context. Poking around between anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality refers to gaining traction for inquiry by means of critical comparison of the relative strengths and weaknesses of various models. This will involve thinking through the logical requirements of comparative inquiry and illustrating it in relation to highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality. Moving beyond anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality refers to a comprehensive coordination of the great models in some wider intellectual scheme. This will involve exploring a mystical theology that relativizes and relates models while explaining the senses in which they truly express ultimate reality—both through describing it more or less accurately and through enabling people to engage it more or less authentically.

My approach here is ambitiously two-leveled. On one level, I describe a method to support comparative inquiry into the plurality of models of ultimate reality. On another level, I articulate a particular ultimacy model, one whose special virtue is to make sense of the diversity of the great models, and whose corresponding liability is its lack of concrete intelligibility. Given the space available, in some places I gesture toward arguments that cannot be presented. But there is sufficient space to show in some detail how the practices of looking behind, between, and beyond models of ultimate reality are philosophically feasible and fruitful.

Behind Anthropomorphic Models of Ultimate Reality

God does not speak and think in Arabic or Hebrew, in Sanskrit or King James English. Claims to the contrary are incoherent in an amusingly self-canceling way. Thus, if there is supernatural revelation at all, upon reception it must be pressed into temporally bound, culturally conditioned, and linguistically limited forms of thought. In fact, my working hypothesis is that there is no supernatural revelation, because there is no supernatural being to convey it, and no supernatural realm to house it. Rather, revelation is best understood as found in every moment of human insight, in the depths of nature, and in the emergence of intense value that nature supports. But whether or not I am correct about this, ultimacy models do not just drop from another realm into this one, packaged and polished. We make our ultimacy models, under the impact of many influences and experiences.

One of those influences is the all-too-familiar fact of finitude. Whether it is fights with loved ones, failures of imagination, the frustrations of sickness, or the finality of death, finitude pervades the human condition. Even if religious traditions are right that there are ways to overcome the bizarre and bad ways we deal with our finite existence, there is no escape from finitude as such. This piece of practical knowledge is directly relevant to how religious philosophers should assess ultimacy models: they must embrace a thoroughgoing fallibilism. While we may be able to minimize imperfections through disciplined effort and technical expertise cultivated in specialized discourse communities, all models of ultimate reality bear the marks of their finite makers, like DNA within organisms.

The marks of the human condition on ultimacy models include the conceptual defects that we associate with anthropomorphism. But all models of ultimate reality are anthropomorphic, strictly speaking, because they are human constructions and limited by the human imagination. So our concern is really with excessive or careless anthropomorphism rather than with anthropomorphism as such. Like other forms of theoretical excess, excessive anthropomorphism is not always easy to detect. Much religious symbolism is self-consciously anthropomorphic, as when Michelangelo portrays God as a bearded man reaching out to enliven Adam, or when Hindus portray Siva as a many-armed man dancing in a ring of fire. The world of religious symbolism is replete with obviously anthropomorphic imagery that promotes spiritual engagement, and there is nothing naïve about it. Moreover, some

philosophic models ascribe to God characteristics that are obviously derived from human experience, such as feelings, intentions, plans, and powers to act. But the philosophers who do this thoughtfully argue that this level of anthropomorphism is appropriate and indeed necessary to make sense of the claims made about God in the religious traditions whose narrative structures they attempt to elaborate in formal philosophic terms.

We can minimize anthropomorphic defects by paying careful attention to the way we make ultimacy models and the purposes served in the making of them. Historians and sociologists have traditionally played the leading roles in helping philosophers become aware of how contextual factors and group interests influence ultimacy models. The theological rationalizations for American enslavement of Africans I mentioned above reflect this type of awareness. The so-called masters of suspicion, among whom I would count Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), Karl Marx (1818–1883), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), speculated about hidden psychic motivations and social reflexes at work in the origins of ultimacy models prevalent within religion.² In recent decades, the sciences bearing on human cognition have come to the fore with evolutionary insights into the cognitive factors playing a role in the imaginative construction of ultimacy models.³

All explanations for the origins of religious ideas are inevitably speculative to some degree. Consider a few examples. First, the historian's smoking-gun evidence would be a document in which a philosopher states his or her reasons for introducing a particular ultimacy model. But that is not decisive. Saint Augustine's autobiographical account in *Confessions* of the motivations and reasoning surrounding his shifting conception of God is subject both to what could be made conscious and to what he was prepared to make public.⁴

Second, the human sciences can explain how the idea of God as a personal being attentive to every detail of our lives and purposefully active in the world serves the interests of strengthening corporate identity of certain religious groups—those groups that prize the spiritual ideal of a personal relationship with God and the moral ideal of a holy life lived transparently before a divine judge. But the fact that

² See, for example, Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (London: John Chapman, 1854) and *The Essence of Religion: God the Image of Man, Man's Dependence on Nature the Last and Only Source of Religion* (New York: A. K. Butts, 1873); Karl Marx, *Marx on Religion*, John Raines, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1933). Sigmund Freud offers several takes on unconscious psychic structures relevant to the psychological origins of religion, including *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: J. Cape & H. Smith, 1930), *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1928), and *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939).

³ An excellent survey is Patrick McNamara, *Where God and Science Meet: How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion*, 3 vols. (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2006). The three volumes are titled *Evolution, Genes, and the Religious Brain; The Neurology of Religious Experience; and The Psychology of Religious Experience*.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

there is a fit between a particular model of God and the identity needs of a particular group probably bears more on the survival value of that model than on the motivations for creating it in the first place.

Third, the cognitive sciences can take us behind the scenes of human conscious awareness into the realm of unconscious motivations rooted in cognitive structures that were originally selected for their fitness-conferring benefits or that are side-effects of other characteristics that were evolutionarily advantageous. But we are left guessing about the evolutionary scenarios that make sense of these claims about human cognition.⁵

Fourth, cognitive psychology can devise experiments that disclose the presence of cognitive biases but it, too, can only speculate as to how they figure in the construction of models of ultimate reality. People routinely exercise their freedom and their rational capacities to resist their basic tendencies in every domain of life, including the cognitive and religious domains, so the sheer existence of cognitive biases is not decisive for an interpretation of the origins of ultimacy models.

These examples show that the philosopher seeking an understanding of models of ultimate reality by analyzing the processes relevant to their creation has a peculiar evidence problem. We have circumstantial and hearsay evidence everywhere we turn, and neither a single eye-witness nor any forensic data that can place a particular motivation or cognitive predisposition at the scene of the creative crime. Yet we do have a vast pile of circumstantial evidence, and it can be interpreted as pointing in roughly the same direction. The recent excitement surrounding the study of religion using cognitive science and evolutionary psychology derives from the sheer weight of this corroborating evidence.⁶

Religious philosophers now know vastly more about influences on the creation of ultimacy models than at any point in the past. Philosophers analyzing, comparing, or constructing models of ultimate reality should keep in mind the following three considerations, each of which looks behind the scenes at the way we think and express our thoughts.

First, human reason is a powerful tool for interpretation but it does have limitations that are relevant to assessing models of ultimate reality. Psychologists have documented these sources of cognitive error, complete with examples of the resulting mistakes in ordinary life. Psychologist Thomas Gilovich divides the sources of cognitive error into cognitive determinants and motivational and social determinants.⁷ Under cognitive determinants, he explains how misperceiving and misinterpreting random data can produce “something out of nothing,” as when people see

⁵This is a version of the widespread critique of unverifiable “just-so” stories to explain selection of traits in evolutionary biology. The most famous example is probably Charles Darwin’s fanciful narrative of how a species of bears hunting insects while swimming could evolve through natural selection into a whale-like mammal; see *On The Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859): 184.

⁶For example, see Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

⁷See Thomas Gilovich, *How We Know What Isn’t So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

the Virgin Mary in a toasted cheese sandwich. He describes how misinterpreting incomplete and unrepresentative data can yield “too much from too little,” as when people believe that horoscope predictions are accurate. And he points out how the biased evaluation of ambiguous and inconsistent data can leave us “seeing what we expect to see,” as when we remember unjust treatment more strongly when it confirms our expectations of the person in question.

Under motivational and social determinants, Gilovich explains how motivational factors leave us “seeing what we want to see,” as when gamblers firmly believe in special systems that actually do not work. He shows how the biasing effects of second-hand information lead us into “believing what we are told,” as when people believe gossip more when they have no hard evidence one way or the other. And he demonstrates how exaggerated impressions of social support render us vulnerable to “the imagined agreement of others,” as when drinkers believe that many more people enjoy consuming alcohol than non-drinkers do.

These cognitive vulnerabilities are well understood by charlatans and magicians, who exploit them for personal gain and entertainment, respectively.⁸ The field of behavioral law and economics studies human cognition and behavior in relation to the legal and economic systems, and tries to determine how a full understanding of the strengths and liabilities of human cognition should affect regulation of these systems.⁹ Research on marketing effectiveness recognizes that one of the factors in buying decisions is cognitive bias, and that advertisers can exploit it to maximize the impact of advertising dollars.¹⁰ Cross-cultural research suggests that these cognitive, motivational, and social determinants of cognitive error appear across cultures, as do certain logical fallacies that derive from them, even though they are expressed quite differently according to the well attested result that cultures support markedly different styles of cognition.¹¹ In fact, education and experience appear to be more important factors than cultural differences in explaining variations in

⁸ A classic magician’s exposé is James Randi, *Flim-Flam: Psychics, ESP, Unicorns, and other Delusions* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1982).

⁹ A good survey of some of the issues in behavioral law and economics surrounding cognitive error is the symposium on “Homo Economicus, Homo Myopicus, and the Law and Economics of Consumer Choice” in *The University of Chicago Law Review* 73/1 (Winter 2006). For example, Jeffrey J. Rachlinski, “Cognitive Errors, Individual Differences, and Paternalism” from that symposium (207–229) focuses on whether and how the legal system should make paternalistic allowance for cognitive error.

¹⁰ A classic work on the psychology of buying is Frank Nicosia, *Consumer Decision Processes* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966). Also see Scott Plous, *The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

¹¹ On different cultural styles of cognition, there is a host of evidence; for example, see R.E. Nisbett, K. Peng, I. Choi, and A. Norenzayan, “Culture and Systems of Thought: Holistic Versus Analytic Cognition,” *Psychological Review* 108/2 (Apr 2001): 291–310. Work on the cross-cultural recurrence of basic forms of cognitive error is less common. A. Tobena, I. Marks, and R. Dar, “Advantages of Adaptive Bias and Prejudice: An Exploration of their Neurocognitive Templates,” *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 23/7 (Nov 1999): 1047–1058 provides a theoretical account of the possible evolutionary advantages of certain forms of cognitive error, building on empirical cross-cultural evidence for cognitive bias.

vulnerability to cognitive error, even though cultural factors remain important. This suggests both that many forms of cognitive error are genetically rooted (perhaps because they were adaptive in certain circumstances) and also that these vulnerabilities can often be regulated and controlled under the right conditions.¹²

It takes decades of education to train human minds to recognize and allow for these cognitive liabilities. Many people remain vulnerable to many of the determinants of cognitive error and routinely fall prey to logical fallacies. This fact, allowing for variations in personality and cognitive style, underlies the prevalence of superstition and gullibility in all cultures.¹³

Even rigorously educated people sometimes have difficulty extending to their ordinary lives the carefully honed critical-thinking skills that they habitually apply in the area of their special expertise. This is probably because the signals that alert us to cognitive error are plentiful in an area of expertise (such as engineering) but are weak or missing in some domains of life (such as religion).

This rapid survey does little more than open the book of lessons that intellectuals must draw from cognitive science. But it is enough for religious philosophers to conclude that they must scrutinize all models of ultimate reality for the effects of human vulnerability to cognitive error.

Second, beneath the manifestations of cognitive error lies a causal story about how we got this way through the evolutionary process. This portrayal of emergent reasoning and interpreting abilities in the human species is currently far from complete.¹⁴ But already numerous thinkers have sensed that it promises leverage on the various evaluative questions that philosophers like to ask about human beliefs and behaviors.¹⁵

It turns out that the path from an evolutionary account of human cognition to a philosophical assessment of the reliability of religious beliefs is extremely complicated. Everyone agrees that a predisposition to religious beliefs and behaviors is widespread among human beings. Some say it is exclusively cultural with no genetic component; this view is implicitly present among the many religious thinkers who ignore evolutionary psychology. Some have interpreted this predisposition to religion as evidence for the adaptive value of religious beliefs and behaviors, and they then go on to fight about what this means for the truth of religious beliefs:

¹² For an integrated evolutionary perspective on cognitive error, see Martie G. Haselton and D. Nettle, "The Paranoid Optimist: An Evolutionary Model of Cognitive Biases," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10/1 (2006): 47–66.

¹³ See, for example, Stuart A. Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁴ For a classic introduction to evolutionary psychology, see Jerome Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). One of the best discussions on evolutionary psychology and religion is in *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 27/6 (Dec 2004): 713–770, which focuses on Scott Atran's "Religion's Evolutionary Landscape: Counterintuition, Commitment, Compassion, Communion" (713–730).

¹⁵ Among the most recent examples of this excitement, see Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Viking, 2006); and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

does their adapted quality make them productive illusions or reliable hypotheses?¹⁶

I judge the expert consensus on this question currently to be somewhere between these relatively extreme views. Many of the cognitive operations involved in producing religion are evolved traits but most or all of those traits evolved for reasons other than religion. That is, religious beliefs and behaviors are side-effects of those traits. Religious side-effects can be secondarily adaptive and maladaptive, and have proved to be both in various selective contexts. They can also be valuable or dangerous, and true or false, and usually are all of these things in various respects all at once.

For example, the adapted cognitive skill of pattern recognition probably evolved largely because facial recognition was highly adaptive for early hominids. Once in place, that cognitive skill was co-opted for many other pattern recognition tasks. The resulting side-effects contribute to activities we value such as art and mathematics, and they also produce some of the cognitive liabilities described above, which are due to overactive pattern recognition. Similarly, cause-detection and intention-attribution systems probably evolved because they helped us get a head start on stalking predators that cause rustling in bushes. But the side-effects of these adapted systems include overactive imaginations that cause us to run away from bushes when wind rather than anything dangerous is doing the rustling. Better safe than sorry, we say. When conditions allow, we can poke around in the bushes and see that there is nothing there after all, much as a child sensibly and courageously looks under the bed to rule out the presence of feared monsters. When resources to correct beliefs resulting from our cause-detection and intention-attribution systems are not readily available, however, we can quickly fall prey to superstition, to beliefs in intentions behind historical events, or to beliefs in causes behind coincidences.

Other evolved traits that play a role in the production of religious beliefs and behaviors include cognitive universals (underlying folk psychology and folk biology and what can be called folk religion),¹⁷ the memorable character of minimally counterintuitive beliefs (aiding the perseverance of religious beliefs),¹⁸ and hypnotizability and dissociation (the bases for colorful religious experiences and psychosomatic

¹⁶ For an example of the view that true religious beliefs are adaptive, see William Ramsey, "Naturalism Defended," in James Beilby, ed., *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002): 15–29. For an example of the view that false religious beliefs are adaptive, see Michael Bulbulia, "Nature's Medicine: Religiosity as an Adaptation for Health and Cooperation," in McNamara, ed., *Where God and Science Meet*, vol. I: 87–121.

¹⁷ For a key discussion on cognitive universals and culture, see the discussion on the topic in *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 21/4 (Aug 1998): 547–609, which focuses on an article by Scott Atran on "Folk Biology and the Anthropology of Science: Cognitive Universals and Cultural Particulars" (547–569).

¹⁸ The key experiments include those reported in J.L. Barrett and M.A. Nyhof, "Spreading Non-natural Concepts: The Role of Intuitive Conceptual Structures in Memory and Transmission of Cultural Materials," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 1 (2001): 69–100. In relation to religion, one of the key works is P. Boyer and C. Ramble, "Cognitive Templates for Religious Concepts," *Cognitive Science* 25 (2001): 535–564.

placebo healing effects).¹⁹ Evolutionary psychologists debate the circumstances surrounding the evolutionary origins of each of these factors. But the consensus is that religious beliefs and behaviors are combinatorial side-effects of all of these cognitive traits, rather than the primary cause of their adaptation.²⁰ This consensus is persuasive chiefly because religion is far too complex to be reduced to just one of the relevant cognitive factors.

If this consensus is correct, those arguing for religious beliefs either as false illusions or as true adaptations invariably depend on a dramatic reductionism to close the gap between the multi-trait complexity of religion and the single-trait explanation they typically need in order to clinch their philosophical case. To assess the reliability of religious beliefs, we must negotiate an intricately contoured landscape joining the evolutionary depths of the oceans of biology to the heady peaks of theoretically expressed models of ultimate reality. The details of the landscape matter; they prevent a simple settlement of the truth and value questions surrounding models of ultimate reality. The challenge for theoretically elaborated ultimacy models is to account for those details. As we shall see, that is an important criterion for adequacy in a process of comparative inquiry.

Third and finally, regardless of available cognitive resources, religious beliefs and behaviors emerge in culturally conditioned and socially charged ways. This fact of life is extremely obvious when one is on the wrong side of someone else's religious orthodoxy or encountering religion in a foreign culture. Yet the same fact can be almost indiscernible when one is at home in a local religious environment. No matter how invisible this fact may seem, religious ideas can be socially explosive. Attempting to take responsibility for this fact of life introduces moral complexities into the task of religious philosophy.

Consider an analogy. The Union of Concerned Scientists urges scientists to take moral responsibility for their research. Some scientists resist these urgings, arguing that the social effects of their research are someone else's problem—say, corporations and governments that develop technological applications. But this smacks of laziness and blame-shifting, comes the reply. In the same way, religious philosophers must do their part to take responsibility for their work with ultimacy models, and not award themselves a free pass and blame retail religion for the consequences of the religious ideas they discuss. How can religious philosophers take responsibility for the social and psychological potency of ultimacy models?

If we abstract religious ideas from their social contexts for the purposes of analysis, then we should pay attention at some point to the effects of the abstracting move, so as to acknowledge that those ideas are embodied social realities and not mere theoretical abstractions. If we take up a God idea for discussion, we should pay attention at some point to the ways that the selected idea has been present in

¹⁹A leading work on the role of hypnotizability and dissociation in the origins of religion is James McClenon, *Wondrous Healing: Shamanism, Human Evolution, and the Origin of Religion* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002).

²⁰For a compact summary of the case, see Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "Religion is not an Adaptation," in McNamara, ed., *Where God and Science Meet*, vol. I: 159–79.

morally dubious exercises of political power, and to the psychological effects, both positive and negative, of that God model. These kinds of responsibility-taking have become the primary task of a rather large group of theologians and philosophers concerned with the psychological and social effects of ultimacy models. They point out that the model of God as king of a kingdom can silently but improperly legitimate certain forms of political organization, or that the model of God as Father can reinforce stereotypes about men and women. Even if this kind of analysis is not the primary obligation of every religious philosopher, it should at least figure somewhere in the mix of tasks undertaken; that is part of the meaning of professional competence in our context.

I welcome the growing sensitivity to the social power of religious ideas among religious philosophers. But another kind of sensitivity—to the plurality of models of ultimate reality—continues to be under-developed. Few philosophers know their way around the world's religious ideas. Most intellectuals who do feel at home in multiple religious traditions are anthropologists focusing on religious practices, sociologists focusing on social change, or historians focusing on cross-cultural interactions, rather than philosophers focusing on the truth and value of the ideas themselves. The effect of this lack of familiarity with the conceptual and religious Other is often a parochialism that makes philosophical work seem quaintly irrelevant to the outsider. Not all religious philosophy need concern itself with the plurality of ultimacy ideas, to be sure. But what is the rationale for excluding alternative ideas of ultimate reality when they are directly relevant to the philosophical point under debate? Unfamiliarity does not count as a rationale for neglect; nor does lack of expertise. These are merely signs of the need to do more homework.

I am designating these three considerations as lessons from cognitive psychology, from evolutionary psychology, and from religious studies, respectively. I have argued that anyone wanting to construct or analyze models of ultimate reality in rigorous and responsible fashion cannot afford to ignore these lessons. When absorbed, like nutrients in soil, they add a flowering self-awareness to disciplined philosophic effort. This awareness exquisitely complicates the model-construction process by triggering self-doubt and causing us constantly to inspect our best thoughts for unacknowledged influences. But it also makes thinking clearer and more realistic. It heightens the ability to understand alternative models, eliminates many wasteful theological disputes, and creates space for reasoning to play an honorable role in authentic philosophical debate rather than functioning merely as a tool for blindly legitimating socially potent constructions of ultimate reality.

Between Anthropomorphic Models of Ultimate Reality

So much for looking behind ultimacy models. Can we say anything about what goes on between them? What I am calling the great models of ultimate reality are like tectonic plates. They cover the indirectly experienceable surface of ultimate reality, which serves as much to hide what is going on below as to define an interesting landscape for intellectual and spiritual exploration. It is at the edges of the plates, where they grind with inconsistency against one another, that we learn most about the dynamism below the surface.

Comparing ideas of ultimate reality is partly a matter of paying close attention to areas of conceptual friction. The purposes of comparing religious ideas vary greatly. Sometimes the aim is simply to create a database of information for others to use, for which purpose the ideal of neutrality serves as inspiration to be approximated through constant vigilance. At other times the aim is one of social control and the accuracy of the comparison secondary to the power it confers on people who make use of it, as when the comparative category of “religions of the book” allows Muslims to rationalize their extending of courtesies to adherents of certain other religions. The proper philosophic purpose of comparing religious ideas is to adduce a penetrating hypothesis about a religious topic, to stabilize that hypothesis by connecting it to the available data that articulate it, and to test the hypothesis against that data so as to refine it or else discard it for a superior hypothesis.²¹ This sort of comparative inquiry is particularly important in relation to models of ultimate reality because there is so little logical and conceptual leverage for dealing with their intricate pluralism outside of comparison.

Wielding comparison of religious ideas and practices to formulate and test anthropological and sociological hypotheses has a long and lustrous history. Theories both justly famous and rightly infamous have sprung from the fevered minds of Western scholars infected by knowledge of multiple cultures and religions, from Frazer to Tambiah, from Tyler to Wierzbica, from Durkheim to Berger, and from Weber to Huntington.²² Comparative inquiry exists in all of the major philosophic traditions. In the West, it arcs from the comparative argument at the beginning of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, through Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles* and Hegel’s lectures on world history and world religions, to the comparative religious philosophies of John Hick and Robert Neville.²³ In South Asia, it is sparked by ancient formal debates between Buddhist and Hindu philosophers and produces competing philosophic schemes such as those of Vedanta that

²¹ See Ivan Strenski, “The Only Kind of Comparison Worth Doing: History, Epistemology, and the ‘Strong Program’ of Comparative Study,” in Thomas Athanasius Indinopoulos, Brian C. Wilson, and James Constantine Hanges, eds., *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?*; *Numen History of Religion Series* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006): 271–292.

²² See James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1900); Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Edward Burnett Tyler, *Primitive Cultures: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols. (London: Murray, 1873–1874); Anna Wierzbicka, *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954); Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930); and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

²³ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955); Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Robert Cummings Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1991).

are both inspired by the Upanishads and aim to register the truth of every other perspective on ultimate reality.²⁴ In the East Asian context, comparative religious philosophy is rooted in the internal diversity of Chinese religion, in the migration of Buddhism from India, and in the modern encounter with the West. Its modern high points include the writings of Kyoto School thinkers such as Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani.²⁵

A key question for the comparing inquirer is whether comparison, inspired by these longstanding traditions, can confer leverage on philosophical questions about the value and truth of models of ultimate reality. Some say no. The case against the viability of comparative inquiry is obvious: comparison is good for organizing and understanding religious ideas, at best, but it has no power to control philosophical interpretation that aims to detect what is true and valuable among religious ideas. This case is compelling, as far as it goes. But it does not penetrate deeply into the potential importance of comparison for philosophical inquiry.

We can spend our lives listing models of ultimate reality, with their intricate theistic and non-theistic variations, noting cross-cases and exceptions, recording contextual and historical conditioning factors, and still get nowhere in a philosophical inquiry. It is only when we introduce criteria for evaluation that our comparative database becomes an asset for inquiry. Comparative inquiry refers not to sheer description under a rubric of comparative categories, therefore, but to the artful use of comparison both to make criteria for evaluation count for inquiry and to expose those criteria to rational scrutiny.²⁶

We can think of philosophically elaborated models of ultimate reality as large-scale hypotheses. For example, we might posit a theory of ultimate reality built around a model of a personal divine being with intentions, conscious states, and powers to act in the world. Such hypotheses can be tested against the data sets we have discussed—cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, comparative religions—among others. But it is difficult to decide how good our hypothesis is in such tests until we put it alongside an alternative hypothesis and compare how well the two handle the various data sets available for testing. For example, we could put the personal theism hypothesis alongside the quite different ground-of-being hypothesis and compare how they handle the data, piece by piece. At the simplest level, this is what is meant by comparative inquiry.

²⁴ Śaṅkara (mid-eighth century CE) set an example of expounding the *Upaniṣads* while taking account of opposing schools, including Buddhism, Jainism, Sāṃkhya, and Vaiśeṣika. See especially his commentaries on the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavadgītā*, which were formative for much subsequent Indian philosophy, including in its comparative aspects.

²⁵ See, for example, Kitaro Nishida, *A Study of Good* (Tokyo: Print Bureau of the Japanese Government, 1960); Hajime Tanabe, *Philosophy of Metamotetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

²⁶ For a good example of this sort of comparative inquiry in action, see the three volumes of the *Comparative Religious Ideas Project*: Robert Cummings Neville, ed., *The Human Condition, Ultimate Realities, and Religious Truth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). For an account of the method of that project in comparison with other methods in comparative religions, see Wesley J. Wildman, “Comparing Religious Ideas: There’s Method in the Mob’s Madness,” in Thomas Athanasius Indinopoulos, Brian C. Wilson, and James Constantine Hanges, eds., *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?*; *Numen History of Religion Series* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006).

How do we know when one hypothesis fares better than another? The superior hypothesis in respect of the data from evolutionary psychology is the one that best explains why we should expect that data to emerge. The standards for good explanations then have to be sorted out, but typically they include applicability, adequacy, coherence, consistency, and sometimes pragmatic considerations such as ethical consequences, aesthetic quality, or spiritual appeal. Then there is the question about which data sets to prize most highly; answering this question produces comparative criteria for the inquiry. For example, proponents of the ground-of-being hypothesis would probably want to emphasize the importance of the data from evolutionary psychology because ground-of-being theism is effortlessly compatible with them. Meanwhile, they would probably want to deemphasize data from religious popularity contests, because the ground-of-being view feels spiritually disappointing to more people than find it spiritually compelling. I suspect that proponents of the personal-theism hypothesis would want to rank these two criteria oppositely to match its own weaknesses and strengths. The two sides may not be able to agree on the importance of such comparative criteria but the argument is there to be had in a process of comparative inquiry, whereas it is often utterly obscured in other forms of argumentation about ultimacy models.

Here is another example. Suppose we place the hypothesis of God as omnipotent creator alongside that of the cosmic moral dualisms of Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism. We could compare them relative to the two criteria of offering a solution to the problem of evil and solving the problem of the one and the many. We can quickly see that absolute moral dualisms handle the problem of evil spectacularly well but stumble on the problem of the one and the many, whereas the advantages and disadvantages are reversed in the case of omnipotent creator theism. Then the question becomes whether it is more important to have an intelligible solution to the reality of evil or a compelling resolution of the problem of the one and the many. That can be debated in the same way that models are.

The various comparative criteria serve initially to emphasize some patches of the relevant data over other patches. But after the hypotheses have offered their explanations of a patch of data, and the explanations have been compared for quality, the comparative criteria actually serve to rank hypotheses as better and worse. Consider the following comparative criterion: “an adequate theory of ultimate reality makes sympathetic sense of the most refined philosophical thinking about ultimacy within the world’s religious traditions.” This criterion would initially select out a patch of data from comparative religions for the various competing hypotheses to explain. But when the explanations are in, the same criterion tends to prefer hypotheses that are compatible with a broader array of ultimacy models. Personal theism stumbles on this criterion but several competitors, including the ground-of-being hypothesis, leap over it naturally. This would narrow the field of excellent contenders in the competition for the best explanation of all relevant data, to the detriment of the personal-theism hypothesis, unless its advocates could argue that this particular criterion should be revised or demoted to an unimportant position. This is why proponents of hypotheses fight over comparative criteria. Unfortunately, much of this fighting over comparative criteria usually goes on under the radar, whereas comparative inquiry helpfully forces it out into the open.

I am describing a comparative framework for a process of inference to the best explanation of all relevant evidence. In reality, there ought to be many competing hypotheses, not just two, though pair-wise consideration of hypotheses is a way to keep the process manageable. Regardless of how comparative inquiry is organized, however, inference-to-best-explanation arguments in religious philosophy are only as good as the comparative infrastructure that articulates and supports them. I have argued elsewhere that this constitutes an unfamiliar comparative style of natural theology that does not fall prey to the much trumpeted weaknesses of traditional natural theology.²⁷

Comparison is not neutral, any more than description or interpretation or evaluation are neutral. Rational inquirers are perpetually working in the middle of relatively unexamined premises and heavily scrutinized conclusions. They move their attention about to test what seems problematic in their conceptual environment, and to detect bias and distortion, but they are always in the middle. In particular, they always begin in the middle of descriptions of religious beliefs and practices that reflect existing traditions of interpretation and translation, constantly refined and corrected by experts. Comparisons make use of categories that are vulnerable to ideological distortions and empirical failures. The attentive inquirer cannot delay beginning until the relevant data is perfectly well organized and impartially interpreted; there never would be a beginning.

It follows that centralizing comparison offers no clean shortcuts for philosophical inquiry; it is the scratchy way through the densest thickets of the forest. But comparative inquiry is the only realistic way to overcome philosophical parochialism. It is also the only way to mount inference-to-best-explanation arguments in religious philosophy that register the relevant data, include the relevant competitor hypotheses, and expose the relevant argumentative criteria to examination. In short, comparison forces the philosophical construction of ultimate realities to do justice to the data of religious ideas and practices, rather than artfully dodging the data for the many reasons we might be inclined to do that.

My ventures into the forest of comparative inquiry have involved confronting an array of theoretically robust models of ultimate reality. These are the great models. They include the most sophisticated versions of personal theism, such as those of Rāmānuja and Augustine, which are the most obviously anthropomorphic offerings among the great models. Śaṅkara's advaita Vedānta is there, along with Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka portrayal of the ultimate way for human beings, and the ground-of-being theory already mentioned. Trinitarian theism is present, with its striking postulate of internal relational structure within the divine, along with the still more differentiated moral dualisms of Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, and perhaps also the unresolved radical pluralism of ancient polytheism without a High God to keep order. The Chinese vision of the Tao whose structured spontaneity flows

²⁷ See Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010). Also see Wesley J. Wildman, "Comparative Natural Theology," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 27/2&3 (May/Sep, 2006): 173–190. For a heuristic sketch of this method at work in relation to God Models, see Wesley J. Wildman, "Ground-of-Being Theologies," in Philip Clayton, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

through all of reality would be there, along with more recent models of ultimacy as a fecund interplay of principles of order and chaos. The Neoplatonic One in eternal self-differentiation would be there, along with Aristotle's Prime Mover, Plato's valuational ultimate, and the highly structured medieval great chain of being. And there would be others besides these, with some models having more in common with models from alien traditions than with other models from their own tradition. For example, within Western philosophical traditions, the ground-of-being viewpoint has more in common with advaita Vedānta and even Mādhyamaka and Philosophical Daoism than with the personal theism with which it has coexisted for millennia.

Demonstrating the possibility or basic intelligibility of these models is not required here; much more than mere possibility is already acknowledged when we grant these views a place among the great models. Arguments about the probability of ultimacy models remain relevant, at least in principle. And a large and diverse range of less familiar types of arguments enter this comparative inquiry. For example, whereas we commonly find people arguing over whether personal theism can hold out against scientific reductionism, we rarely encounter debates over whether the *pratītya-samutpāda* metaphysics of *sūnyatā* or the substantial *jīvan* metaphysics of dvaita Vedānta does a better job of accounting for what is known from evolutionary psychology about human nature, and how both compare with personal theism and the ground-of-being theory in that respect. Comparative inquiry opens up worlds of philosophical debate that cross cultures in new ways and place new demands on the religious philosopher.

It seems that the process of comparative inquiry threatens to become extremely unwieldy, even if it proceeds pair-wise or chunk by manageable chunk. Nevertheless, it is worth asking about its overall prospects. Differentiating better from worse among the great models is sometimes feasible, at least in the sense that some models handle entire sets of key comparative criteria significantly better than their competitors. But the chances of identifying a clean winner overall are profoundly uncertain. I conjecture that a few of the great models—the very great models, if you like—turn out to be roughly equivalent. What does this mean? Relative to a fairly large set of key comparative criteria, all of the very great models do fairly well, and arguments to promote a favorable subset of those key criteria above others are not decisive, to about the same degree in all cases.²⁸

We might complain that, if the results are of this sort, then comparative inquiry yields far too little return on our investment. We might long for the good old days of simple arguments over the sheer possibility of a favored model of ultimate reality, and indeed there is a place for such arguments. But the point here is that this kind of comparative inquiry is precisely as complicated as the subject matter demands. Any other approach inevitably short-circuits the real challenges and produces an artificial triumph, thereby violating the comparing inquirer's fundamental values of open inquiry.

²⁸ See an example of this sort of stalemate sketched in Wesley J. Wildman, "From Law and Chance in Nature to Ultimate Reality," in Fraser Watts, ed. *Creation, Law, and Probability* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

This sort of comparative inquiry is not for everyone, but for those who want to pursue it, nothing simpler or more convenient or less demanding can get the job done.

Beyond Anthropomorphic Models of Ultimate Reality

With this we come to the final preposition: beyond. Many religious philosophers have no interest in moving beyond highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality. I think we need to move beyond them, however, and I will explain why as an illustration of how comparative inquiry might progress, even if it is only a small step.

In the comparative inquiry I am describing, the more obviously anthropomorphic versions of personal theism are less proficient at explaining many important chunks of data than a lot of other ultimacy models. In fact, I suspect that the highly anthropomorphic models, including most forms of personal theism and polytheism, are not among what I earlier called the very great models, which are the finalists in this drawn-out comparative dance competition. The comparative criteria that most strongly favor anthropomorphic ultimacy models are related to what makes them popular—they are concretely intelligible and inspiring for human life, they promote dramatic and minimally counter-intuitive reconciliation narratives, and they offer a strong basis for hope in the continuation of individual consciousness after death. But these are also the kinds of virtues that any popular model of ultimate reality would have, according to cognitive psychology and evolutionary psychology, because they directly reflect the cognitive biases of the human species.

If you believe our cognitive biases are adaptations that evolved specifically because they promote accurate religious beliefs—not just useful beliefs but true beliefs—then those biases confer likelihood on popular anthropomorphic religious beliefs such as highly anthropomorphic personal theism. In that case, you can frame the psychological data so as to confirm personal theism and other highly anthropomorphic ultimacy models. But if you are convinced as I am that religiousness is not the primary drive for the evolution of human cognitive traits, and that their application to religion is an evolutionary side-effect, then the correspondence between human cognitive bias and the popularity of highly anthropomorphic forms of personal theism is more troubling. In this case, the *prima facie* likelihood is that highly anthropomorphic ultimacy models reflect cognitive error more than reliable belief.

Of course, there are less heavily anthropomorphic ultimacy models that are also less popular and more intellectually compelling than highly anthropomorphic forms of personal theism. For example, some models of ultimacy combine personal characteristics such as intentionality, awareness, and activity with non-personal characteristics such as non-temporality, impassibility, and immutability. There is a serious problem of coherence in such models, because intentionality seems to require temporality, awareness seems to contradict impassibility, and activity seems to entail mutability. This is why these models are so markedly different from the popular forms of personal theism all over the world. Moreover, these models must face daunting theodicy challenges to their coherence. Nevertheless, providing the

coherence problems are addressed—and vast traditions are devoted to doing this—I think that this sort of not-highly anthropomorphic personal theism has a place among the very great models.

Long before evolutionary psychology came along, many thinkers had noticed the psychologically suspicious quality of highly anthropomorphic ultimacy models. This is why most ancient philosophers, from Greece to India to China, treated popular mythologies as superstitions. This is also the instinct of the Masters of Suspicion that I mentioned earlier. And the same instinct is now amplified in the contemporary scientific study of religion, with the beginnings of a sturdy empirical database where once there was only speculation. None of these arguments can ever rule out personal theism or polytheistic mythologies. Nevertheless, religious philosophers have more reason than ever to move beyond highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality.

Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* argues that personal theism is almost certainly false.²⁹ He thinks that we believe in a personal, attentive, active deity only because we are psychologically predisposed to see signs of intentionality even where there is no intentional agent at work, and because we lack the courage to examine our assumptions about the relevant data. Recall the analogy with the person who runs away from rustling bushes, fearing a stalking tiger. Dawkins thinks we should get a spear for protection and poke around to see what is actually in the bushes instead of talking ourselves into believing in the lurking tiger without hard evidence. When we do investigate, we find not a tiger but merely the empty wind, playing tricks on our minds.

This is a blunt and incautious application of evolutionary psychology to belief in a personal God. To stay with the tiger analogy, we know that we are likely to jump to conclusions about the tiger, and also that we are likely to be afraid of inspecting the rustling bushes even with spear in hand and friends in tow, but none of that means there is no tiger. This has been the theistic answer to projection theories of religion for centuries, and it works here too. Unfortunately, Dawkins' detailed philosophical arguments fail to register even the most elementary philosophical insights into the nature of God. He treats God as one cause among many, for example, rather than as the First Cause.³⁰ Now, the first cause model of God may or may not be coherent, and it certainly is not a part of the popular understanding of God as an active person, but simply neglecting it in favor of making God essentially an omnipotent creature means that Dawkins is attacking a version of personal theism that virtually no reputable philosopher or theologian has ever espoused. This is the so-called straw man fallacy grown to massive proportions—the straw T-Rex fallacy, perhaps. The best versions of personal theism effortlessly escape this attack, as do most other ultimacy models.

By now it is clear that I am one of the critics of Dawkins who actually agrees with his negative conclusions about the most popular forms of personal theism. Unfortunately, it is a case of, “with friends like this, who needs enemies?” He never

²⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

³⁰ For a typically lively philosophical review of the book, which does not hesitate to show how paper-thin the argument is, see Alvin Plantinga, “The Dawkins Confusion: Naturalism ad absurdum,” *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 13/2 (March/April, 2007): 21 ff.

takes seriously a view of ultimate reality other than highly anthropomorphic personal theism, and the resulting parochialism is not helpful for moving beyond anything except his book. This illustrates why it is vital to set up the sort of comparative inquiry I have described, with relevant theoretically articulated models of ultimate reality vying with each other relative to explicitly stated comparative criteria.

Of course, the enormous complexity of comparative inquiry is not sexy in the way Dawkins fans would require if they were to invest time reading about it. It is so complex that it makes even the probabilistic natural theology arguments of Alvin Plantinga or Richard Swinburne seem massively over-simplified.³¹ Nevertheless, without a comparative framework, crucial alternative hypotheses are routinely neglected. This leads to fatal flaws in arguments assessing the probability of hypotheses about ultimate reality, including those familiar from Dawkins, Plantinga, Swinburne, and others. Showing that personal theism is significantly more probable than a flattened out kind of atheism that stubbornly refuses to explain existence and value might well be possible; in fact, I think it is not difficult. But this achievement offers precious little support to personal theism when we never bother to calculate the probability of its competitor hypotheses among the great models. This can only feel like a significant accomplishment to religious philosophers who do not care about the entire Museum of Models but want to focus only on one model, defending it from attacks. There is a place for that. But such arguments say almost nothing about the adequacy of the model being defended. It is much more difficult to compete with robust competitor views of ultimate reality than with Dawkins' metaphysically innocent atheism. Plantinga and Swinburne should choose tougher opponents.

Highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality perform sub-optimally not only in relation to the data from the scientific study of religion and from our experience of suffering; they also prove disappointing in relation to the data from comparative religious ideas. Views that can subsume other models within them—say, as perspectives or as interpretative slices—offer the best explanations of the profusion of ultimacy theories in the museum of models. Highly anthropomorphic personal theism is relatively ill-suited to this because its personalist metaphysics operates with highly determinate categories, such as intention, awareness, and agency, and thus tends bluntly to contradict alternatives. But a number of other views can subsume personal theism in a way that explains the data of personal theistic religious experience by rendering the key metaphysical categories of personal theism in symbolic terms compatible with their own. This occurs in advaita Vedānta and ground-of-being theism. Sometimes the subsuming view retains the metaphysics of personal theism and implants it within a larger metaphysics that adds a God beyond God, as in the perennial philosophy.

This leaves strongly anthropomorphic God models such as most forms of personal theism in roughly the same position logically and philosophically that they are in religious practice. These ultimacy models achieve plausibility within communities that engage ultimate reality deeply and authentically through them. Criteria for

³¹ For example, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

plausibility are carried along and nurtured both within traditions of religious practice and within philosophical subcultures. When exposed to the wider world of ultimacy models, philosophers and ordinary religious folk alike experience the energizing potential of the wider view and also the corrosive effects on familiar criteria for plausibility. As a result, some religious folk set out on a journey in search of a view of ultimate reality that can make better sense of this wider range of experience. Some philosophers likewise invest energy in the kind of comparative inquiry that I have been describing, trying to move beyond highly anthropomorphic personal theism even while trying to do justice to its capacity to foster authentic engagement with ultimacy. Other religious folk never feel the plausibility problem of their restless kin, or else they will it to one side and nestle into the comfortable and beautiful intricacy of their existing beliefs, and once again much the same is true for some religious philosophers.

It is easier to look beyond highly anthropomorphic ultimacy models once we truly realize that there are plenty of compelling alternatives. In fact, the neighborhood of the edifice of personal theism is less like New York harbor hosting the glorious and lonely Statue of Liberty, and more like the hills of Easter Island gracing numerous vast and portentous stone statues with uncertain meaning. It was an Easter-Island vision of plural religious practices and beliefs that probably inspired the *Upaniṣads*, with their affirmation that Brahman is One—behind, between, and beyond all, both identical with the human spirit and utterly transcending it, grounding and uniting everything that is. The same vision powers the perennial philosophy's attempt to coordinate all of the models of ultimate reality into a hierarchy perfectly suited to accommodate the vast range of spiritual personalities and inclinations, with each soul tending toward the loftier, trans-personal models as it commutes through the samsaric cycle of lives.³² It is a vision of the wealth of religious imagery for God that inspired many of the apophatic mystics to declare that ultimate reality is beyond all imagery, and also to articulate trajectories of visualization that propel the imagination as far as possible in the direction of wise and true engagement with God before lapsing into inevitable silence.

The yielding of imaginative theoretical and spiritual exertion to ultimate silence is a kind of philosophic failure, obviously. But this silent failure is celebrated by apophatic mystics in all traditions. For them it confirms and comforts. This strikes many other religious folk as an absurd embrace of the irrational. They can no more imagine feeling satisfaction at conceptual fracturing of God ideas than they can appreciate the apophatic mystic's ideal for the afterlife, which is to be a dewdrop slipping silently into the shining sea. But there is nothing irrational about it. For the apophatically minded religious philosopher, there is a great deal to say, and much theoretical intricacy to negotiate, prior to lapsing into silence. Just as apophatic mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius promote spiritual trajectories, however, so apophatic religious philosophers recognize better and worse in models of ultimate reality. This defines what it means to go beyond highly anthropomorphic views of ultimate reality. Let's ponder this point for a moment.

³² See Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

The apophatic mystic's positive way of naming, the *via positiva*, organizes ultimacy images from the most noble to the least adequate. The associated spiritual discipline involves meditating on each image, slowly blanketing the conceptual wall with the whiteness of silence by affirming ultimacy in everything, eventually even the least likely and most repulsive thing. In the world of religious philosophy, this is akin to organizing the museum of models of ultimate reality to conform to a working hypothesis about relative value, while allowing that even the least valuable model conveys some truth.

The apophatic mystic's negative way of denial, the *via negativa*, organizes literal ultimacy images from least adequate to most adequate. The associated spiritual discipline involves denying those images in that order, so as to remove any hint of exaggerated claims to adequacy of such models, even the most authoritative and sacred among them. Silence arrives through the gradual elimination of cognitive content. In the world of religious philosophy, the sort of comparative inquiry I have been advocating can be construed in much the same way as the *via negativa*, though less linearly.

Apophatically minded religious philosophers recognize the virtues of theoretically articulated ultimacy models as intellectual avenues for potentially authentic engagement with ultimate reality. But they advance arguments for why some should be denied as more inadequate than others, corresponding to the mystic's organization of denied images from least adequate to most adequate. The arguments take the comparative form that I have described. While never decisive, those arguments do permit the philosopher to envision the complicated inquiry in the form of a dynamic conceptual field of comparative play—perhaps in much the same way that a coach imagines a football play unfolding, or a choreographer pictures a dance. This vision includes provisional diagnosis of better from worse models, all relative to arguments over comparative criteria—a diagnosis always subject to correction.

If indeed there is a “last group standing” these models are, for the apophatic religious philosopher, not so much the decisive victors as the last words before death—artful words, memorable, and filled with solemn significance as befits a lifetime of striving for wisdom. But just as we would select our final words with great care, circumstances permitting, so well-supported judgments about relative superiority among the world’s great models of ultimate reality is a weighty matter. The last models standing cast long shadows over their fallen companions, framing them and interpreting them in highly particular ways, before they, too, fall before light inexplicable. I have indicated why I think that highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality are not among the last group standing—the very great models. But I also think that evolutionary psychology guarantees that nothing in religion happens without those highly anthropomorphic constructions, and thus that their existence is a condition for the possibility of the emergence of more adequate understandings of ultimate reality.

In the final analysis, perhaps the multi-traditional appreciators are correct and the entire vast museum of models, unanalyzed and unorganized, is the better way to go. It seems to be the humbler way and it certainly is easier than the way of the comparative inquirers. But the erotic lure of curiosity and ultimate longing drives comparing

inquirers to seek out the grand encounter of great models in a drawn-out competition that serves their truth-seeking impulses. Think of it in football or ballet or gladiatorial or conversational terms; it makes little difference. The complex outcome is not for everyone but I think it does have the considerable virtues of welcoming every model with a stake in the conversation, including all data that is pertinent to evaluating models, keeping track in an optimal way of the precise logical import of every argument made, and forcing claims for the likelihood of any given model to take honest account of the eager alternatives standing nearby ready to play or dance or attack or talk, depending on the analogy. Provisional decisions involve artful equilibration of numerous competing factors, as always in life. But the comparative inquirer makes those decisions with fair confidence that everything vital to the decision is at least showing up somewhere in the process. And that is all too rare in the history of religious philosophy.

Can Models of God Compete?

Jeremy R. Hustwit

God-modeling, by its very nature, rules out two increasingly popular views of religion. First, because a model is by definition a simulacrum of some other object that is obscured, God-modeling excludes the notion that our concepts of God are positively given in any infallible manner. Models are by nature hypothetical. Second, models are tools used to understand something that exists independently of our beliefs about it. Without a referential object, a model collapses into fantastic construction. Fantasy may have aesthetic value, but it has no descriptive value. God-modeling, therefore, excludes the shrill extremes that dominate the public spaces these days.

But between the extreme diagnoses of inventive fantasy and infallible revelation lie all manner of sins. Which element—self or God—contributes more to the content of our models? We can imagine a continuum of responses. At one end, the subjective pole, our own existential situation determines nearly all the attributes we assign to God. Here theology collapses into anthropology. At the other end of the continuum, the objective pole, causal influence of the divine other determines nearly all the content we load into a model. Every position in between these extremes entails that at least some content in a model of God can be traced back to cultural perspective, and at least some content comes from the divine reality. This co-constitution thesis raises a theologically potent question about the relationship between differing models. Can they—should they—compete? If models are pure cultural projections, then competition between them is difficult or pointless. However, if our models make contact with the divine reality, and reflect that reality—even through

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a glass darkly—then it may make sense to place them in competition and judge them as better or worse.

Insofar as each of the positions along the continuum makes claims about the potential accuracy, constitution, and referential capacity of models of God, we might describe each point along our continuum as a model of God-modeling (MGM). Four major MGMs should be considered: “mysteriosophy,” “theopoetics,” “optimistic realism,” and “reticent realism.”

Mysteriosophy

It is perhaps best to begin with the most skeptical of MGMs. In this first position, our subjectivity makes a maximal contribution to the content of our religious experience—and ultimately the model of God—while the world (i.e., the reality of the divine) makes a minimal contribution. This MGM flirts heavily with negative theology and mysticism. A striking example is John Hick’s “hyper-Kantian” hypothesis that the categories of the understanding are culture-relative, and transform the information transmitted from a transcendent source into knowable religious experience (Hick 1989). Hick thus divides the cosmos into the Real, which is ineffable and transcendent, and the constructed objects of religious experience. This position offers a clean break between the reality of the divine and our various cultural perspectives on it. For example, Hick would explain that both an Advaita Vedantan, who perceives a non-personal Absolute, and a Catholic, who perceives a personal and immanent God, are related to the same Real. In each case however, the content of the religious experience—Brahman’s bliss and omnipresence; or God’s will and grace—are human contributions, the artifacts of religio-cultural lenses. The only phenomenal contribution made by the Real is that of bare presence.

While this dualism may provide a neat explanation of religious diversity, it undermines the particular and concrete claims of the world’s religions. Mysteriosophical models of God, though they may be causally linked to the divine reality, cannot be said to literally—and maybe not even figuratively—describe the divine reality. The models of God proposed by religions have the status of “mythology,” i.e. not literally true, but only *practically* true insofar as they evoke “an appropriate dispositional attitude,” (Hick 1989, 48). Chances are slim that our models have any resemblance to the divine reality, and we have no possible way of ever verifying a resemblance anyway. The Real is beyond the limits of the understanding. Those MGMs that describe God as ineffable in some qualified sense, or pursue weaker forms of negative theology would also qualify as mysteriosophy for the same reasons.

One of the most common critiques of Kantian epistemology applies here. If there is a complete disconnect between the constructions of our own understanding and noumenal reality, how can we assert that there is a causal relation that extends from human religious experience to the Real *an sich*? The Real cannot be said to cause anything, as that would be attributing the property of causality to a noumenal entity, which is supposed to be beyond the capacities of human understanding.

Mysteriosophy reduces religious claims and God models to little more than cultural construction.

From this stance, the fragile and dubious connection between human models of God and the actual Reality that inspires them represents the minimal condition for inclusion into MGMs that propose some version of a co-constitution thesis. If one pushes mysteriosophy into a slightly more skeptical light, and the causal relation between noumena and phenomena cannot be maintained, then there is little to differentiate a mysteriosophical position from a theory of religion in which all religious language is pure projection of subjective concerns, and has little to no relation to an external reality. So, can mysteriosophical models of God compete? No. Mysteriosophers would see little benefit to adjudicating between models of God, as the models are constituted by human cultures alone, and cannot possibly reflect any of the divine nature *in se*.

Theopoetics

The sharp Kantian dualism between noumenon and phenomenon is not the only option available to God-modelers. One might take a slightly more sanguine approach and postulate that the world-in-itself has *some* constitutive role in determining the content of religious experience, even if that role cannot be distilled from the human contribution. In this case, we would need to pursue a plurality of models, each novel and inspiring, each able to disclose a fragmented aspect of divine reality. We would have to value *poiesis* over against *theoria*.

Contemporary versions of this MGM have their roots in the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics, specifically Heidegger, Gadamer, and their followers. Gadamer, for example, argues that language is both culturally contingent and a necessary condition of human understanding. The ineradicability of language in human experience entails Gadamer's famous aphorism: "Being that can be understood is language," (Gadamer 2000, 474). Heidegger provides a more esoteric formulation: "Language is the house of the truth of Being." (Heidegger 1993, 236). When the world appears to consciousness, it must do so clothed in concepts that we already know. The experience of romantic love, for example, despite its seeming indescribability, can only be understood in pre-existing linguistic concepts. Metaphors like "butterflies in the stomach" or "flaming desire," are taken from things already understood in order to express a new experience. A pure pre-linguistic immediacy, according to Gadamer, is not available to understanding. It must be evoked through language.

Models, as metaphors, are only able to highlight an aspect of the world at the expense of obscuring the rest. Claiming "the Lord is my shepherd," discloses some attributes (e.g. providence, guidance) and rules out others (e.g. abuse and neglect). This feature of language is particularly salient if one is trying to describe an extraordinary being like God. So, any truth disclosed is incomplete and distorted to begin with, and is then further particularized and potentially distorted by subsequent interpretations. From this MGM, language, and therefore models, conceal as much

as—if not more than—they disclose. Yet unlike mysteriosophy, Heidegger’s house of language can sometimes reveal shadowy glimpses of its occupants: truth made manifest in and through the disclosive power of language. Theopoetic descriptions of God would never be literally true in a scientific sense. Models would be too mediated and plurivocal, but models could hint at the divine reality in an oblique manner.

A more recent manifestation of this view has arisen in theological circles with the theopoetics movement, which was pioneered by Stanley Romaine Hopper and Amos Wilder in the 1970s. Though the movement contains multitudes, most theopoets argue that rational abstraction ought to take a back seat to imagination and creativity. Wilder points out, however, that *poiesis* must draw from both tradition and reality—it is not just fantasy for its own sake (Wilder 1976). Theology is ultimately aimed at existential transformation, a process far more susceptible to imagination and emotion than rational appeal.

The primary criterion for a theopoetical model of God is not its correspondence to the reality of God, for such a reality is thickly mediated, but instead the imagination’s own “reality-sense and its own tests of coherence,” (Wilder 1976, 74). The only available criteria for deciding between models would be entirely subjective. We should not be surprised, therefore, if the Heidegger, Gadamer, and the theopoets find the notion of competition misguided. One of the philosophical underpinnings of these positions is a critique of subject-object dualism, which manifests itself in at least three different objections to competition. First, because my worldview and the object of my experience may not be neatly discriminated, there are no objective or universally accepted criteria by which models of God might be judged. Second, the goal of theopoetic discourse is not to eliminate competing interpretations, but to multiply the ways we model God in order to disclose novelty. Here, creativity is valued above descriptive accuracy, which would be a red herring. Third, though there may be competition among theopoetic models of God, the criteria for judging a model’s value are highly personal. Instead of appealing to communal standards of rationality, theopoetics appeals to idiosyncratic phenomenology. The best models have disclosive value, i.e. they resonate with the existential concerns of the individual.

Theopoetic models of God do not compete. Many theopoets seem to argue that because there are no objective or universal criteria for judging models, then eliminative competition loses its point, and the quest for a God’s identity is a mistake at best, and a tool of oppression at worst. It is not obvious, though, that contests lose their point just because our judging tools are imperfect or biased.

Optimistic Realism

Though the previous MGMs assume that religious language is, at best, quasi-referential, the positions toward the other end of our continuum see little difficulty discussing the relation between language and reality. There have been many flavors of “realism” discovered in the past two centuries of philosophy, but I have no specific

school of thought in mind here. “Optimistic realism” indicates any position that holds that our models of God would contain a degree of subjective bias that can, in the end, be neutralized.

Perhaps one of the most exemplary thinkers in this MGM is Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead’s own model of God arises as a result of his conviction that “the things experienced and the cognizant subject enter into the common world on equal terms,” (Whitehead 1925, 89). There is a confidence here that the contribution of divine reality to experience is not buried very deeply beneath the mediation of subjectivity. In fact, many interpreters of Whitehead argue that the world is objectively present at the beginning of every moment of experience, and subjective mediation is a secondary process. Subjectivity is, in effect, tethered to the “brute facts” of the actual world. John B. Cobb, Jr. uses Whiteheadian metaphysics to argue that because our experience is as influenced by the world as it is by culture, any theological model that has persisted for a considerable length of time is probably “oriented rightly” to some structures of reality (Cobb 1999b, 116). For this reason, dialogue among and between competing communities would be desirable as it leads to richer, more complete models of God.

According to this MGM, models are influenced by subjectivity and thus have distorted the reality of God to some degree, but by comparing these models, one may find commonalities, or at least family resemblance traits among them. In this MGM, there is optimism that the fractured subjectivity that infects God-modeling can be corrected by rational dialogue according to common ground criteria. Consensus among models of God is indicative of truth. In optimistic realism, models of God not only compete, but one expects a winner to emerge. The winner of such a competition is not necessarily the corresponding and true model of God (modeling God would lose its point if such certainty were attainable), but it would be the most adequate.

Reticent Realism

Of the three MGMs described thus far, mysteriosophy and theopoetics have the liability of undermining the realistic intent found in most religious communities.¹ Few Muslims consider the will of Allah to be a mythical representation of their cultural history. They will tell you Allah is very real and acts independently of human expectation. Likewise, most Vaisnavas do not perform puja to an amalgam of Aryan lore, but to an actual deity. Though such attitudes can be found among professional theologians, philosophers, and mystics, to take mysteriosophy or theopoetics as the *only* proper description of (or prescription for) God modeling would distort the religious experience of millions. As Cobb observes, overly constructivist

¹ This is not necessarily a fatal flaw. It could be the case that the majority of religious communities are wrong, and their concrete experiences are metastasized with cultural construction. Nevertheless, I think that authentically describing the self understanding and intention of adherents is one desideratum of an MGM.

theories of religion create equality among religions by offending all religious persons equally (Cobb 1999a, 105).

On the other hand, optimistic realism seems to be slightly too optimistic, and may not take seriously the considerable power of ideology and cultural tradition to warp and conceal the structures of reality from religious experience. It does not seem obvious that poor models will lose favor over time, or that good models will naturally persist in popular belief. The true and the persuasive are not always coincident.

Another MGM is needed—one that attributes models of God with the ability to refer to reality, but acknowledges a robust subjective influence. There are other reasons to suppose such a position is needed. First, because human religious experience is not always a simple manifestation or repetition of one's tradition or culture, it is likely that there is a world independent of linguistic tradition influencing the character of these experiences. Second, we assume that our modeling of God would have some satisfactory end: a point at which there was no gap between model and reality. This is the very point of modeling. Without this assumption, modeling becomes fantasy.

This middle position, between theopoetics and optimistic realism, I call reticent realism. It is so-named because it subjects models to potential criticism by recognizing that models are able to refer outside of discourse to a divine reality. At the same time, it acknowledges the robust role of human perspective to distort and obscure than optimistic realism. This stance entails that multiple models are needed to describe a hidden God, but pushes theopoetics further by making the bolder claim that religious language is, in principle, capable of describing a religious reality in a comprehensive way (though human finitude most likely precludes this in actuality). Likewise, reticent realism would contend that certain models could be said to be more or less adequate to the facts of reality. Whereas theopoets have argued that the divine can never be reduced to an identity, a reticent realist would quibble that this is not necessarily so. If we grant that an individual could have absolute knowledge, then she could construct a robustly adequate model of God and, given enough patience, communicate it to others.

Of course this description would be unlikely to exhaust God's otherworldly nature. Likewise, if God's nature is in flux—and won't sit still for the modeler—then a complete model is impossible because our hypotheses could never catch up with its moving target. But a complete description is not necessary. Competing models are frequently incomplete. Any good scientist will admit that the current model of the atom is tentative and most likely leaves something out. At the same time the current model is clearly an improvement, given what we have observed, over the models proposed by Democritus and Rutherford. Models of God need not be complete to compete.

When the reticent realist holds that models are capable of capturing God's essence in principle, even if they always fall short in practice, God becomes a regulative idea that serves a heuristic purpose in the competition between models. "God" becomes a placeholder to which each new model aspires. Without criteria for judging models as better or worse, a once-healthy plurality may grow cancerous,

drowning a signal with noise. But by placing models in competition, the horizontal profusion of models metamorphosizes into a process of inquiry, which meanders toward God over time.

The process is not perfect, of course. Though models of God in reticent realism can compete with one another, the proper criteria by which we judge the model are rarely agreed upon. The sorts of indirect criteria that could be used for evaluation (e.g. internal coherence, predictability, explanatory scope, ethical consistency, etc.) currently admit of no universal consensus, and this does not seem likely to change any time in the near future.

In the end, a reticently realist MGM must settle for “local” competitions. The language of “better” and “worse” theological models only holds currency relative to a particular and concrete instance of comparison, in which a group of evaluators can cobble together fitting criteria to judge between models. Here we might invoke Peirce’s notion of a “relevant community of experts” that in its consensus, whether present or projected infinitely into the future, indicates the truth of a model. But universal decisions, e.g. that Shankara’s Brahman beats out Tillich’s Godhead hands down, are practically impossible. There are too many relevant criteria to employ. Every new historical situation brings new needs and relevance. Plurality and tension drives this process of inspiration, innovation, and criticism. But without critical standards, the process runs off the tracks. If we accept reticent realism (and I hope I have given a few good reasons for doing so), then we find ourselves straddling the need for plurality and the eschatological hope of a perfect model. Given the ideological forces in public conversations about religion, this is not an easy stance to maintain. But to do otherwise is to settle for a less adequate model of god-modeling.

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Ibn ‘Arabī on the Ultimate Model of the Ultimate

William C. Chittick

Ibn ‘Arabī was born in Murcia in 1165 and died in Damascus in 1240.¹ He left behind several hundred books and treatises full of subtle disquisitions on the Qur’ān and its theological, philosophical, psychological, mystical, social, and legal implications. His works were widely influential in the development of metaphysics, philosophy, cosmology, and spiritual psychology before the modern period. In the eyes of many scholars, he deserved the title al-Shaykh al-Akbar, “The Greatest Teacher,” because he integrated the diverse fields of learning that had been flourishing for several centuries and he reformulated the Qur’ānic worldview with unprecedented breadth and depth. Other scholars, however, considered him a baleful influence on the tradition, and within a century after his death, a good deal of opposition to his writings had begun to coalesce. Perhaps the main cause of the opposition was that he forced his readers—especially in his most famous book, *The Ringstones of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*)—either to turn away in shock, to throw up their hands in bewilderment, or to reconsider their most cherished beliefs. Scholars who found the essence of Islam in their own narrow specialties, not least jurists and experts in Kalam (scholastic theology), either ignored him or did what they could to discredit him.

Being and Consciousness

Perhaps the best place to start tracing out Ibn ‘Arabī’s model of Ultimate Reality is to look at the notion of *wujūd*, a word that has been closely linked with his name ever since the Ḥanbalī polemicist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) accused him of espousing

¹ For an overview of his teachings and a bibliography of important secondary sources, see Chittick (2008).

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wahdat al-wujūd, “the oneness of existence.” According to Ibn Taymiyya, this meant that Ibn ‘Arabī failed to distinguish between God and creation. He was, in other words—as similar polemicists in the West were wont to say—a “pantheist.” Ibn ‘Arabī, however, never used the expression *wahdat al-wujūd*, nor did any of his early followers suggest that he spoke for it. Nonetheless, from Ibn Taymiyya down into modern times, supporters and detractors have ascribed *wahdat al-wujūd* to him, even if there is little or no agreement as to what exactly it means.²

This having been said, there is no doubt that both oneness and existence are foci of Ibn ‘Arabī’s attention. The word *wujūd*, commonly translated as “existence” or “being,” entered the mainstream of philosophical discussions from the time of Avicenna (d. 1037), the greatest representative of the Peripatetic school. Famously, Avicenna classified *wujūd* as necessary, possible, or impossible. Although the word had been adopted as the nearest Arabic equivalent of *ousia*, its everyday meaning is to find, experience, feel, and perceive, and it was used in this sense in both the Qur’ān and early Sufism. In contrast to some philosophers, though certainly not all,³ Ibn ‘Arabī never ignored the word’s literal meaning, nor did he neglect the fact that the Kalam experts included the word’s active participle, *al-wājid*, “the finder,” among God’s “most beautiful names” (*al-asmā’ al-husnā*). As a divine attribute, *wujūd* signifies not only the fact that God is—and, as Avicenna and other philosophers prove to their own satisfaction, cannot not be—but also the fact that he necessarily finds, experiences, and knows.

When Ibn ‘Arabī spoke of the Ultimate Reality in philosophical terms, he frequently called it *al-wujūd al-haqqa*, that is, the True or Real Being/Consciousness, or simply *al-haqqa*, the True, the Real (another Qur’ānic divine name). Along with the philosophers generally, he held that in contrast to everything else, Real *Wujūd* has no quiddity or “whattiness” (*māhiyya*). When we ask *what* it is, the only proper answer is *that* it is. In other words, *wujūd* is no specific thing, but rather that which gives rise to every specific thing. “Things” (*ashyā’*, pl. of *shay’*), whether perceived as external or internal to us, are “delimitations” (*taqyīd*) of *wujūd*, or, employing the past participle of *wujūd*, they are *mawjūd*, “existent/found,” though the modalities of their foundness are diverse.

As no specific thing, Real Being/Consciousness is “nondelimited” (*muṭlaq*). It is so utterly and absolutely nondelimited that it is not delimited by nondelimitation, which means that it displays its presence in all delimited things. One can say that metaphysics, often defined as the investigation of “existence qua existence,” addresses the various degrees and modalities of *wujūd*’s presence. This brings us back to Avicenna’s basic question: In any given case, is *wujūd* present necessarily or

² For a history of the expression and various meanings that have been ascribed to it, see Chittick (1994).

³ For example, Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī, an Aristotelian and contemporary of Ibn ‘Arabī, writing in Persian, classified *wujūd* into two basic sorts, which he called “being” (*hastī*, cognate with “is”), and “finding” (*yāftī*). Then we have a hierarchy: potential being (e.g., a seed), actual being (a tree), actual being along with potential finding (the soul), and actual being along with actual finding (the fully realized intelligence). See Chittick (2001, pp. 41–45).

possibly (contingently); and, what can we mean when we say that *wujūd* cannot possibly be present? Or, to put this in terms closer to how Ibn 'Arabī would formulate it, in all of reality, what is it that must be found, what is it that may be found, and what is it that cannot possibly be found?

In discussing things, also called “entities” (*'ayān*, pl. of *'ayn*), Ibn 'Arabī is addressing precisely what Avicenna calls possibility or contingency (*imkān*). Each thing, as a delimitation of the Nondelimited Real, is possible, which is to say that its relation to existence and nonexistence is equal. It does not exist in itself, or else it would be necessary; nor is it nonexistent (*ma'dūm*) in every respect, or else it could never be found. All entities are in fact found (*mawjūd*) by the Supreme Consciousness that is the Real *Wujūd*, the Ultimate Reality. The Real is aware of them as possibilities of delimitation embraced by its own absolute nondelimitation. Famously, Ibn 'Arabī calls the possible things “fixed entities” (*al-a'yān al-thābita*), which is to say that, although they have no existence of their own, they are potentialities of manifestation fixed in the Being/Consciousness that is the Real. They are, in short “the nonexistent, known things” (*al-ashyā' al-ma'dūma al-ma'lūma*).

Self-Disclosure

Al-wujūd al-ḥaqeq, “the Real Being/Consciousness” is the Ultimate Reality, utterly nondelimited and ineffable, a no-thing that is thereby distinct from every thing and that gives rise to all things by its own self-delimitation. We cannot talk about it in positive terms, because it is unknowable and unspeakable, so language serves merely to point in its direction. All positive knowledge that we do have pertains to things, not to the Real in itself. This, in brief, is the apophatic side to Ibn 'Arabī's model of the Ultimate Reality.

As for the cataphatic side, this implies first that, by knowing anything at all, we are in fact knowing a delimitation of Nondelimited *Wujūd*. As for “knowing,” it is simply our *wujūd*, our finding that we find and are found, our presence to our own finding. Such finding underlies all consciousness and explication, just as it underlies all existence. Ibn 'Arabī often refers to the source of finding and being found, with the word *tajallī*, a verbal noun derived from a Qur'ānic verse in which God “discloses himself” (7:143). This word, which had been used by Avicenna and others to speak of the intimate connection between the Necessary Being and the cosmos, can be translated literally as “self-disclosure” or “self-manifestation,” though historians commonly render it as “theophany” or “epiphany.” If we ask why the Real *Wujūd* discloses itself, we are asking why it is *wujūd* and not a thing. If it were this thing or that thing, it would thereby be a possibility and not exist in itself; it could only come into existence upon receiving existence from something else. At this point it would turn into something whose existence is “necessary through the Other” (*wājib bi'l-ghayr*), as Avicenna had also pointed out. In contrast, as a no-thing, the Real Being/Consciousness has no needs whatsoever—this is precisely what is meant by its necessity, its utter lack of thingness and neediness for anything else. The

Necessary Being cannot not *be*, and it can have no need for *things*, which in themselves are nonexistences. The Real *Wujūd* is simply that which is and that which finds, that which cannot not be and cannot not find. It is free of all the limitations that define every specificity, every entity.

One of the many Qur’ānic divine names that Ibn ‘Arabī employs to explicate the notion of *wujūd* and bring out the nuances of the Real’s self-disclosure is light (*nūr*). The word is often defined as that which is manifest in itself and makes other things manifest. This is an apt description of the Real *Wujūd* and its self-disclosure—it is manifest through its own self and makes others manifest. By making things manifest (*zāhir*), it makes them known, perceived, and found, that is, *mawjūd*. All knowledge, perception, and consciousness are modalities of finding the Real Light, for, as the Koran says about God, he is “the light of the heavens and the earth” (24:35). This Light bestows foundness and finding on all things, each in its own measure—not in the measure of the Light itself. Looking at the manner in which the human soul finds itself and others, Ibn ‘Arabī remarks, “Were it not for light, nothing whatsoever would be perceived, whether it be an object of knowledge, or an object of sense perception, or an object of imagination.... The faculties of smell, taste, imagination, memory, reason, reflection, conception, and everything through which perception takes place are all light.”⁴ Each faculty, in other words, is a different modality through which the finder finds the found.

The self-disclosure of the Real *Wujūd* assumes three all-comprehensive forms: the cosmos, the human being, and scripture. The word for cosmos, ‘ālam, derives from the same root as the word for knowledge, ‘ilm, and mark, ‘alāma. Classical dictionaries define ‘ālam as “that through which knowledge occurs” or “that through which God is known.” Ibn ‘Arabī is simply asking his readers to remember the word’s etymology when he says, “We mention the *cosmos* with this word to give *knowledge* that by it we mean that God has made it a *mark*.”⁵

Ibn ‘Arabī typically describes the cosmos as “everything other than God” (*mā siwa’llāh*). In other words, it is the entirety of the Real’s self-disclosure. When we keep in mind the infinity and nondelimitation of the Real and the delimitation and restrictedness of everything else, it becomes clear that the cosmos can have no beginning and no end, for it is simply the self-disclosure of the Infinite Real within the delimitations of finite things, and no limits can apply to the self-disclosing Infinite. As Ibn ‘Arabī remarks, “The Infinite does not enter into [manifest] *wujūd* all at once; rather it enters little by little, with no end.”⁶ The cosmos is then the sum total of all entities, all possible things, over the span of beginningless and endless duration. Duration does not mean time as we understand it, for time, space, and other such notions are names given to general principles which, in our understanding, lie behind the world’s multiplicity, dispersion, and endless change. By no

⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, vol. 3, pp. 276–277).

⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, vol. 2, p. 473, line 33).

⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, vol. 2, p. 482, line 26).

means, however, does our specific cosmic niche even begin to exhaust the possibilities of manifestation called “everything other than God.”⁷

The cosmos, then, is everything that is not the Ultimate Reality per se, and within it appear the entities, which are the infinite things known to the divine omniscience. As such, the cosmos can be called “the great cosmos” (*al-'ālam al-kabīr*). We can imagine it as a boundless, luminous sphere, shining forth from the dimensionless center, Nondelimited *Wujūd*, and ranged in every possible degree of intensity and color. In contrast, the human being is “the small cosmos” (*al-'ālam al-ṣaghīr*), which is to say that the Real *Wujūd* discloses its own totality within each human being in a compressed and focused mode. In the microcosm, the side of finding predominates over the side of foundness, consciousness over unawareness, unity over multiplicity. In effect, the macrocosm that appears outside the human self is present as a potentiality of knownness inside the human self. All entities are latent in the microcosm, which helps explain the endless human desire to know—that is, to actualize the potential to encompass all things in awareness. Mythically, the human capacity for omniscience is voiced by the Qur'ānic verse, “God taught Adam the names, all of them” (2:30). This capacity, however, can never be actualized fully, even over the course of endless duration. As a result, “Increase in knowledge of God will never be cut off in this world or the next, for the actual situation has no end.”⁸

Human beings find themselves in the macocosm yearning to know. At the same time, the microcosm, potentially embracing the knowledge of all that may be found, is “an ocean without shore,”⁹ so it is prone to indefinite dispersion. The inner light of finding and intelligence provides the means to know, but people are faced with the question of how to actualize their potential without becoming dispersed in endless possibility. Ibn 'Arabī sees the solution to this difficulty in the third self-disclosure of the Real, scripture generally and the Qur'ān specifically. Scripture is

⁷ In order to forestall the usual theological objections—namely, that to speak of beginningless and endless duration is to claim that the world is “eternal”—one can say briefly that for Ibn 'Arabī, the Arabic terminology itself nullifies such objections. “Eternity” (*qidam*) belongs exclusively to God in himself, and all things other than God, the sum total of which is the cosmos, are by definition *muḥdath*, literally, “caused to occur,” which is to say that they do not exist in themselves and must be given existence. Second, “the world” that theologians are talking about when they deny its everlastingness is not the same as the “cosmos,” even though the same Arabic word may be used, for the cosmos embraces anything other than the Nondelimited *Wujūd*, not least the posthumous realms known as paradise and hell. Scholars, by the way, commonly used the expression “18,000 worlds” when they wanted to refer to God's endless creativity. Third, it is incoherent to talk about a time “before” the creation of the cosmos, given that God is the creator eternally, and time is a word that applies only to our own created circumstances. It seems to me that had Ibn 'Arabī been familiar with Hindu views of samsara and cosmic cycles (which he was not), he would have considered them good ways to explain the nature of the cosmos. In at least one place, when he tells of a visionary encounter with a man who existed before our common ancestor Adam, he alludes to cycles by saying that he recalls hearing a saying of the Prophet that there were a hundred thousand Adams (see 1911, 3:549.12). Ibn 'Arabī explains how he reconciles the philosophical notion of the world's eternity with the theological insistence that it originates in time on more than one occasion. See Chittick 1989, pp. 84–85.

⁸ Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 3:317.31).

⁹ Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 3:552.20).

God's self-disclosure in human language. It provides the key to discerning the principles, patterns, and archetypes that become manifest in the twin oceans of macrocosm and microcosm.

Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that the literal meanings of the words Qur’ān and Furqān, the book’s two primary names, point to its role in providing the cognitive keys to analysis and synthesis, discernment and unification. Qur’ān means “that which brings together” (though famously, it also means “recitation”), and Furqān means “that which discerns and differentiates.” The self-disclosure of the Real in scripture, the simultaneous manifestation of the principles of oneness and manyness, provides the keys to discerning priorities and finding unity. Qur’ān and Furqān are the “two eyes” with which people can situate themselves in the cosmos and open themselves up to the harmonious actualization of their own endless potential. As Ibn ‘Arabī writes in one passage,

When someone stops with the Qur’ān inasmuch as it is a Qur’ān, he has but a single eye that unifies all things. But when someone stops with it inasmuch as it is a totality of things brought together, then for him it is a Furqān. When we tasted this latter situation, we saw ... that the schools have become multiple and the religions diverse. The levels have been distinguished, the divine names and the created traces have become manifest, and the names and the gods have become many in the cosmos.¹⁰

Naming the Real

The Real *Wujūd*, which is the Supreme Being/Consciousness, discloses itself in the three realms of cosmos, self, and scripture. The human microcosm finds itself as an existing, finding thing, and wherever it looks it encounters the delimitations of the Nondelimited. Through the linguistic keys provided by the Qur’ān/Furqān, people come to understand that the Real is named by whatever they find, even though it is nameless in itself. For, in respect of the self-disclosure of the Real, “The names of God are infinite, since they become known from that which comes into being from them, and that is infinite, even though the names are reducible to finite roots, which are the ‘Mothers of the Names’ (*ummahāt al-asmā’*) or the ‘Presences of the Names (*hadarāt al-asmā’*).”¹¹

Muslim thinkers employed two basic methods of sifting through the names of things in order to discern the root principles, the Mothers of the Names. The more philosophical approach appealed to the innate light of intelligence (*‘aql*), its ability to perceive the general contours of the Real’s self-disclosure by its own resources. This is what Avicenna does when he argues first for *Wujūd*’s necessity, then for its unity, eternity, consciousness, desire, power, wisdom, and generosity. Ibn ‘Arabī appreciates this method and never hesitates to employ in his own writings, but he prefers to draw his nomenclature from the Qur’ān. For him the philosophical method

¹⁰ Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, 3:94.16).

¹¹ Abu'l-'Alā' 'Afīfī (1946, p. 65). For more on the infinity of the names, see Chittick (1989, p. 42).

has a limited usefulness, given that people cannot be sure that their rational faculties are trustworthy. The safer and more reliable route is to trust in God and meditate on the names by which he has named himself in the Qur'ān.

Ibn 'Arabī frequently discusses the divine names as "presences" (*hadarāt*).¹² Each name, he explains, designates the Unnamable in itself and, as such, is unfathomable. At the same time, it designates a specific quality of the Real's self-disclosure, one that is distinct from every other quality. This quality's sphere of influence is then its "presence," discernible in the name's traces and properties found in the cosmos and the self. The presences are diverse, for God as the merciful does not disclose himself like God as the wrathful. Some names have greater "compass" (*iḥāṭa*) than others, and all are subsumed under "the Divine Presence" (*al-hadrat al-ilāhiyya*), which is the sphere of influence designated by the name "God" (*Allāh*), the Qur'ānic name of the Real *Wujūd* in both its unknown and self-disclosing modes. This name is "all-comprehensive" (*jāmi'*), because every other name refers back to it, both linguistically and ontologically. We say, "God is merciful, God is just," and so on. In each case the specific name designates one quality of the Real's self-disclosure. The Divine Presence is thus the sphere of influence of the name God, and it embraces three basic realms: the Essence (*dhāt*), which is the nameless Real in itself; the attributes (*sifāt*), which are the universal qualities found in the Real's self-disclosure; and the acts (*af'āl*), which are the entities that make the traces and properties of the attributes manifest, that is, the entire cosmos and all that it contains.

Like Avicenna and others, Ibn 'Arabī sometimes discussed the primary presences embraced by the Divine Presence in terms of seven attributes, usually listing them as life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, and justice. He points out that the relative compass of these names is obvious in their meanings. If God is the knower, this means that he is already alive. If he is the desirer, this means that he desires something that he already knows. If he is the powerful, this means that he exercises his control because he desires to do so. His speech is then the articulation of the infinite entities over which he has power, his generosity the bestowal of being on the entities, and his justice the positioning of each entity in its proper place.

Speech plays an especially prominent role in Ibn 'Arabī's depiction of the relationship between the Real Being and its self-disclosure. His most elaborate cosmological scheme is built on the notion of "the Breath of the All-Merciful" (*nafas al-rahmān*). He points out that the Qur'ān mentions two divine attributes as embracing all things: knowledge and mercy (e.g., Qur'ān 40:7). All things, whether existent or nonexistent, are embraced by the presence of God's knowledge. Mercy then designates the presence that bestows *wujūd* on things. As Ibn 'Arabī puts it, "*Wujūd* itself is a mercy for every existent thing (*mawjūd*)."¹³ By speaking, God as the

¹² Take, for example, the book-length chapter 558 of the *Futūḥāt* (Ibn 'Arabī 1911) which explains each of the 99 names of God as a specific divine presence.

¹³ Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 2:281.27).

All-Merciful existentiates the cosmic words in the substratum that is his breath. The imagery here builds on the Qur’ān’s mention of God’s inexhaustible words and its description of all things and happenings as “signs” (*āyāt*), the same word that it uses to speak of its own verses. Thus the three self-disclosures of the Real—the cosmos as macrocosm, the human self as microcosm, and scripture—are three “books” (*kitāb*) composed of words, signs/verses, and chapters (*sūra*).

In this depiction of the Real’s self-disclosure, things enter into existence in a manner analogous to the way in which we articulate words. When we speak, our words have no existence apart from our breath, but each word is distinct from every other word and from the breath itself. Our spoken words disappear the moment they are uttered, for they are “possible,” which is to say that they have no existence of their own, only inasmuch as we speak them. The cosmos may appear stable, but in fact it is a constant re-voicing of existence, an endless re-utterance of words, each word unique and unrepeatable. “There is no repetition in self-disclosure,” as Ibn ‘Arabī often reminds us. At each instant each cosmic word disappears, only to be replaced by a similar word. If the two words appear the same to us, that is because of our inability to see things as they actually are.

In describing the nature of possibility—the constant need of the cosmic words for re-articulation in the Breath—Ibn ‘Arabī often resorts to the notion of *khayāl*, which means both image and imagination. Thoughts and dreams are *khayāl*, as are reflections in mirrors. A mirror image is neither the thing that it reflects nor something else. A dream image is both what it represents and the articulated consciousness of the dreamer. The cosmos is then “God’s dream,”¹⁴ because the divine words are neither the All-Merciful Breath nor other than the Breath, neither Real Being nor absolute nothingness.

Later scholars like Ibn Taymiyya, who read Ibn ‘Arabī as claiming that all things are identical with God, focused on the numerous ways in which Ibn ‘Arabī showed that the cosmos is none other than the Real—“All is He (*hama īst*)” as this notion was later expressed in Persian. They ignored the equally numerous ways in which Ibn ‘Arabī demonstrated that all things are absolutely other than God. In brief, Ibn ‘Arabī’s position is that, inasmuch as the cosmos exists, it is the Real, and inasmuch as it has no claim on existence, it is not the Real. Thus, it is “it/not it” or “He/not He” (*huwa lā huwa*). Its actual situation is utterly ambiguous. “The whole cosmos is it/not it. The Real that is made manifest through form is It/not It, the limited that is not limited, the seen that is not seen.”¹⁵

Human Deiformity

When Ibn ‘Arabī describes the articulation of cosmic words within the All-Merciful Breath, he compares the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet to 28 levels of being, each of which is dominated by the properties of a specific name’s presence. Just as human

¹⁴ See Chittick (1989, p. 120).

¹⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, 2:379.9).

letters are articulated by the gullet and mouth in a known order described by the classical grammarians, so also the levels of being appear in a specific order. Here Ibn 'Arabī is presenting an original version of a scheme often discussed by philosophers and commonly called "the origin and the return" (*al-mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*). It depicts the manner in which the Necessary *Wujūd* drives a chain of causation that makes the light of Being become ever more dispersed, differentiated, and externalized. Once the chain reaches the furthest reaches of darkness and scatteredness—that is, the four elements—the movement reverses direction and becomes gradually more integrated and unified. During the returning ascent, consciousness and finding become more intense, a fact that is apparent in the increasing internalization represented by the progression from minerals, to plants, to animals. Ibn 'Arabī and others sometimes speak of this descent and ascent as two arcs (*qaws*) of "the circle of existence/consciousness" (*dā'irat al-wujūd*).

In Ibn 'Arabī's detailed version of this well-known scheme, the 27th letter, representing the penultimate articulation of the Breath, is the human microcosm, which manifests the Divine Presence per se. The 28th and final letter then pertains to "the levels, stations, and waystations," which disclose the presence of the name Lifter of Degrees (*rafi' al-darajāt*). This stage represents the varying levels of consciousness or self-realization (*tahaqqiq*) actualized by human beings over the course of their lifetimes. Sufi authors had often discussed these as the increasing levels of proximity to God that can be achieved by travelers on the path to spiritual perfection. Ibn 'Arabī brought ontology into this picture in a manner that had few precedents.

In explaining the vast spectrum of human possibility represented by the levels, stations, and waystations, Ibn 'Arabī built on the notion (discussed by Avicenna and others) of human perfection as "deiformity" (*ta'alluh*, from the same root as *Allāh*) and the similar theological notion of "characterization by God's character traits" (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*). In the case of God, "character traits" are the presences of the divine names, the general principles of the Real Being's self-disclosure. Each presence is described by a specific attribute such as life, knowledge, justice, mercy, wrath. As an all-comprehensive self-disclosure of the Real, the human microcosm has the potential to find the presence of each name within itself and bring it into actuality. At the same time, each person represents a unique delimitation of the Nondelimited, so each stands in a specific "station" (*maqām*) on the ascending arc. Every station is determined by the sum total of the divine presences that are actualized and synthesized within a self at any given moment. The human stations are ranked in degrees of excellence (*tafāḍul*) in keeping with the relative scope of the specific self-disclosures that govern them.

As in the case of the divine attributes, the human attribute of life has a broader scope than knowledge, knowledge a broader scope than desire, and desire a broader scope than power. When we speak of these four attributes, however, we have in view a soul inasmuch as it pertains to the "natural" realm. The moment we start looking at the various divine presences that do not clearly display their properties outside the human microcosm (such as compassion, generosity, and justice), the discussion turns to the modalities of moral and spiritual perfection.

Simply by existing, human beings are in the process of becoming characterized by the character traits of God. Scholars usually translate the word character traits

(*akhlāq*) as “ethics.” In the philosophical tradition, the science of ethics—i.e., “the science of character traits” (*ilm al-akhlāq*)—was a major discussion, though philosophers followed in the tracks of Aristotle, even if others based their ethical discussions on the Qur’ān. Among God’s “ninety-nine” names, many are immediately recognizable as ethical principles or traits of character, and these also can be ranked in degrees of excellence (*taṣādūl*). Ibn ‘Arabī points out that this ranking, like the ranking of the ontological names, is rooted in the nature of things, that is, in the principles and archetypes that govern the self-disclosure of the Real *Wujūd*. For example, the famous saying of the Prophet, “God’s mercy takes precedence over His wrath,” means that the Real Being/Consciousness predominates over nonexistence and unawareness. God’s forgiveness and pardon are more real than his wrath and anger, for forgiveness and pardon pertain to his mercy, that is, the Real *Wujūd* in its self-disclosing mode. In contrast, wrath and anger are directed at nonexistence (*‘adam*), which is the most basic meaning of the word “evil” (*sharr*), as Avicenna had also pointed out.¹⁶

In human terms, the principle that God’s mercy takes precedence over his wrath provides an overarching scheme for the path of achieving deiformity. Virtuous human activity must be rooted in compassion, love, care, and forgiveness. Attributes like wrath, severity, and justice must remain subservient to mercy, compassion, and love, just as they are in the Divine Presence itself. The common observation that these merciful qualities play but a minor role in human dealings simply highlights the depth of the human predicament, out of kilter with the nature of things. Nonetheless, it is precisely the innate human sense of imperfection, imbalance, and disharmony that drives the universal quest for meaning, equilibrium, wholeness, and peace, a quest that demands actively striving to put oneself into accord with the ascending arc of intensifying light.

The Unfolding of the Self

In Ibn ‘Arabī’s way of looking at things, every human soul perceives itself and the cosmos in ever-changing terms defined by each soul’s specific station, which is the unique and non-repeating self-disclosure of the Real *Wujūd* that it represents at any given moment. In speaking of the cognitive implications of these stations, Ibn ‘Arabī often talks about “the god of belief” (*al-ilāh al-mu‘taqad*). Each person’s god or gods—that is, each person’s point or points of orientation—is shaped and molded by his or her finding of the Real *Wujūd*’s self-disclosure. Referring to the etymology of the word “belief” (*‘aqīda*), Ibn ‘Arabī remarks that every belief is a “knot” (*‘uqda*) that ties down the Real, and that “People are bound to worship only what they believe about the Real, so they worship nothing but a created thing.” As a result,

¹⁶ For Ibn ‘Arabī’s analysis of the five basic senses in which people use the word *evil*, see Chittick (1989, pp. 290–292).

"There are none but idol-worshipers."¹⁷ Human beings, however, were created in the all-comprehensive image of the unknotted Divine Presence, so they should be striving to undo the knots that define their beliefs, break their idols, and to focus on the Nondelimited Real itself. A god of belief, a doctrine, or a model that would be adequate to the Nondelimited Real is a contradiction in terms, which helps explain why Ibn 'Arabī writes,

The possible thing looks only at itself, so it looks only at the veil. Were the veils to be lifted from the possible thing, possibility would be lifted, and the Necessary and the impossible would be lifted through the lifting of possibility. So the veils will remain hung down forever, and nothing else is possible.... Nor will the veils be lifted in the beatific vision, for vision will be through the veil, and inescapably so.¹⁸

At any given point in the unfolding of their selves, people stand in specific stations that determine their beliefs, outlooks, understandings, and desires. Here Ibn 'Arabī likes to quote a saying of the early Sufi Junayd (d. 910): "The water takes on the color of the cup." Every human cup is a microcosmic delimitation of the Nondelimited Water colored by specific beliefs and character traits. Moreover, says Ibn 'Arabī, the Qur'ān set down a universal principle when it put these words into the mouth of an angel: "None of us there is but has a known station" (37:164). The only partial exception to the rule of the known station is human beings, who have no fixed identity before death.

The word "station" (*maqām*) literally means a standing place or a standpoint. To speak of diverse human stations is to speak of the differentiation of human finding in terms of patterns implicit in the Real Being/Consciousness. The broadest and most general of these patterns are designated by the divine names, that is, the presences that differentiate the attributes and qualities of the unique and all-comprehensive Divine Presence. Since human beings are images of the Divine Presence per se, their essential nature (*fīṭra*) cannot be designated by any specific attributes or character traits. Rather, they have the potential to actualize and realize every attribute that becomes manifest in cosmos. Their relative freedom allows them to participate actively in the unfolding of their own possibility, to shape and mold their own becoming, to accept responsibility for their own final stations by making day-by-day choices in life.

The possibilities of human unfolding are endless, including those that lead to imbalance, deviation, disequilibrium, disharmony, and suffering. The ultimate model of a balanced human microcosm is provided by the Divine Presence, and the way to achieve conformity with that Presence goes back to the third global self-disclosure of the Real, scripture. Nonetheless, people will always interpret scripture in terms of their own gods of belief, so they also need the help of living human models of deiformity to assist them in the undoing of knots. The original human models were provided by the prophets, each of whom represented a full participation in the Divine Presence along with the predominance of a specific divine attribute appropriate to his (or her, according to some theologians) historical context.

¹⁷ Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 4:386.17).

¹⁸ Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 3:276.19). On the complex relationship between veil (*hijāb*) and face (*wajh*), see Chittick (1998, Chapters 3–4).

In standard Islamic lore the prophets numbered 124,000 individuals, beginning with Adam and ending with Muhammad. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s reading, each represented a specific station of perfection (*kamāl*), and each embodied the One, Nameless *Wujūd* in a manner appropriate to the needs of the people to whom he was sent.

Here Ibn ‘Arabī’s well-known discussion of “perfect human beings” (*insān kāmil*) enters the picture. The prophets actualized the Divine Presence, but each in a specific modality of perfection. Those who have successfully followed in their footsteps are called the saints (*awliyā’*, literally “friends,” i.e., of God). They have achieved some or many of the prophets’ stations, though never the station of prophecy itself. This theme permeates Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings and is especially prominent in *The Ringstones of Wisdom*. Each of the book’s 27 chapters is dedicated to one prophetic model, called a “word” (*kalima*) and associated with one divine attribute. The imagery of the book’s title and chapter headings suggests that each prophetic word is like a seal-ring constructed of the same precious stone—the human image of the Divine Presence. Each is then differentiated from the others by a specific form of wisdom associated with one divine attribute and engraved on the stone.

Beyond Models

What then is the model of Ultimate Reality, if any, that Ibn ‘Arabī is offering? His basic position is that a “model” can be nothing but a human construction, a god of belief, and that it cannot avoid displaying the station of the modeler. Any attempt to represent the Real *Wujūd* in human language will be colored by the specific, human disclosure of the Real that is articulating the language. Nonetheless, people should strive to approximate the nondelimited knowledge and consciousness that is Being itself while recognizing that “None knows God but God,” which is to say that complete and absolute knowledge, awareness, and consciousness is simply the Real *Wujūd* in itself, and that remains forever inaccessible. “The veils will be hung down forever.”

To strive for the best model is to attempt to bring oneself into harmony with one’s own deiformity, or to become fully characterized by the divine character traits. These character traits are revealed in the three books: cosmos, self, scripture. The prophets represent the archetypal human embodiments of these traits, the models of perfection that are available to human souls. The saints, who always live among us, are those who follow in the footsteps of the prophets, each saint actualizing the station of one specific prophet and worshiping God in terms of the god of belief expressed by that prophet’s specific wisdom. Ibn ‘Arabī even claims that at any given moment in the historical process, there are at least 124,000 saints, each embodying the wisdom of one of the 124,000 prophets.¹⁹

Ibn ‘Arabī devotes many chapters of his magnum opus, *The Meccan Openings* (*al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya*), to stations of wisdom that he ascribes to various prophets, especially Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Among these stations, he considers those pertaining exclusively to Muhammad the highest of all human possibilities. He explains that as the

¹⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, 3:208.13).

last prophet Muhammad received a message that corresponded exactly with the perfection of his own soul, his “character” (*khuluq*), and that both his message (the third self-disclosure) and his own self (the second self-disclosure) were perfect mirrors of the cosmos as a whole (the first self-disclosure). His message was the all-comprehensive Qur'ān, the all-differentiating Furqān, because his soul was the perfect receptacle for the message that includes every message, the station that embraces all stations, and the wisdom that encompasses all wisdom. Since every message was present within his soul, he acknowledged the appropriateness of each in its own context. Hence the specific nature of the station to which his followers should aspire is that it embraces all stations, without being defined by any specific station. Whatever stations they achieve will pertain to one or more of the prophets, all of whose stations are embraced by Muhammad's station. Those who actually achieve the station of Muhammad himself are then called “Muhammadans,” and their station is in effect “the Station of No Station” (*maqām lā maqām*).

The highest of all human beings are those who have no station. The reason for this is that the stations determine the properties of those who stand within them, but, without doubt, the highest of all groups themselves determine the properties.... Their vastness is the vastness of the Real, and the Real has no goal in Itself that Its *Wujūd* might ultimately reach. The Real is witnessed by the Muhammadan, so he has no ultimate goal in his witnessing. But everyone other than the Muhammadan witnesses his own possibility.²⁰

In other words, all those who have not realized the Station of No Station, which is perfect deiformity and total characterization by all divine character traits, will be constrained by their own entities, their own thingnesses. Ḫadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 1274), Ibn 'Arabī's foremost disciple, made this point by saying that the person who reaches the Station of No Station has no quiddity, for he has transcended every specific thing. In effect, his “whatness” is pure “that-it-is-ness,” the Real *Wujūd* itself.²¹ Standing in no station, such a person has realized every station and then passed beyond. He recognizes the relative validity of every station and the truth of every belief. This is why Ibn 'Arabī advises his readers as follows:

He who counsels his own soul should investigate, during his lifetime in this world, all doctrines concerning God. He should learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of his doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed for him in the specific mode in which it is correct for him who holds it, he should support it in the case of him who believes in it.²²

The Model of No Model

Ibn 'Arabī was an extremely prolific author who wrote at an exceptionally high level of discourse. Throughout his books and treatises, he speaks from diverse standpoints, typically identifying each standpoint with a specific divine name or a specific prophetic

²⁰ Ibn 'Arabī 1911, 3:506.30.

²¹ Qūnawī (1996, p. 266). For more on Qūnawī and the station of no station, see Chittick (2004, pp. 25–45); also <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/centralpoint.html>.

²² Ibn 'Arabī (1911, 2:85.11).

lens. He sees the prophets as full realizations of the Divine Presence, though each was dominated by attributes and character traits appropriate to his context. Each was the embodiment of a perfect model of Ultimate Reality, with the understanding that no model can be adequate to that Reality, so its perfect embodiments will necessarily be diverse. The most adequate linguistic models of Ultimate Reality are then represented by scripture, and the most perfect and all-encompassing scripture is the Qur’ān.

To summarize, then, Ultimate Reality in itself is unknowable, unspeakable, ineffable. The entire universe, everything other than the Ultimate Reality, is its self-disclosure, its self-utterance. Human beings are its all-comprehensive, microcosmic self-disclosures, a characteristic that bestows upon them consciousness, awareness, and the quest to realize their own potential. Scripture is the Ultimate Reality’s most adequate linguistic self-disclosure, and the individual prophets are the perfect models of its microcosmic embodiment, offering keys to the human situation. Any model of Ultimate Reality offered by a human individual will inevitably be a depiction of his or her own self-awareness, for “When a person sees something of the Real, he never sees anything but himself.”²³ Every depiction will necessarily be a constriction, a knotting, a binding, a colored lens, incapable of representing the Ultimate Reality in itself.

As existent things (*mawjūd*) human beings find themselves finding (*wujūd*), and they have no choice but to live in terms of what they find. When they do act upon their finding, they are following the god of their belief. If they reflect upon their finding, they will find that their god is inadequate to the Ultimate Reality that lies beyond all reality. The only model that can approach adequacy is the surrender of all limitation and constriction, all specific beliefs and stations, and the simultaneous acknowledgement of the role that each belief and station plays in the total self-disclosure of the Real *Wujūd*. This is precisely what Ibn ‘Arabī tried to do in his works—to offer the model of all models, a model that is simultaneously no model whatsoever.²⁴

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²³ Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, 2:667.13).

²⁴ Part of the controversy that has surrounded Ibn ‘Arabī’s name can be traced back to the fact that for many scholars, his claim to provide the model of all models seemed like enormous arrogance, even if many other scholars accepted that he was indeed “The Seal of the Muhammadan Saints” (*khātam al-awliyā’ al-Muhammadiyya*). Notice here that “the Muhammadan Saints” are those friends of God who achieved the Muhammadan Station, which is precisely the station that encompasses the stations of all saints; to be the “seal” of this station is to be its last historical embodiment, not the seal of sanctity per se, which continues until the end of time. See Chodkiewicz (1993). For a few of the controversies surrounding Ibn ‘Arabī’s name, see Knysh (1999).

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The Many-Sided Reality: A Model of Models

Jerry L. Martin

Disclosures of Reality

If we know something about Reality, it is only because Reality discloses itself to us. Disclosure is a bipolar relationship, always to someone, at a particular “location” – not only a particular time and place, but also a cultural and existential situation, with certain linguistic and conceptual resources. Hence, Reality is disclosed “perspectivally.” One sees what one sees, as one sees it, in part because of where one “stands.” On any given occasion, Reality discloses itself from a particular “angle.” This is not a defect. It is the very condition of there being any disclosure at all – just as, for seeing to take place, someone must stand somewhere in relation to what is seen.

Nor does it imply that “everything is subjective” any more than it does for ordinary seeing. That an object looks a certain way from a certain vantage point and distance is as objective a fact as its spatial coordinates. For reasons the science of optics explains, an object *does* look larger up close; railroad tracks *do* appear to converge in the distance. Far from being problematic, there is a sense in which no disclosure fails to be veridical if it is properly understood. Seeing a straight stick that looks bent in water can be deceptive but, rightly understood, it discloses an aspect of refraction.

Reality discloses itself in moments of epiphany or theophany, moments that in some sense “stand out” – one is tempted to use the Heideggerian term *ekstasis* here – of the usual stream of events, outside the routine flow of daily life. Each such disclosure provides an *apercu* of Reality – “a revealing glance” (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) – to an individual in a certain existential, cultural, and historical situation. The glance does indeed reveal – Reality is not a hidden *Ding-an-sich* – but it reveals partially, through the opening provided by the *apercu*.

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And, in such moments, Reality is disclosed as, in some sense, ultimate – more ultimate than the world of ordinary experience or the world described by the equations of physics. Reality is the *explanans*; other phenomena are the *explananda*. To the extent that one can speak of degrees of reality, other phenomena are “less real.”

Models

A religion provides, among other things, a model of Reality, and it is a perspectival model, from the angle of vision provided by the *apercu*. A model is a representation of reality. It is *about* something, which it portrays *as* thus or so. As Bas van Fraasen notes, the term “model” does not so much designate a thing as a function or role: “Whether or not A represents B … depends largely, and sometimes only, *on the way in which A is being used*” (van Fraasen (2008), p. 23).¹ The objects on the dinner table can be used to depict the solar system as having the sun at the center and planets at different distances from it. The elements of the model need not resemble the thing modeled, any more than words resemble the objects to which they refer.

To portray something *as* thus or so is to direct attention to certain of its features and not to others. Models ignore, simplify, or distort certain aspects of reality in order to make better sense of other aspects of reality. An economist represents the economy as the systematic interaction of rational optimizing agents, with perfect information, buying and selling goods and services. It is a powerful model, but it leaves out most of what makes people interesting, including a great deal of their economic life. The fact that human beings are not simply rational optimizing agents is irrelevant for the features of reality the model explores.

Models are perspectival. They have an orientation, an angle of vision, that locates what is portrayed in relation to the situation of the observer.² They “foreground” the aspects of reality most relevant to the purposes of the model-maker. For example, the tectonic model emphasizes the plate-like aspects of the earth’s crust. Other aspects are pushed to the background where, like distant objects, they almost disappear. There is a focal point that centers the model. It is here that items are most sharply delineated. Those at the margins are indistinct and

¹ van Fraasen provides the most comprehensive exploration to date of the perspectival nature of models.

² To be used for explanation or prediction, a model must include the “location” of the person using the model. For a map to be useful, you need an X that marks where you are. van Fraasen gives the example of the Aviation model used for predicting the weather, which is just an inert set of data and equations until the user specifies a location (van Fraasen, pp. 77–8, 196–7). “In sum,” he concludes, “the use of ‘perspective’ and ‘perspectival’ in connection with depictions of events in varying frames of reference cannot be banished completely” (van Fraasen, p. 71).

“distorted” – they are less prominent and understood, not on their own terms, but solely in reference to whatever is at the center. The term “distortion” is meant to be descriptive rather than judgmental. Distortion is essential to our ability to highlight what is important for a given purpose and to relegate other factors to the margins.

Models not only distort; sometimes they occlude entirely. Some elements may be foregrounded so prominently that, like a photograph in which a large object up front obstructs smaller objects behind it, other elements simply cannot be seen or acknowledged at all. A strong research program such as behaviorism, for example, completely occludes the inner lives of its subjects. As van Fraasen puts it, “revealing what things are like from one angle is incompatible with simultaneously revealing the values of certain other parameters” (van Fraasen 2008, p. 37).

An ultimate model combining all perspectives is not possible. It would require mapping an infinite number of angles and distances, times and viewing conditions, and “visual takes” based on different personal histories and belief systems.

Even if the totality of such variables could be related in some systematic way to one another, the result would be only one way of projecting the whole, with its own focal point, with some objects in the distance or pushed to the sides, and with one ultimate angle of vision – that of the model-maker. Hegel attempted something like this in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, an impressive effort – but with its own point of view and perspectival distortions.

In fact, if there were a “perfect” model that replicated reality in every respect, it would not be a model at all. It would be another world. And it would utterly fail as a model: it would not portray anything *as* thus or so. It would not *say* anything. It would not explain anything. A ping-pong ball is not the “perfect model” of an identical ping-pong ball. It is not a model at all.

We encounter our world perspectively, and we understand it perspectively, articulating aspects of what we encounter in ways that make sense of it, help us explain it, and enable us to relate our lives to it.

Five *Apercus*

Reality discloses itself through an *apercu* and thereby illuminates elements of the human situation in relation to the Reality as disclosed. Six such elements are: the human predicament, community, history, ethics, nature, and the self’s identity or difference with Reality. The human predicament denotes whatever is the deepest “flaw” in human life as well as the remedy. The result is a model of Reality in which these features are seen from a certain angle, seen *as* thus or so from this angle. Since the model is perspectival, salient elements will appear “up front” while others will be in the background or perhaps occluded entirely.

Consider the following five *apercus*.

A Call to Obedience

If the *apercu* (or series of *apercus* that form a certain tradition) is a call to obedience and hence to partnership with the God who issues the call, Reality is disclosed as personal, as one, as authoritative, as purposive, and as commanding obedience. From this vantage point, ethical and religious duties are disclosed as obedience to God's commandments. Community becomes a shared commitment to partnership with God, hence a covenant, and history becomes sacred history. The human condition, whether of sin or of righteousness, is defined by one's obedience or disobedience to God. Since God commands human beings and creates nature, God is not identical with either. Relationship, not identity, is the goal, with God's ultimate victory as the promised outcome.

Several elements are foregrounded: God as one and as a person, ethics (and worship) as divine commandment, community as covenant, and history as partnership with God.

Encountering the Messenger

If the *apercu* is an encounter with a Messenger who announces the good news of the Kingdom of God, the coming of which is both imminent and somehow already present in his person and teaching, then Reality is disclosed as personal, both judging and forgiving, loving and even co-suffering, triumphant over evil, and available to each of us in an intimate way through his Messenger. To know the Messenger is to know God, to receive forgiveness, and to participate in the Kingdom.

The human condition is understood as one of sin, of falling short of the glory of God. The way of life to which one is called and hence the ethics, both personal and social, is based on imitating the Messenger's love and forgiveness. Since the Kingdom of God is not of this world, the horizontal flow of historical time tends to be displaced by the vertical relationship to the eternal God who redeems all history. Nature is disclosed as reflecting the glory of God. The promised transformation is from a state of sin to one of redemption. The means is relating to God through the Messenger.

The elements that are foregrounded are: the human condition as sinful, the Kingdom of God as triumphant, the Messenger as manifesting God, as offering love and forgiveness, and as providing the exemplar for how we should live.

Intimations of the Way

If the *apercu* is an intimation of the Way, then Reality is disclosed as an undifferentiated whole, beyond the grasp of language and thought, which manifests

its creative power without exertion, just as water effortlessly seeks its level. Reality is disclosed, not as personal, but as transpersonal. The human condition is revealed as one of distraction, caused by willfulness, passion and excessive desires. No ethical code is needed. It is the Way that is normative, not by issuing commands (since the personal aspect of Reality is largely occluded) but by underlying the harmonious ebb and flow of Nature. Those who try to enforce ethics are as disruptive as those they seek to reform. Yielding to the Way, not historical action, is the appropriate response. One may participate in family and community, in ways that are natural and harmonious, or may be reclusive if that makes it easier to follow the Way. While all existence manifests the underlying Reality, the goal is not to realize one's identity with the Way, but to live in harmony with it.

The elements that are foregrounded are: the Way (its non-exertion, its harmony, its ungraspability – uncontrollability – by reason), the human predicament as one of agitated distraction and, by contrast, the harmony of living in quiet attunement with the natural, uncoerced course of things.

Discovering the Self Behind the Self

If the *apercu* is a meditative discovery of the Self behind the self, Reality is disclosed as the Atman that is Brahman, the One, the All, featureless but manifesting itself in the world of appearances. Gods are revealed as representations or manifestations of the impersonal One.

The human condition is disclosed as a state of ignorance that, blinded by desire, mistakenly takes phenomenal selves and things to be ultimate realities. Ignorance is removed by the discovery of the Atman and its identity with the Brahman and by understanding that the world is but a reflection of the Brahman. Detaching from one's self and its desires constitutes a spiritual liberation that breaks the endless cycle of desires, actions, and consequences. Justice and duty are not "up front" in this *apercu* except as social duties that govern the world of appearances, but certain kinds of behavior, such as truthfulness, kindness, and non-violence, tend to flow from an *apercu* that *discloses* the oneness of all things.

Elements foregrounded are: the inner Self, the formless One, identity of the Self and the One, the cycle of actions and consequences (and, more fundamentally, ignorance) as the predicament, and detachment as the solution.

An Enlightenment About the Conditions of Suffering

If the *apercu* is an enlightenment about suffering as caused by illusions of permanence, Reality discloses itself, not as an enduring, substantial self and world, or a Being beyond the world, but as an unconditioned state of existence that cannot be conceived but can be achieved. The human condition is seen as one of suffering and

suffering as a condition that can be overcome. Through meditation and spiritual disciplines, false beliefs and desires dissolve, and the enlightened person enters the unconditioned state. There is no God, since the idea of such a being assumes the very permanence that nothing has. If there are gods, they also need to follow the path of enlightenment. Rising above one's own desires leads to such ethical behaviors as treating others with compassion and helping them achieve enlightenment. The relevant community is the monastic community of those following the path of enlightenment. The transformation is from conditioned to unconditioned existence, and meditative discipline is the means.

Elements foregrounded are: the problem of human suffering, the impermanence of self and world, the possibility of unconditioned existence, the path of enlightenment, and the resulting life of compassion and service.

Common Elements

Different disclosures of Reality need not be regarded as mutually contradictory. However, common elements of the human situation will be seen from different angles. The elements that appear in the foreground of one *apercu* may not be salient in another. They may be “distorted” at the grainy margins – disclosed from so different an angle they are barely recognizable – or fully or partially occluded. Think of a light that shines through a crack in the window into a darkened museum. It will “light up” certain objects. The vases near the window will loom large. The statues against the far wall will barely be seen. Another light, shining through a window to the side, will illuminate the same objects in a different way, and will not shine at all on those that are behind larger objects.

Similarly, through each *apercu* can be seen the human predicament, whether disclosed as disobedience to God, a lack of attunement to the Way, or an attachment to desires. In each case, attachment to ego and desire is illuminated, but it is seen differently depending on how Reality has disclosed itself.

Yielding to Reality is salient in each *apercu*, but appears variously as obedience to God, as accepting the Messenger, as following the Way, or as giving up attachment to desire. Through each *apercu*, yielding to Reality is seen as true freedom, but freedom or liberation is defined in reference to Reality as disclosed in its particular way.

The intimate aspect of the self’s relation to Reality is disclosed variously through the “still small voice,” a personal relationship with the Messenger, the Atman that is Brahman, or the self that enters the ultimate state of unconditioned existence.

Human suffering is foregrounded only in that *apercu* in which Reality discloses itself as not subject to the conditions that cause suffering. If Reality discloses itself as a call to obedience, suffering appears, not so much as something to be overcome (apart perhaps from God’s final triumph in history), but as raising the question of why the obedient suffer while the disobedient prosper. Reality that discloses itself as the Way does not eliminate suffering but brings the peace and acceptance that

make it easier to bear. Through another *apercu*, suffering might be seen as primarily requiring love, compassion, and assistance.

In some *apercus*, Reality discloses itself as personal, but as also greater than the human conception of a person. And even when Reality is disclosed as transpersonal, it may also manifest itself in the form of personal gods.

Critical Pluralism

It is often thought that, if Reality is one, then it would necessarily disclose itself in one and only one way. But this assumption ignores the dynamics of a boundless Reality interacting with our limited capacities and the particularity of our existential situations. Reality is complex and our situations are many. This fact alone should suggest the need for an intellectual pluralism. Sandra D. Mitchell makes a similar point in a discussion of explanation in the biological sciences. While “the way the world is dictates what we can say about it,” she says, reality is not grasped whole (Mitchell (2003), xiii). “The idealized and partial character of our representations suggest that there will never be a single account that can do all the work of describing and explaining complex phenomena. Different degrees of abstraction, attention to different components of a system, are appropriate to our varying pragmatic goals and conceptual and computational abilities.” This is why “models of different causal factors qua models do not directly conflict” (Mitchell (2003), p. 9).

Reality is complex and our situations are many. Our *apercus* are partial and perspectival. One person glimpses God in nature, another in the human heart. Yet another hears a voice that issues authoritative commands. Still others encounter not a personal God at all, but a Reality that lies beyond human thoughts and desires. These may well be different aspects of the same Reality, glimpsed from diverse angles of vision. In fact, to the extent that awareness is intrinsically perspectival, it would not be possible to disclose in a single *apercu* all the ways in which Reality is present in nature and in the human heart, issues calls to action and to one-pointed stillness, and yet is ultimately more than all these manifestations.³

A model of Reality – or, more accurately, a model of models, which is what is offered here – will have to accommodate all the above understandings and, no doubt, more.⁴ And this means, much as quantum mechanics does, that we may have to

³The history of efforts to unify religions is not reassuring. Some are hierarchical. Hegel provides a grand theory in which all religions express a moment of the Absolute, most adequately expressed in a philosophized Lutheranism. Some are essentialist. The phenomenological tradition attempts to identify a single essence of religion – the sacred, or the numinous, or the holy, or ultimate concern, or a wholly-other Power, and so forth. Some achieve unification by making religion mute. John Hick regards the great religions as incommensurable representations of the noumenal X. The Perennial Philosophy makes religion both hierarchical and mute by privileging the mystical level, regarded as ineffable, over those aspects of religion that can be expressed.

⁴A model of models of Reality is not itself a model of Reality, any more than a theory of maps is itself a map.

revise our customary ideas of what is logical, of what predicates contradict one another, and seek instead to find ways to express multiple truths. We should think only secondarily of how to make them fit into a coherent account. Religious theorizing has to follow, not dictate or restrict, spiritual insight.

This is not to say that “anything goes.” Religion is no more exempt from error than other human endeavors. Maps using different projections, or mapping different features, can all be true, but a map can also be inaccurate – if it puts the mountains where the ocean should be. Or it can be accurate but unhelpful for the purpose it was meant to serve – a political map when a topographical map is needed.

We do not have to assume that every experience of every seer and saint or every iota of every religious tradition is a valid disclosure of Reality. We are all fallible receivers and fallible reporters. A putative disclosure may be distorted or illusory or misreported or misunderstood. The only reasonable pluralism is a critical pluralism. It must contain its own means of self-correction.⁵

We have to subject the religious claims of all religions to the methods of spiritual discernment and critical reflection that inform theological discussion *within* current traditions. There are no Cartesian Rules for the Direction of the Mind for these discussions, even within a single tradition. But method must fit subject-matter; we can’t tailor subject-matter – in this case, Reality – to fit predetermined methods.

Responding to the Many-Sided Reality

Every *apercu* is perspectival and partial, but this is not how it strikes the recipient or those who understand Reality through it.⁶ Reality does not disclose itself as neutral fact available for theorizing, but as transformative – not just accidentally but essentially, as if this were its very reason for being. Reality seems to reveal what kinds of beings we are and should become, and so “invites” the response that moves us from one to the other. It calls for a turning of our souls and a new way of life. One feels one’s whole life oriented in a new direction, as if pointing true north, and that nothing could be more certain than this thing that cannot quite be grasped. It seems to be the only truth, or at least the only truth worth having. It is not easy to step back and take in a larger picture in which the disclosure to which we are responding is only a part.

⁵ Mitchell also describes her own theory of biological explanation as “critical pluralism,” which she sees as the reasonable “middle ground” between epistemic “promiscuity” and the ideal of a “grand unified theory” such as reductionism – an unsuccessful research program increasingly rejected by a “developing antireductionist consensus” among philosophers of biology (Mitchell, pp. 2, 179, 214).

⁶ An object is viewed from one side, but implicitly as being visible from other sides as well, as being the reference point of a horizon of perspectives. Looking directly at the midday Sun overwhelms the visual field and blocks this horizon. Awed by their own *apercus*, religions tend to ignore the horizon of alternative perspectives, of other dimensions of Reality. They acknowledge the partialness of their *apercus* in another way – by asserting the ultimate ineffability of Reality.

Even if a complete, non-perspectival disclosure were theoretically possible, it could not disclose to any individual more than that person could humanly absorb. People's cultural resources and existential situations vary. It may be that Reality discloses to different individuals and cultures that aspect of itself that they are prepared to understand or that is relevant to their situation. We cannot assume that there is only one kind of transformation that puts us in essential connection with Reality. There may be a kind of division of labor, as believers in each tradition try to live out their own divine summons, one called to a partnership with God in history, another to accepting God's love through Christ, another to live in harmony with the Way, another to an interior path for reaching the Brahman, another to rise above the irreality of the conditions of existence, and so on. If so, each of us should be open to Reality in whatever way and in whatever venues are most available to us.

It is also possible that, even though we cannot create a seamless non-perspectival model of Reality, we should be prepared to take in a larger horizon of truth, not merely to respect it as someone else's truth, but to make it our own. Once one understands that there are other valid traditions of *apercus*, one lives one's own with a wider vision.

Even now, within a single tradition, it is routinely accepted that there are alternative valid ways of relating to Reality. The way of St. Francis is not the same as the way of St. Thomas Aquinas, not to mention the way of Gabriel Marcel or Dorothy Day or Teilhard de Chardin. These can co-exist with relative ease because, however different, they are viewed, and view themselves, as ways of living through the *apercu* of the Kingdom of God. Likewise, in the Hindu tradition, *karma yoga* (offering action and its fruits as a sacrifice), *jnana yoga* (the path of knowledge that realizes the self's identity with the Brahman), and *bhakti yoga* (devotion to gods such as Vishnu and Shiva) are all considered valid. It is common among the Chinese to consider themselves simultaneously Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian and to actively participate in all three traditions, without feeling tension between them. Perhaps we should have a similar acceptance of the many ways that deeply spiritual people have responded to those aspects of Reality disclosed to them. This may make things more complicated, even messy, but that is not too high a price to pay for being open to Reality as it is, in all its dimensions. Spiritually open individuals, even those strongly committed to a single tradition, are already finding their own forms of pluralism. Thomas Merton was "committed to Hindu and Buddhist spiritual wisdom without diminishing his attachment to Catholic Christianity" (Padovano (1987), p. 390). Bede Griffith, a Catholic monk, lived in India for 25 years and concluded that "the modern Christian view needs to be complemented with the constant awareness which the Hindu has of the eternal dimension of being" (Griffith (1938), p. 128). Raimon Panikkar considers himself both a Christian and a Hindu, each without reservation (Panikkar (2007), pp. 52–54) Irving Greenberg, a modern Orthodox rabbi, has suggested that it may have been "God's purpose" both to maintain the covenant with Israel and yet, through the revelation through Jesus, "to start another religion, alongside Judaism to bring the message of redemption to the world in accelerated fashion..." (Greenberg (2004), pp. 31–32).

Since Reality is transformative, it calls for a response by our whole being. But, since it discloses itself in multiple ways, each of which calls for a different response, we are faced with the question of how we should respond. There is no reason to think we are all called to the same life. We have to open ourselves to Reality and, wherever we best hear the call or sense the divine presence, respond to it in kind. For many, that will be through the faith into which they were born. Others will hear a far-off call. For some, it will be a dramatic turning of the soul; for others, a slowly deepening attunement. Faced with such possibilities, it might be well to worry less about which religion is right, since none is complete, and to listen with an attentive and yielding heart for Reality's call.

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Incoherence and Truth in Models of the Ultimate: A Badiouan Approach

David R. Brockman

Models of the Ultimate, as Ted Peters notes, “follow precedents set in science,” particularly the construction of theories to explain scientific observations (Peters 2007, 274).¹ Should we then expect such models to meet standards of efficacy similar to those of scientific theories? In particular, should we expect models of the Ultimate to be internally coherent? Do such models portray the Ultimate more effectively if the elements of the model are consistent and hang together well?

Prima facie, coherence clearly plays at least some part. One could hardly be satisfied by a model that, say, holds *both* that God created the cosmos *and* that God did not in any way create the cosmos, or one that holds that God is utterly and exclusively transcendent and yet that we can know God’s nature and will.

Peters, arguing from a critical realist perspective, gives coherence a very important role: it is one of his four criteria for assessing the adequacy of models of the Ultimate (275).² Yet, interestingly, James E. Taylor contends that the model Peters chooses, “eschatological panentheism,” is itself logically incoherent (Taylor 2007, 292).

¹ For the sake of convenience, I speak of “the Ultimate” in the singular. I do not mean to imply thereby that the Ultimate is unitary, as in Jewish or Muslim monotheism.

² The other three criteria are applicability, comprehensiveness, and logic. It is unclear from Peters’ discussion whether his selection of coherence stems from his commitment to critical realism. He cites Whitehead’s *Process and Reality* as the source for his four criteria. However, Arthur Peacocke, in a work Peters cites (275n.7), argues that a critical realist method in theology applies “the criteria of reasonableness that are used generally to assess ideas and, in particular, in appraising scientific models and theories,” two of these being “internal coherence” and “general cogency” (Peacocke 1990, 15).

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Rather than continue that debate, I suggest that we look at the question of coherence differently. In this paper, I argue that due to the nature of models and their relation to the Ultimate, coherence may in some cases be more a hindrance to a given model's efficacy than a help. I reframe the discussion by moving away from Peters' critical realist approach and adopting instead an approach derived from philosopher Alain Badiou, in works such as *Being and Event*.³ By considering models of the Ultimate in Badiouan terms, I show how such models are inherently limited by the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization by which they are constructed and ordered. Nonetheless, and somewhat counter-intuitively, I will suggest that it is through their *incoherencies* that models may be effective in pointing to the Ultimate.

To demonstrate this possibility, I will consider two quite different models of the Ultimate: that of Christian liberation theologians Ronaldo Muñoz and Pablo Richard, and that of the Daoist teacher Huajing Ni. These particular models are illustrative in that they offer diametrically opposing responses to one of the great questions in interreligious dialogue, whether the Ultimate is personal or impersonal.⁴ Both models try to "fix" the Ultimate to a particular coherent conception, either intensely personal (liberation) or resolutely impersonal (Ni's Daoist model). Both models are thus limited by their own dynamics of exclusion and marginalization. Yet fortunately, when the excluded breaks into the model in the form of an "event," often associated with an internal inconsistency, the model may nonetheless succeed in pointing beyond its own merely human conceptions, to the truly ultimate.⁵

³ Badiou (2005). For a detailed analysis of Badiou's thought, see Hallward (2003). It should be noted that Badiou himself does not reflect on models of the Ultimate.

⁴ What constitutes "personhood," especially as regards non-human entities such as the Ultimate, is a matter of considerable debate. I find Mikael Stenmark's description of "personal" helpful: the Ultimate is such that it "can have knowledge and awareness, perform actions, enter into a loving relationship with humans, respond to prayer, and be morally good." While Stenmark refers explicitly to "God" here, his definition applies equally well to other theistic understandings (Stenmark 2003, 175).

⁵ Judging from some reviewer comments on an earlier draft, I should make clear that this essay does not attempt to comment on either Christianity or Daoism as a whole, a task which far exceeds the scope of a short essay such as this. I am interested only in the two aforementioned instantiations of these two religious traditions, as they embody opposing poles regarding the question of the Ultimate's personal or impersonal character. The wider traditions themselves tend to offer a more mixed response. While Christianity by and large tends to speak of a personal God, some Christian voices have presented God in largely impersonal terms; an example is Meister Eckhart's depiction of God as "above being" and beyond description and definition (Eckhart 1957, 206). Similarly, the Daoist cosmos is populated by a mind-boggling array of deities, immortals, and other spiritual beings; these may be taken to present a personal dimension of the Ultimate which complements the highly abstract Dao. Indeed, as I will argue below, the two models under consideration in this paper themselves take inconsistent positions on the question of the Ultimate and the personal.

Models and Situations

To use a well-worn but appropriate metaphor, a model of the Ultimate is like a finger pointing at the moon: as the finger must not be mistaken for the moon, so the model should not be confused with the Ultimate. Put differently, models are “provisional ways of imagining what is not observable” (Peters 2007, 275). Models of the Ultimate can never be more than provisional, because they are linguistic and conceptual constructs, and thus are not themselves ultimate. The authors we will consider below recognize this fundamental limitation of attempts to capture the Ultimate in words and concepts. “[T]he mystery of God is so radical and disconcerting,” Richard writes, “... that any attempt to name it is almost impossible” (Richard 1993, 152). Similarly, Huajing Ni renders the famous opening to the *Daodejing* as follows: “Tao, the subtle reality of the universe/cannot be described./That which can be described in words/is merely a conception of the mind” (Lao-tzu 1995, 7).

As a linguistic and conceptual construct which includes some things (e.g., claims, doctrines, metaphors, reflection on religious symbols or experience) and excludes others, a model of the Ultimate functions as what Badiou calls a *situation*: a presentation of elements selected out of the wider plural reality (Badiou 2004, 121).⁶ What is excluded Badiou terms the *void*; it is whatever “does not count” according to the criteria which construct the situation.

There are two movements in the construction of a situation. The first is the dynamic of inclusion/exclusion, which simply presents some things as inside the situation and other things as outside (the void). However, a situation as such is unstructured and thus potentially anarchic, incoherent, and unstable; there is “nothing to ensure that the foundational void of the situation ... might not somehow erupt into the situation itself” (Hallward 2003, 95). To protect the integrity of the situation, a second movement is needed, that of the *state* of the situation. Whereas the situation establishes those entities that are included within it, the state establishes the way its elements are grouped into parts or subsets (96). The state attempts to establish internal coherence among the elements, by asserting the primacy of some parts and marginalizing any that seem to contradict or call into question the very selection process which constructed the situation.⁷

In the mainline Christian situation, for instance, some elements do not hang together well. Among these are the following two claims: (a) that *God is loving and gracious* and (b) that *explicit allegiance to Jesus Christ is necessary to salvation*. It is not immediately obvious how these two claims are consistent; how, for instance, could a loving God refuse salvation to those who never heard of Jesus Christ, and thus had no opportunity to accept him as savior? Since this possible incoherence threatens the situation’s stability, some organizing principle (state) is needed.

⁶ Badiou grounds his philosophy upon set theory. For an in-depth examination of the mathematical foundations of Badiou’s thought, see Hallward (2003, 49–106).

⁷ In Badiou’s terminology, the situation “presents” its elements, whereas the state of the situation “represents” (re-presents) them.

Evangelical versions of the Christian situation typically prioritize (b) over (a), interpreting (a) in terms of (b).⁸ Other versions of the Christian situation take the opposite approach, emphasizing God's loving and gracious character, and either downplaying the need for explicit allegiance to Christ or interpreting allegiance in terms of "anonymous Christianity" or the like.⁹

The dynamics of exclusion and marginalization have important epistemological implications. Badiou presents these in terms of a distinction between "knowledge" (*savoir*) and "truth" (*vérité*). Knowledge is a function of the situation; it is limited to the elements included therein and is conditioned by the ordering operations of the state. Truth, on the other hand, is universal and exceeds the situation. It is what the situation excludes and the state seeks to conceal or suppress. It is, viewed from within a situation, always something new, something extra (Badiou 2003, 61).¹⁰ As excess, a truth cannot be known merely from the elements within a situation. Rather, truth is revealed through encounter with the void of the situation. Picturesquely, Badiou says that a truth "punches a 'hole'" in knowledge (Badiou 2002, 70).

This in-breaking of truth Badiou calls an *event* (Badiou 2002, 41–42).¹¹ By calling into question what is "known," an event can provoke a revolutionary rethinking of the situation itself, and perhaps call forth the creation of a new situation in light of the event (41). Points at which such an encounter can happen are what Badiou calls *evental-sites*; these are often associated with inconsistencies or contradictions in the situation (such as claims (a) and (b) in the example above), which undermine its stability and order.¹²

In the following sections, I will apply the situation-void-event framework to the two models under consideration.

The "Intensely Personal God" of Liberation Theology

Our first situation is the model of the Ultimate presented in the contributions of Muñoz and Richard to the seminal systematic work of first-generation Latin American liberation theology, *Mysterium Liberationis*. For the sake of simplicity, let's call it the Liberation Model (LM), without thereby implying that all liberation theologians adopt such a model (indeed, we will shortly consider a liberation theologian who models the Ultimate quite differently).

⁸ Such an interpretation might hold that since salvation unquestionably depends upon explicit allegiance to Christ, then God's love and grace must be expressed precisely in making salvation available to sinful humans through the incarnation of Christ.

⁹ See, for example, Cracknell (2005, 95).

¹⁰ Badiou also speaks of truth as "subtracted" from what is known.

¹¹ Badiou writes that "the fundamental ontological characteristic of an event is to inscribe, to name, the situated void of that for which it is an event" (Badiou 2002, 69).

¹² Hallward calls the evental site "one of the most important and most slippery aspects of Badiou's philosophy of truth." While the evental site is not the void, it is "that element of the situation which is located 'at the edge of the void'" (Hallward 2003, 117).

The LM situation attributes certain characteristics to the Ultimate (“God”), and excludes others. It seeks to set forth “the true image of the living God” distinct from “its caricatures and falsifications” (Richard 1993, 152; Muñoz 1993, 407). The selection criteria reflect a choice on the part of liberation theologians to derive their model of the Ultimate from the experience of God among the poor—as Richard puts it, “to acknowledge the presence and face of God among the most oppressed” (Richard 1993, 152). The LM is rooted in the ways the poor experience God in their struggles against “misery, poverty, injustice, oppression, repression, discrimination, marginalization” (152). Muñoz specifies that “we have preferred to follow the obvious usage of the Christian scriptures itself, as we have rediscovered how to read it today in our communities among the poor” (Muñoz 1993, 417). For Muñoz and Richard, this means taking at face value biblical references to a personal God.¹³ In this way, liberation theology “create[s] a space … for God to speak personally” (Richard 1993, 152).

The result is a model of God as “*intensely* personal” (Muñoz 1993, 412, 417 emphasis mine). This God experiences love and its attendant sufferings and joys. The divine attitude is that of a (human) mother who feels viscerally “the suffering of her innocent creatures, or thrill[s] with inexpressible delight at the return of a lost child” (412). God experiences “a longing” for justice, and “is determined to have a response on the part of the individual or the people to a divine, summoning, and challenging word” (408). The God of the LM situation also wills and acts. God creates human beings through “a free divine initiative,” and personally seeks to intervene in history in order to execute divine judgment upon it and “to liberate oppressed, exploited, and disintegrated human groups” (412, 407).

The LM situation relegates to the void attributes associated with a more abstract and impersonal conception of the divine. Muñoz rejects the attribution to God of any “philosophic conception of impassible perfection and immutable principle, essentially beyond the reach of human contingency” (412). He specifically distinguishes his intensely personal God from “a ‘God’ of the universe and of life in the sense of the religions of the earth, or to a supreme Being or absolute Future discerned by philosophy” (417). “Yahweh,” Muñoz writes, “is the God of history and historical hope, rather than the God of cosmic nature and an absolute future” (412). Also excluded is any notion of creation as a natural process of emanation (which we will see in the Daoist model).¹⁴

In most respects the LM depicts the Ultimate as radically immanent to human history and as so thoroughly personal as to verge on the anthropomorphic. Were the

¹³ In this respect, the LM would seem to violate Peters’ description of models. He argues that models “explicate the … primary level of symbolic discourse,” and that theological discourse is “a conceptual reformulation of what appears at a more primary level of discourse, namely, the language of biblical symbols”; through this hermeneutic process, “The theologian explicates the symbolic language of scripture or liturgy or history.” This activity includes denying “literal references to God” (Peters 2007, 274–275).

¹⁴ Humans (and, presumably, other creatures) are not “generated … by some natural process; nor have they emanated from the divine being itself in the form of a more or less deficient expression of the same” (Muñoz 1993, 412).

LM wholly coherent, it would be open to criticism for limiting God to the merely human and worldly. However, the LM situation is not entirely coherent—and this is fortunate, for the LM's inconsistencies open up fissures that allow access to the *truly* ultimate. In Badiouan terms, the inconsistencies constitute evental sites, openings to the void.

One such site is Muñoz and Richard's assertion of divine transcendence. Muñoz, for instance, states—though without additional clarification—that as Creator, God is “different” from human beings (412).¹⁵ This assertion is in keeping with a long tradition of Christian thought which holds that God is not only immanent, acting in and through human history, but also ontologically transcendent, of an order of being different from creatures. Yet divine transcendence, especially in the ontological sense, sits uncomfortably within the LM's radically personal depiction of the Ultimate. It is not immediately obvious how an intensely personal, nigh anthropomorphic, God is all that “different” from humans.¹⁶

Yet the state of the LM situation acts (though not entirely successfully, as we shall see) to marginalize ontological transcendence and to privilege instead a transcendence more in line with the LM conception of God as intensely personal: that is, transcendence of social structures, especially those which oppress and marginalize the poor. Muñoz writes that God “personally reveals an active presence and call … not in the ‘sacred power’ of human hierarchies … but … *in the multitude of poor and outcast*, with their privations, their misery, and their hope” (408). Similarly, Richard depicts divine transcendence as “guarantee[ing] the oppressed the radical novelty of a full life in this world, *beyond all oppression*, and beyond death itself” (Richard 1993, 151, emphasis mine). Significantly, Richard holds that God also transcends the church: “the Reign of God is the only absolute … the church is relative” (153).

Despite the action of the LM state to conform divine transcendence to the overall presentation of an intensely personal God, however, the attribution of transcendence remains an evental site because it points beyond the boundaries of *all* situations, including those of the LM situation itself. Put differently, if God transcends social constructs, including the church itself, it also transcends the constructions of theologians—and those of Muñoz and Richard are no exception. Thus the assertion of transcendence represents an opening out into the excluded void—and, possibly, beyond the personal.

A second evental site is less an inconsistency than the potential for inconsistency. It is the very methodology which generates the “intensely personal” presentation of the Ultimate in the first place: the use of the experience of the poor as theological source. Religious experience is neither predictable nor universally identical; it may

¹⁵ In fact, he puts this the other way round: human beings “are different from God.”

¹⁶ For that matter, neither Muñoz nor Richard seem all that interested in ontological transcendence. This is no doubt due to the use of the experience of the poor as theological source: in their struggles against poverty, oppression, and injustice, the poor (or at least those poor whom Muñoz and Richard have in mind) are less interested in how God transcends the world than in how God acts within it.

also be socially constructed, or at least socially conditioned. Consequently, the character of the Ultimate is always to some extent up for grabs. It is always possible that the poor (or any given subset thereof) may experience an impersonal God, or at least a God who is not exclusively personal.

In fact, that is the case in parts of Asia, where the poor are more likely to be Hindus, Buddhists, Daoists, and/or Confucianists than Christians. In response, a number of liberation-oriented Asian Christian theologians, such as Raimon Panikkar and Chung Hyun Kyung, image the Ultimate in far less personal terms than do Muñoz and Richard.¹⁷ We will look more closely at one such theologian, Heup Young Kim, later in this paper.

In short, these two inconsistencies in the LM situation—the attribution of divine transcendence, and the reliance on religious experience—are cracks that let in light from beyond its carefully constructed walls. Encounter with either of these eventual sites allows one working within the LM situation to transcend the limited “knowledge” of a personal Ultimate offered by the situation and its state, and to access the “truth” that the Ultimate may be *both* “intensely personal” *and* beyond the personal.

The Intensely Impersonal Dao

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the LM situation is the impersonal model of the Dao offered by contemporary Daoist master Huajing Ni.¹⁸ True, some venerable strands of Daoism personify the Dao in the figure of Laozi, the legendary author of the *Daodejing*.¹⁹ However, Master Ni’s model presents the Dao in terms as intensely *impersonal* as the LM God is intensely personal. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to Master Ni’s presentation of the Dao as the Daoist Model (DM), without thereby implying that all Daoists hold to such a model.

As with Muñoz and Richard, Master Ni constructs a situation and its associated void by attributing some qualities to the Ultimate (the Dao) and excluding others.²⁰

¹⁷ See Panikkar (2004), Kyung (1990, 1994, 1997).

¹⁸ Wade-Giles: Tao; Hua-Ching Ni. The reader should note that I am working primarily with Master Ni’s book *Entering the Tao* (Ni 1997), as well as his “translation and elucidation” of the *Daodejing* (Lao-tzu 1995). Master Ni uses the Wade-Giles transliteration “Tao” and refers to it without a preceding article (i.e., as “Tao” rather than “the Tao”).

¹⁹ See, e.g., Kohn (2008, 615).

²⁰ In one respect, however, it might seem that the DM is less dualistic than the LM. Master Ni writes that the universe has two “apparent aspects,” an unmanifest aspect and a manifest aspect. The latter is the “perceptible world of multiplicity.” The former is equivalent to the Dao, “the undivided oneness or ultimate nothingness … undifferentiated, absolutely whole and complete.” Although these two aspects “appear as two,” they “are in fact one” (Ni 1997, 13). Despite this apparent nondualism, however, Master Ni does not in fact present the manifest as itself ultimate. Though the Dao is the “deep root” of all things, “everything is not Tao”; “To be formed, limited, manifested, and definable is to be something; to be not limited, defined or formed is Tao” (1). In short, the DM presents the unmanifest Dao as the only “real” Ultimate.

Although Master Ni occasionally refers to the Dao in personal or quasi-personal terms (e.g., the Dao “nurtures and sustains” all things (Ni 1997, 13)), the DM situation presents the Ultimate almost exclusively in impersonal terms. The Dao is the “potency” of the universe, its “original energy,” its “Subtle Origin” (1, 13). It is “the undivided oneness or ultimate nothingness” (13).

The DM situation relegates most personal aspects—knowledge, awareness, will, intentionality, feelings of love—to the void. Perhaps because Master Ni is writing to a Western audience in which Judeo-Christian ideas of a personal God dominate thought about the Ultimate, he takes great pains to exclude any characteristics associated with a personal Creator deity. For instance, he contends that if God is the source of all things, “then God must have some shape. If he is formed, then he is no different than we are; he is only one of the offspring.” The Dao, by contrast, “is the final source, the unformed origin of all things. There is no one creator of the universe, there was no particular design or laws which existed beforehand, there was only the primal energy” (2–3). This directly contradicts Muñoz’s assertion of a divine creator.

Furthermore, Master Ni differs with Muñoz over the process by which the cosmos comes to be. While Muñoz presents Creation as an act of divine will, Master Ni presents it as the natural—and very impersonal—process of emanation from the Ultimate. Creation is “an expansion of the primal energy outward from a center” (14). “Tao manifests itself through an active process of self-expression. Creation may be viewed as the process in which the organization of the undifferentiated primal energy occurs” (13–14).

While the DM’s presentation of an impersonal Ultimate results in part from the exclusion of personal attributes, it is also a function of the action of the state of the situation. The state works—though not wholly successfully, as we will see—to marginalize any personal elements (or elements with personal implications) which are included in the DM situation, and to make them cohere with the overall presentation of an impersonal Ultimate.

An example is Master Ni’s assertion that prayer can be beneficial. This comes as something of a surprise, for if the Dao is as impersonal as Master Ni suggests, it cannot “hear” our prayers; thus it makes no sense to pray to it. However, Master Ni holds that “people may direct their prayers to any object and they may still receive a response” (130).²¹ This is due to the radical immanence and omnipresence of the Dao: “the responsive subtle energy is everywhere in the universe and also within the person who prays. The response [to prayer] will be positive if the subtle energy waves are projected properly” (131). While it does not matter to whom or how one prays, Master Ni notes that some “invocations … are designed to create effective and appropriate responses.” He quotes in its entirety the prayer to the Jade Emperor, described in impersonal terms as “the directing energy of the multi-universe” (131). Prayer becomes less a dialogue between persons than a redirection of energy flow dressed in the garb of personal language.

²¹ He also holds that images or names can in fact be a hindrance (131).

Although the state of the DM situation generally orders the elements associated with prayer to fit the governing notion of an impersonal Dao, it is not entirely successful. The language of the prayer to the Jade Emperor remains highly personal. The Jade Emperor “educates” people, “bestows his blessings,” “gives energy to those who have positive virtue,” and “chains the self-centered” (132–133). This language sits uncomfortably alongside the impersonal attributes which Master Ni clearly privileges.

What are we to make of these highly personal characteristics in an otherwise impersonal presentation? It might be seen as an anthropomorphic accommodation to a finite human mind incapable of conceiving of a fully impersonal Ultimate. Whatever the purpose, it is an inconsistency—and thus a potential evental site, an opening beyond the DM situation itself to its void, to the *truly* ultimate.

As with the inconsistencies in the LM situation, this inconsistency also turns out to be beneficial. For, were the presentation of the Dao consistently impersonal, it would be open to criticism for unjustifiably restricting the Ultimate to a particular human conception—in this case, an impersonal conception. After all, if, as the *Daodejing* asserts, the Dao cannot be described, then it also cannot be limited to a set of impersonal characteristics.

For one operating within the DM situation, encounter with this evental site might suggest the limitations of the “knowledge” offered by the situation itself, i.e., an overly impersonal conception of the Ultimate. It might suggest the truth (in the Badiouan sense) that the Dao may be both personal and impersonal—or perhaps, being beyond “names and descriptions,” may also be beyond merely human notions of personality *and* impersonality.

Modeling After the Event: Heup Young Kim’s Theotao

This insight—that the Ultimate cannot be reduced to the personal or the impersonal—is a major theme of *Christ and the Tao*, by the Korean Christian liberation theologian Heup Young Kim.²² While this work does not provide a full-blown and explicit model of the Ultimate, it suggests at least the outlines of a model that is open to encounter with the void. Kim, a Presbyterian rooted in the theology of Karl Barth, brings his Christian commitments into dialogue with the non-Christian traditions of his homeland—that is, with what has traditionally been the void of the Christian situation.

²² Kim describes himself as “a Christian who has been raised in a Korean family steeped in a thousand-year history of Confucianism.” He writes that “Spiritually and religiously, Confucianism and Taoism (Neo-Confucianism) still function as my native languages, while ... Western Christianity remains as a foreign language like English.... To be fully Christian, I should be able to utter my faith and experiences of God in my own native religious languages as fully—without restraint and shame—as possible. I do need to *own up* to my own religions” (Kim 2003, 125). This is not a speculative syncretism of multiple religious traditions, Kim contends, “but a confession of the integrated Christian selfhood in the network of our own community” (126).

Like that of Muñoz and Richard, Kim's theology is informed by the struggle for social justice; for Kim that means solidarity with "the exploited life including minjung [the oppressed masses], women, and polluted nature" (Kim 2003, 133). Yet it also means taking seriously the inconsistency in the LM mentioned earlier: that the poor and marginalized may experience the Ultimate in other than the intensely personal terms of Muñoz and Richard. Kim contends that it is necessary for his fellow Korean Christians to "own up to" the fact that Daoism, Confucianism, and shamanism remain vital parts of Korean collective identity; any Christian identity that is disconnected from that collective identity, he argues, "is not only inappropriate but also false." Korean Christian theologians "should critically appreciate the symbols and the metaphors of our religions and cultures and apply [them] to our theological thinking" (126). That is precisely what Kim does in *Christ and the Tao*: he brings Christian faith into dialogue with Korea's non-Christian traditions.

His encounter with what has traditionally been the void of the Christian situation enables him to recognize that Western theology, including Western liberation theology, is hamstrung by dualistic, either-or thinking (135). Arguing that the Christian God is beyond oppositions "such as form and matter, body and soul, or theory and practice," Kim rejects a dualistic opposition between logos (traditional theology) and praxis (liberation theology). He calls instead for a non-dualistic "theotao," which "means both the source of cosmic being (logos) and the way of historical becoming (praxis)." Rather than either-or thinking, the theotao embraces both-and and its complement, neither-nor (132, 168). Kim's non-dualism also leads him to move away from the LM's stress on an "intensely personal" Ultimate. As "the great Tao," he writes, God "is simultaneously personal and impersonal," yet "at the same time ... neither personal nor impersonal" (169).

Kim's turn to the theotao also helps him to rethink other aspects of Christian teaching. His christology, for instance, moves away from the traditional division of Jesus Christ into the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ. Instead, Kim conceives Christ "as the crossroad of the Heavenly Tao and the human tao," "the way of sociocosmic reconciliation and sanctification" (133). Kim argues that Jesus does not teach "an orthodox doctrine, a philosophical theology, a manual of orthopraxis, or an ideology of social revolution"; instead Jesus teaches "the tao of how we, cosmic sojourners, can live fully human in solidarity with other cosmic co-sojourners" (133).

In Kim we see a Christian liberation theologian who, by refusing to exclude or marginalize the native non-Christian witness of his Korean context, is able to discern the dualistic assumptions of Western theologians and to suggest a model of the Ultimate which transcends the personal/impersonal dualism. Through encounter with the void of the Christian situation as traditionally construed (even by liberation theologians such as Muñoz and Richard), Kim is able to move beyond the "knowledge" of that situation and glimpse the possibility of a "truth" about the Ultimate.

Conclusion

As Badiouan situations, models of the Ultimate are inherently limited by the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization by which they are constructed and ordered. By selecting certain elements and rejecting others, models limit what can be said and thought about the Ultimate. They are further limited by the state's attempts to enforce internal coherence by marginalizing unruly elements of the situation. Such limitations "put God in a box" (to borrow the Christian phrase). Yet surprisingly, these highly provisional and limited models remain able to point beyond themselves by virtue of their inconsistencies, attributes which do not harmonize well with each model's overall presentation of the Ultimate. Nonetheless, far from being flaws, such inconsistencies can serve as evental sites, pointing beyond the limitations of each situation toward its void—toward the truly ultimate.

This possibility serves as a caution against overemphasizing internal coherence in models of the Ultimate. The fact that a given model (situation) is coherent does not mean that it represents the Ultimate more effectively; it may simply offer its own circular, self-affirming "knowledge," rather than the truth which necessarily exceeds it. Complementarily, the fact that a given model contains incoherencies, even nagging ones, does not necessarily make it less effective in representing the Ultimate; those incoherencies can serve as evental sites, pointing beyond the model's limitations and toward its void.

Interestingly, incoherence within the model may be a virtue in another way. A model which holds that the Ultimate is, say, both personal and impersonal may indeed be internally incoherent. Yet it may thereby be *externally* coherent: it may be consistent with the testimony of the religious tradition on which the model is based and to which it seeks to be faithful.

The incoherence endemic to models of the Ultimate may also have to do with the nature of that which they seek to model. While we may reasonably expect that the Ultimate is itself internally coherent (e.g., it does not both exist and not exist²³), yet *qua* Ultimate it cannot be limited to mere human conceptions or reasoning. Some attributes of the Ultimate may violate the standards of consistency and non-contradiction that we expect of, say, scientific theories. The personal/impersonal distinction on which I have focused here appears to be one such case; however, other examples come to mind. Trinitarian Christians assert that God is both essentially one and essentially three, without separation or confusion (Declaration of Chalcedon, in Bettenson 1963, 51); similarly, a famous passage from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* asserts that the true number of gods is simultaneously thirty-three, six, three, two, one and a half, and one (*Upanishads* 1996, 46). The Daoist tradition is rife with such (apparent) paradoxes: for instance, the Dao is both infinitely great and infinitesimally small; it is both "empty non-being" and "the myriad forms of being"

²³ Some hold that the Ultimate is beyond even the distinction existence and non-existence. While such an approach has merit, what I mean here is simply that one cannot hold both "there is an ultimate reality" and "there is no ultimate reality" at the same ontological level.

(Kohn 1993, 23). For all we can know (being non-ultimate ourselves), what seem incoherencies to us may in fact be quite coherent within the Ultimate itself; or the Ultimate may in fact be itself incoherent (at least according to our standards). Since it is impossible for us to know, we are well advised to keep our models of the Ultimate open to encounter with the void.

By way of conclusion, let me at least glance at two issues that arise from the foregoing argument. First, in cautioning against the expectation that models of the Ultimate be internally coherent, am I in fact suggesting that modeling the Ultimate is a hopeless task? Am I instead arguing for a *via negativa*? My answer to both questions is no. We have no choice but to construct conceptual models of the Ultimate. Revelatory as religious texts such as the Bible or the *Daodejing* undoubtedly are, they inhabit a primary level of discourse, the language of symbols. In the process of making sense of those symbols and applying them to our lives, we reformulate the symbolic discourse of the texts conceptually—that is, we must construct models, however provisional (Peters 2007, 274). Model-making, limited though it is, is inherent to religious understanding.

While a *via negativa* has its appeal and its uses, I do not find it a satisfactory response to the inherent limitations of models. First, adopting exclusively the way of negation may simply be to construct another situation—a rather empty one, with its own, quite extensive void. The basic questions remain: What are the inherent limitations of a situation constructed along a *via negativa*? What possible truths about the Ultimate does it exclude? Secondly, Heup Young Kim's example demonstrates that it is possible to make positive claims about the Ultimate (God is simultaneously personal and impersonal) as well as negative claims (neither personal nor impersonal). To choose between a *via negativa* and a *via positiva* is to fall into the either-or thinking that Kim quite rightly criticizes. The negative and the positive ways are mutually complementary when referring to the Ultimate.

Finally, let us turn to a second issue arising from my argument in this paper. Can it possibly be meaningful to say that the Ultimate is both impersonal and personal, or neither impersonal nor impersonal, or (as I suggest) that the Ultimate may be *beyond* both the personal and the impersonal? Of course, the question of how (and whether) religious claims can be meaningful has a long and fraught history in the philosophy of religion, and I cannot resolve it here. I would say, however, that Christian theologians (myself included) are accustomed to making sense of seemingly paradoxical claims about the Ultimate, such as the trinitarian claim that God is ultimately both one and three. A Christian might make sense of the personal/impersonal paradox in any number of ways; I will mention two. One might argue, much as Barth does with regard to the Trinity, that the personal and the impersonal are “ways of being” for the Ultimate.²⁴ Without additional work, however, this approach has the unfortunate downside of implying that personal and impersonal are secondary attributes of some primary underlying “something” (be that essence, being, or what have you); that implication may not be warranted by the Christian

²⁴ See, for example, his statement that God “is One in three distinctive modes of being subsisting in their mutual relations” (Barth 1975, 348).

tradition as a whole. Alternatively, one might leave the question of the “real” nature or being of God in abeyance and instead argue from experience. Sometimes we *experience* the Ultimate as personal (say, hearing our prayers, liberating the oppressed) and sometimes as impersonal (e.g., the numinous, the ground of being).

However we make sense of it, the apparent contradiction that we may justifiably conceive of the Ultimate as both personal and impersonal, and/or neither, or beyond the personal and the impersonal altogether, serves to challenge merely human assumptions about what constitutes the personal. Perhaps even more vitally, it calls into question our very human reliance on very human logical categories, such as coherence. Such a challenge is one of those annoying yet ultimately fruitful functions that religious traditions perform.

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The Equal Weight Argument Against Religious Exclusivism

Samuel Ruhmkorff

Introduction

The consideration of the diversity of models of God has led to a vast literature on the proper reaction to religious disagreement. Broadly speaking, there are three main positions. Exclusivism is the view that one model of God – presumably one's own – is correct and the others are incorrect to the extent that they are inconsistent with it. Inclusivism is the view that more than one model of God has access in some way to ultimate reality, although one model (again, presumably one's own) is uniquely positioned in respect to that reality. Pluralism is the view that more than one model of God is correct in some important sense, and that no model enjoys a special status in relation to ultimate reality. I take the most economical and precise definition of these positions to be Schmidt-Leukel's. On his view, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are different answers to the question: how many religions possess the property of “[mediating] salvific knowledge of ultimate/transcendent reality (P)”? (Schmidt-Leukel 2005, 19):

1. Exactly one	<i>Exclusivism</i>
2. More than one, with a “singular maximum”	<i>Inclusivism</i>
3. More than one, without a singular maximum	<i>Pluralism</i>

In the last decade, analytic epistemologists have been inspired by the epistemological aspects of the debate about religious diversity (Kelly 2005, 173). A lively debate has arisen about the degree to which one's beliefs should be affected by learning that epistemic peers disagree with you. Elga and Christensen have defended *Equal Weight*, the claim that one should give the credences of epistemic peers as

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much consideration as one's own credences, and therefore adjust one's credences in response to learning of one's disagreement with one's peers. This debate has significant implications for how we should respond to religious diversity (see Thune 2010).

In this paper, I begin to explore these implications. I first claim that one common argument against exclusivism can be articulated as an Equal Weight argument. I then argue that, in order to avoid this argument, exclusivists must reject Equal Weight. Next, I maintain that the claim – puzzling to many – that pluralism is self-undermining is better interpreted as the claim that the *Equal Weight argument* is self-undermining. Thus both exclusivists and pluralists have an interest in rejecting Equal Weight. My final discussion is speculative rather than conclusive: I suggest that the goals of those of pluralist persuasion might be better met by abandoning Equal Weight and embracing Epistemic Permissiveness, the view that there is more than one rational response to a given body of evidence. Religious permissivism, a view based on Epistemic Permissiveness, has both hopeful and challenging implications for those responding to religious diversity.

Equal Weight

What is the appropriate response to learning that an epistemic peer disagrees with you concerning p? An epistemic peer is someone whom you judge to be as rational, intelligent, and unimpaired as you and to have the same evidence as you (see, e.g., Christensen 2009, 2). Feldman (2006), Elga (2007), and Christensen (2007) have defended a *conciliatory* principle:

Equal Weight One should give the credences of epistemic peers as much consideration as one's own credences.¹

Giving the credences of one's epistemic peers the same consideration as one's own means that one's credences conditional on meeting an epistemic peer and learning of disagreement should be *halfway* between the peer's and one's own prior credences; this commits one to shifting one's credences halfway towards those of one's epistemic peer when one learns of the disagreement.² There are a number of ways one could disagree with Equal Weight. One is Extra Weight, the view that one should give one's own credences greater consideration than one's peer's (Elga 2007, 485). Another is the Total Evidence view, which says that one may give one's own credences greater consideration than one's peer's to the extent that one has good

¹ Elga (2010) admits that this principle is strictly speaking self-undermining, because those who endorse it are compelled by it to conciliate their opinions with those who oppose it, and thus would come to no longer endorse it. He modifies Equal Weight by specifying that it does not apply to cases of disagreement about disagreement, and argues that this modification is not ad hoc. My arguments in this paper apply to both Equal Weight and to Elga's modification of it.

² In a full belief context, if you peer believes that p, and you believe that not-p, then Equal Weight would have you both adopt an agnostic attitude. It is not clear what you ought to do if one party is agnostic and the other believes or disbelieves.

reasons for doing so (Kelly 2010). I will consider the following claim (called “The No Independent Weight View” in Kelly 2010), which is compatible with both Extra Weight and the Total Evidence view:

Steadfastness One’s credence in p after learning that an epistemic peer disagrees may equal one’s prior credence in p.

There is not space in this paper to arbitrate conclusively the debate between Equal Weight and Steadfastness. However, it will be important to consider briefly motivations that have been advanced for these views.

Motivations for Equal Weight and Steadfastness

A common consideration given in favor of Equal Weight (Christensen 2007, 190–192) is that for me not to give my epistemic peer’s credences equal weight involves an arbitrary privileging of my own credences. In recognizing that someone is my epistemic peer, I am taking her to have evidence and reasoning skills equivalent to my own. Epistemologically, there is no difference between the two of us. The only difference is that *I am me* – but this hardly seems to be epistemically relevant unless the disputed proposition is related to my private experiences. The kind of example that best fits this motivation for Equal Weight is illustrated by Christensen’s restaurant tab case (2007, 193). I judge you to be my epistemic peer. We go out to dinner and, as is my habit, I calculate my portion of the bill in my head. I then come to have a high credence in the proposition that my share is \$43. If I learn that you have mentally calculated my share and have arrived at \$45, it seems plausible that I should lower my credence in the proposition that my share is \$43.

An important consideration in favor of Steadfastness is that following Equal Weight looks to make us “spineless.” Given the apparent diversity of disagreement in the world, even among epistemic peers, it seems that following Equal Weight would have the effect of rendering us agnostic about any controversial issue whatsoever (Elga 2007, 484–485; Feldman 2007, 213). Moreover, if we assign equal weight to our epistemic peers, then our beliefs will be more affected the more peers there are who disagree with us. This threatens to reduce inquiry into controversial matters into aggregating the opinions of our peers, i.e., into voting (Elga 2007, 484–485; for some absurd consequences of this, see Pettit 2006).

Equal Weight seems more plausible than Steadfastness in “shallower” cases such as the restaurant example, where the disagreement does not affect many other aspects of our view about the world, while Steadfastness seems more plausible in “deeper” cases such as debates about the divinity of Jesus, where the disagreement about the proposition in question affects our worldview greatly. This has led some (Elga 2007, 492–494) to develop a version of the Equal Weight view where we are not required to modify our beliefs upon learning about deep disagreement (for example, by holding that in these cases, we don’t consider those with whom we disagree to be our epistemic peers), and others (Kelly 2010, 168) to endorse views

opposed to Equal Weight which nonetheless allow for meeting peers halfway in certain specified circumstances.

The Equal Weight Argument Against Exclusivism

In the literature on religious diversity, there is a common epistemic argument used by pluralists against exclusivists.³ The basic outline of this argument is that exclusivists are committing an error because they are in a symmetrical epistemic position relative to people of other faiths, yet they make the asymmetrical claim that truth resides with their own religion. In this section, I explicate this argument in terms of the Equal Weight view.

The Equal Weight view has implications for a person's probabilities conditional on disagreement with an epistemic peer. An epistemic peer is someone who shares the same evidence and has the same inferential abilities. In the case of religion – or in any realistic case involving complex beliefs – it seems unlikely that two agents would share exactly the same evidence. Still, let us consider such a case. This would most plausibly involve, say, two scholars of different religions who have studied the religion of the other, neither of whom have had mystical experiences. According to Equal Weight, their probability conditional on disagreement with an epistemic peer should take into account their prior credence and their peer's prior credence equally.

This constitutes an argument against religious exclusivists. The argument runs: there are people of other faiths who have heard all of your arguments – and, if you have inquired in these matters, whose own arguments you know – and have come to different conclusions. According to Equal Weight, your probabilities, conditional on discovering such disagreement, should take your views and those of your peers into equal consideration, resulting in belief that is moderate between your two prior unconditional probabilities. Given the great number of informed and reflective people in the world of all different faiths, you should – after learning of all of this – modify your credence such that you assign equal probabilities to the world's major religions. Perhaps you would then become confident in whatever is common among these religions and agnostic about the aspects in which they are inconsistent; develop an interpretation of religious claims according to which the apparently inconsistent claims of various religions are all true; or embrace a Kantian understanding of religious language such that the claims of various religions are phenomenally true and noumenally false. This kind of reasoning is evident in several critiques of exclusivism; see, for example, Stenmark (2006, 110–111), Ward (2000, 120), and Plantinga's explication of his opponent's view (2000a, 181). In addition, McKim (2001, 181–183) and Basinger (2000, 46–47)

³This argument applies to inclusivists as well; for ease of discussion, I restrict my discussion to the debate between pluralists and exclusivists.

use Equal Weight-style considerations to motivate the claim that exclusivists have an epistemic obligation to re-evaluate their religious beliefs in light of religious disagreement.

Exclusivist Attempts to Limit Equal Weight

The exclusivist has been subjected to the critique that she is adopting an asymmetrical attitude – that she is correct and her religious disputants are incorrect – when she is in a symmetrical epistemic situation – viz. all parties are equally grounded in the evidence. Exclusivists might object to this argument on the grounds that the Equal Weight principle does not apply in cases of religious disagreement because the disputants are not epistemic peers. In this section, I survey a number of ways that exclusivists might support this claim. Some may argue that disputants in religious disagreements are unlikely to share a body of evidence because of limitations on human knowledge and the complexity of different religious doctrines. Others may claim that the disputants are guaranteed not to share a relevant body of evidence because religious belief is basic or based on religious experience. Finally, it may be argued that disputants of different faiths would not be epistemic peers because they have radical differences in core beliefs or because people of some faiths are simply not rational. I reject all of these attempts to maintain that Equal Weight does not apply to religious disputes. I conclude that the only hope for exclusivists is to reject the Equal Weight principle itself.

Some might complain that it is unlikely that they ever would share a body of evidence with someone of a different faith. Indeed, they could guarantee the lack of shared evidence by never learning anything about other religions! If people of one faith are not epistemic peers with anyone of a different faith, then Equal Weight cannot be used to push their credence away from a commitment to the truth of their own religion over others.

However, there is no refuge to be found here. First, Equal Weight has challenging consequences for exclusivists even if we restrict its application to intrareligious disagreement (King 2008, 847). There is significant disagreement within each religion, even about fundamental issues related to it. To follow the Equal Weight principle would be to prevent oneself from holding very many distinctive positions at all about one's own religion, unless one simply conformed one's credences to the deliverances of an expert (see Elga 2007, 479f; Thune 2010, 720f). Second, it is not far-fetched to think that one might be subject to the experience of having a coreligionist convert to another faith and then share with one the crucial aspects of that other faith which fueled the decision to convert. Third, the conclusion of the Equal Weight argument is that one's *current* probabilities *conditional* on meeting an epistemic peer and learning of disagreement should give that person's opinion the same weight as one's own. In other words, conciliation should already be built into one's current conditional probabilities, even if one has not yet met a disagreeing

peer. Of course, one could conform to Equal Weight, possess a high credence in one's faith, and have a lower probability in one's faith conditional on running into religious peer disagreement while hoping or trying to guarantee that one never does so. I would imagine that for most exclusivists, such an admission is already a step too far: it would be to say "I'm committed to the exclusive truth of my faith; I love my God and only my God...unless, of course, I ever happen to meet an epistemic peer from a different faith." Yet against those willing to embrace this awkward combination of conditional conciliation with exclusivism, more work must be done.

Willful ignorance can be addressed rather easily. Consider a person who is willing to stick his head in the sand, as it were, and refuse to learn any evidence supporting faiths other than his own. This person is guilty of ignoring evidence, which, while not a violation of the Equal Weight principle, is an epistemic shortcoming. What about those who just happen not to learn of other religions? I claim that such people cannot avoid the Equal Weight argument because the Equal Weight principle can be extended farther than its apparent range of application when combined with principles concerning testimony and expert opinion. In each religion, there are experts who know a great deal about the evidence for and the nature of their own faith. Their statements carry epistemic weight to their coreligionists. Some of these experts know a great deal about other faiths. Thus these experts have epistemic peers in those other faiths; by Equal Weight, they should conciliate. By extension of principles of testimony, the person who doesn't share a body of evidence with people from other faiths should, upon learning that there are experts in his faith who disagree with epistemic peers in other religions, be at least partially conciliatory in his credences (testimony is not infallible, so there wouldn't be a requirement to be fully conciliatory). The fact of religious disagreement and the existence of religious scholars should be enough to inspire conciliation based on Equal Weight, even if one does not personally know any of the details.

The second way that critics might attempt to reject the application of the Equal Weight principle to cases of religious disagreement is to take issue with the Equal Weight argument's picture of religious disagreement as between epistemic peers with a shared body of evidence. This critique draws on the attempts of scholars who have looked beyond the model of the justification of religious belief based on common evidence in order to defend the rationality of religious belief. Some have argued that religious belief is basic and needs no justification at all (Plantinga 2000b). Others have argued that religious belief can be sufficiently grounded in private religious experience (Alston 1991). Both of these scenarios seem to depart from the Equal Weight argument's picture of epistemic peers disagreeing with a shared body of evidence, the first, because there is no body of evidence, the second, because the body of evidence is not shared. However, a version of the Equal Weight argument can be constructed in both cases.

First, take the case of reformed epistemology. Here, agents do not always infer their warranted beliefs from a body of evidence. Instead, they are warranted in hold-

ing basic beliefs without evidence. The Equal Weight principle applies in cases of religious disagreement where the beliefs involved are basic, because in these cases the agents have a shared body of evidence: the null set. Assuming equal inferential abilities, this makes the agents epistemic peers (trivially). Therefore, when they learn of their disagreement, the Equal Weight principle entails that they should conciliate.

Second, consider private religious experience. Technically, the Equal Weight principle does not apply here, because the agents have different bodies of evidence.⁴ However, assuming that their experiences share similar externally verifiable properties (e.g. they are not a result of LSD ingestion), their bodies of evidence are of equal epistemic weight, even though they are not identical. Some kind of extension of the Equal Weight principle might be formulated: that someone counts as your epistemic peer, even if he has different evidence than you have, just in case there is no way of distinguishing between the quality of your respective bodies of evidence. An example might be two agents who share all evidence except that each received different and incompatible testimony from equally trustworthy sources. The same intuitions that motivate Equal Weight would seem to support the claim that such agents should conciliate. Thus, if we are motivated by Equal Weight considerations, it seems we should move our credences towards the credences of those who would be our peers but for having different religious experiences with similar externally verifiable properties. This extension of Equal Weight reasoning to religious experience can be found, for example, in Silver (2001) and Wainwright (2000).

The third way to claim that Equal Weight does not apply to cases of religious disagreement is to claim that all people of other faiths are not epistemic peers in virtue of being less effective evaluators of evidence (see King 2008, 845). I will consider two variants of this argument. The first is based on the claim that any two individuals with significantly different worldviews will ipso facto not regard each other as epistemic peers. Pettit (2006) argues that changing one's belief in propositions "deeply embedded in your credal web" based on disagreement would be disastrous. Elga, a defender of Equal Weight, attempts to avoid this consequence by claiming that individuals who share evidence but disagree on major issues will conclude that the other has consistently failed to draw the correct conclusions from the evidence and is therefore not an epistemic peer. His example is of two individuals who disagree about abortion, and hence who disagree about a host of issues involving, e.g., personhood and early human developmental stages. Elga argues that these individuals will take each other to be unreliable believers in these domains simply on the grounds of their disagreement and therefore will not be epistemic peers (2007, 493).

Kornblith responds by arguing that in many cases – including the kind of political disagreement with which Elga's examples are concerned – the agreement

⁴To be an interesting epistemic principle, the Equal Weight view must trade on some kind of public verifiability of our evidence: if I see a chair and you see the same chair, we have different private experiences of chairs, but it counts as the same evidence and we are epistemic peers. If Equal Weight did not do so, it would never apply, except perhaps for beliefs about the a priori. Since religious experience is not publically verifiable, religious experience cannot be handled in the same way.

between the parties is much more extensive than the disagreement, allowing for epistemic peerhood (2010, 50). I maintain that this response also applies to cases of mainstream religious disagreement as well. Even if we bracket off all of the religious points of difference between, say, a Christian and a Buddhist, there will be enough shared religious beliefs such that the two parties have grounds to consider themselves epistemic peers. This will be true of claims about, say, what God is not, what one ought to do, and perhaps particularly about methodological issues. For example, a Christian and Muslim who regard scripture as the literal word of God can agree about the methodological approach to religious questions even though they disagree about which scripture is the word of God. This raises the possibility that peerhood might be delineated by methodological approach (sacred text, mystical experience, rational inquiry) more than religious affiliation. If all of this is correct, shared methodological commitments combined with shared beliefs about the divine are sufficient for two individuals of different faiths to be epistemic peers.

The second way to argue that all people of different religions are less rational evaluators of evidence is to maintain directly that they are less rational humans. I object to this response on the grounds that it is factually incorrect. There is no religion that has cornered the market on rationality. (Of course, there may be a religion that has cornered the market on *truth* – but that is a different issue.) More precisely, while I think that some characteristics of rationality may vary with religious affiliation – for example, Quakers may have a tendency towards a more thorough consideration of personal testimony than Mormons – it is not the case that a core subset of believers in one religion exhibits greater rationality than the most rational believers of each of the other major religions. Everyone has potential epistemic peers in other religions; given the popularity of interreligious inquiry, it seems certain that everyone has actual epistemic peers as well, subject to the considerations above.

I conclude that exclusivists cannot plausibly escape the Equal Weight argument by denying that those in other religions are epistemic peers. In order to avoid this argument, they must reject Equal Weight.⁵ In the next section, I argue that they have good company in doing so, for pluralists must reject Equal Weight too. In other words, it is self-undermining for pluralists to use Equal Weight reasoning against exclusivists: the Equal Weight argument against exclusivism, if sound, refutes pluralism as well.

⁵ King (2008, 847) presents the possibility that religious exclusivists will reject Equal Weight but agree that religious disagreement should result in *reduced* credence in one's religion. This looks similar in spirit to the views of McKim (2001) and Basinger (2000). There is not space in this article to explore fully this approach. My initial take is that it will be difficult for exclusivists to give away something but not everything. One consideration is the arbitrariness of giving an epistemic peer some but not equal consideration. Another is the risk of having one's credence in one's religion reduced to the level of agnosticism. There is a lot of religious disagreement out there to be had! State a weighting used to calculate how far one should conciliate in cases of disagreement; we can find enough disagreement to force agnosticism. Alternatively, stipulate a maximum level of credence conciliation that can be forced by disagreement; we can find enough disagreement to make the stipulation of that maximum be tantamount to Steadfastness.

Why Pluralists Need to Reject Equal Weight, Too

A number of exclusivists have objected to pluralism on the grounds that it is self-undermining in some way (see Plantinga 2000a; D’Costa 1996; Seeman 2007; Meeker 2003). One way to phrase the objection is that pluralism is not itself a pluralistic doctrine. Another way is to say that pluralism is exclusivist, in that it denies the truth of exclusivism. A third way is: many religions have strong exclusivist strands; pluralism rejects this aspect of religion, which is exclusivist.

The objection that pluralism is self-undermining is hard to pin down, and has met with criticism (Hick 1997; Schmidt-Leukel 2005, 21–22). I think there is good reason for this objection to be critiqued. If we take pluralism as defined above, it is not self-undermining. Pluralism is the claim that the world is such that more than one religion has P, with no singular maximum. But to reject the claim that only one *religion* has P is not to say that in *all* areas of human inquiry, it is not the case that one view is correct and incompatible views are false. Thus, in the domain of responses to religious disagreement, pluralists can maintain that one view is correct (pluralism) and incompatible views are false (including exclusivism). As has been pointed out (Hick 1997, 162), the objection that pluralism is self-undermining because it excludes exclusivism amounts to the absurd idea that pluralists are not allowed to make *any* assertoric claims.

To be sure, pluralists have to explain why the apparent inconsistency of their view – which *prima facie* allows that inconsistent claims made by different religions are all true – is merely apparent. But this is a different issue than the accusation that pluralism is inconsistent simply in virtue of rejecting exclusivism.

While the objection that pluralism is intrinsically self-undermining fails, there is a stronger case to be made for the claim that pluralists’ Equal Weight argument against exclusivism is self-undermining. The reason for this is that the universe of epistemic peers disagreeing about religion is larger than peers of different religious faiths. It includes epistemic peers who are agnostics and atheists. This means that pluralists – including erstwhile exclusivists convinced by Equal Weight arguments to abandon their exclusivism – will be compelled by Equal Weight to lower their credence in the truth of all religions and raise their credence in the nonexistence of God. “Meeting every peer halfway” will result in a thoroughgoing agnosticism of the sort described by Feldman (2007), not religious pluralism.

It might be objected that there are more religious believers (roughly five billion) than atheists and agnostics (roughly one billion), and hence that a view weighted equally by the views of one’s peers would not end up being agnostic. There are three points to be made here. First, one’s probabilities conditional on discovering peers with a wide range of beliefs on religion are highly complex, and it will be hard for either side of this debate to say anything determinate about them. Second, the origins of atheism and agnosticism may make the beliefs of atheist and agnostic peers count more than those of religious peers. To see this, note that if one is faced with disagreement with more than one peer, how one should react depends on how the beliefs of the peers were formed (Elga 2010, 177; Kelly 2010, 146f). Consider

again the restaurant case, but suppose that you are dining with ten friends rather than one. Upon returning to the table, you discover that all ten friends are confident that your share is \$45 rather than the \$43 that you have calculated. What should you do with your credence? It depends on how your friends arrived at their conclusions! If one of them did the math in her head and shared the answer with the others, who subsequently became confident in her answer, the situation is the same as if you had only one disagreeing peer; by Equal Weight, you should meet the collection of them halfway. However, if all of them performed the calculations separately, then you should meet them $10/11$ s of the way towards their position, and thus be almost certain that your share is \$45. Now, religious belief is often not independently arrived at, as is clear from the fact that most members of a religion are the children of other members of that religion. However, many atheists and agnostics are the children of people of faith. If more atheists and agnostics arrive at their beliefs independently than religious people, then their opinions will generally count more in calculations of how to take disagreement into consideration, and their lesser numbers might be overcome. The third and final point to be made is that even if the above replies are not accepted, the existence of atheist and agnostic peers should at least *lower* pluralists' confidence in their own view by the same reasoning that the above authors use to critique exclusivists. To the extent that it does so, it is counter-productive.

What about pluralists who started out as atheists or agnostics? It might be argued that such pluralists can consistently critique exclusivists on the basis of Equal Weight considerations because they have already taken atheist or agnostic viewpoints into consideration. Equal Weight does not make you conciliate with viewpoints you have already considered (Elga 2010, 178). However, this point should be stated more precisely: Equal Weight does not require you to conciliate with the viewpoints of people whose views (token) you have already considered, but it does require you to conciliate when you learn of new peer disagreement, even if the peers hold views (type) identical to those of people with whom you have already conciliated. Our lapsed atheist will have considered the views of some atheists (including her prior self), but will no doubt run into individuals new to her who have arrived at atheism independently from those she has consulted previously; by Equal Weight, she must conciliate with these individuals.

The final objection I'll consider to the argument that pluralism is undermined by its own Equal Weight argument against exclusivism is that being an atheist or agnostic commits one to a fundamental error in thinking that disqualifies one from being a peer to people of faith. The only way I see this happening is if one of the arguments for the existence of God is both sound and sufficiently obviously sound that the failure to recognize its soundness is irrational. Since the history of philosophy demonstrates that this is not the case, the objection under consideration fails. I conclude that the pluralist argument against exclusivism based on Equal Weight-style considerations undermines pluralism.

Conclusion: Religious Permissivism

I have claimed that an important argument pluralists use against exclusivists is based on Equal Weight-style reasoning; that the only plausible rejoinder on behalf of exclusivists is to reject the Equal Weight principle; and that while the exclusivist complaint that pluralism is self-undermining is incorrect, exclusivists can rightly object that the pluralists' Equal Weight argument against exclusivism is self-undermining, for it pushes pluralists themselves towards agnosticism. Thus both parties have an interest in rejecting Equal Weight – even though for the pluralist it involves abandoning a favored argument against the exclusivist – and embracing Steadfastness. Steadfastness is a view amenable to the exclusivist, for it points to the possibility of her rationally maintaining the unique correctness of her faith despite the existence of peer disagreement.

I conclude by suggesting quite speculatively how those with pluralist motivations might proceed in the absence of Equal Weight. Pluralists have an admirable desire to validate the thinking and beliefs of reasonable people in the area of religion. Those who have chosen to make an epistemic argument against exclusivism and for pluralism based on Equal Weight considerations seek to critique those who think that the beliefs of people of different faiths are incorrect (insofar as they are inconsistent with their own religious beliefs). By doing so, they embrace a principle that puts tight constraints on rationality, threatening to undermine the attempt to validate the thinking and beliefs of reasonable people in the area of religion. This leads to exclusivist complaints that pluralism is a narrow – even intolerant – doctrine (D'Costa 1996). Exclusivists may think that adherents of competing religions are *incorrect*; but defenders of the Equal Weight argument think that exclusivists are *irrational*.

I suggest that Epistemic Permissiveness – although it is itself contentious (Feldman 2007; White 2005) – is the principle best suited for the pluralist goal of validating the thinking of reasonable people in the area of religion:

Epistemic Permissiveness There is sometimes more than one rational credence for a given proposition relative to a given body of evidence.

If we endorse Epistemic Permissiveness, learning of disagreement does not always push us towards changing our credences, because in some cases both our opinion and our peer's opinion are within the bounds of what is rational (see Kelly 2010, 118f).

Epistemic Permissiveness alone is not sufficient to validate the thinking of reasonable people in the area of religion. While some who endorse Epistemic Permissiveness may hold that there are often situations in which the range of rational credences relative to a given body of evidence is large, others may hold that it is usually or always very small. Indeed, one could technically be an epistemic permissivist in virtue of holding that in a single context unrelated to religion, there are two rational credences. Therefore, Epistemic Permissiveness is compatible with the most rigid exclusivist and pluralist positions which hold that it is irrational to be anything other than that style of exclusivist or pluralist.

In order to validate the thinking of reasonable people in the area of religion, we must add to Epistemic Permissiveness the claim that the range of rational responses to religious bodies of evidence encompasses some varieties of both exclusivism and pluralism. I will use ‘religious permissivism’ to refer to the view that (1) Epistemic Permissiveness is true; and (2) some exclusivist and some pluralist attitudes are rational in the light of disagreements about models of God. Religious permissivism operates at a different level from the debate between exclusivism and pluralism.⁶ Thus religious permissivism allows individuals to be exclusivists or pluralists. It is within the bounds of proper belief to hold that one’s own religion is correct and others are incorrect; it is also within the bounds of proper belief to hold that there is truth within a multiplicity of religions. An example can be found in Philip Quinn’s argument that practitioners of one tradition of mystical experience can rationally respond to the existence of incompatible but apparently equally profound competing traditions by either continuing their practice as is or revising it to incorporate a Kantian understanding of mystical experience along the lines of Hick’s pluralism (Quinn 1995). Note that, just as pluralists do not have to endorse all forms of religious thought, religious permissivism does not have to license as rational all varieties of opinion on religious disagreement. For example, a religious permissivist could argue that certain forms of soteriological exclusivism are irrational.

Developing and defending religious permissivism would require extensive additional investigation. I’ll close by mentioning a reason for thinking that religious permissivism is worth the effort. This reason is based on an analogy to the philosophy of science (see, e.g., Axtell 2003; Gutting 1982). Lakatos holds that it is best for science to support multiple research programs. Diversifying our epistemic portfolio is the best way to make progress on difficult problems. Perhaps no problem is more difficult than the investigation of divinity. One virtue of religious permissivism is that it validates the rationality of a multiplicity of approaches, including exclusivist approaches, to flourish. There may be significant epistemic utility in there being entrenched exclusivists of various religions, as well as individuals who attempt to find common ground among world religions. It would be a bad thing for us to lose this diversity of approaches to religious disagreement: doing so might undermine our attempts to learn more about ultimate reality.

Religious permissivism contains lessons for both exclusivists and pluralists. For exclusivists, the maneuver of denying epistemic peerhood to those of different faiths has been rejected. It has been replaced by an acknowledgement of the rationality of (at least some of) those of different faiths, and of some religious pluralists.⁷ In the end, religious exclusivists are permitted to remain steadfast and maintain their view

⁶ Hick holds that “religious exclusivism and religious pluralism are of different logical kinds, the one being a self-committing affirmation of faith and the other a philosophical hypothesis” (1997, 163; see also Meeker 2006; Hick 2006). Hick is thinking of exclusivism, not as the philosophical hypothesis that exactly one religion mediates knowledge of ultimate reality, but rather as the faith in that religion. I continue to conceive of exclusivism and pluralism as philosophical hypotheses.

⁷ Some permissivists may argue that disagreement with permissivism is beyond the bounds of reasonable belief, giving them the leverage to critique non-permissivists. On this view, religious permissivism would be rationally required; exclusivists would be forced on pain of irrationality to

that their religion is true and other religions are false, but at the same time, they must acknowledge the rationality of different approaches to religious belief. Pluralists must relinquish a common epistemic argument for pluralism, and must acknowledge the rationality of (at least some) exclusivist approaches to religious faith. I think these lessons are useful, as they point towards spending more time on exploring various models of God and less time focusing on the debate between exclusivism and pluralism.⁸

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recognize the rationality of some pluralists; and vice versa. However, it is also possible that some permissivists would claim that it is rational not to believe in permissivism. This would make it hard to convince others of the view; however, it would not undermine belief in permissivism. On this latter view, permissivism would not require of exclusivists and pluralists that they regard at least some in the other camp as rational. Although I state the consequences of the former view in the main text, this question requires further investigation.

⁸I am grateful for helpful comments from Jeanine Diller, Brian Kierland, Aaron Smith, and audiences at Boise State University and the 2010 Models of God conference at the American Academy of Religion.

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Suggested Readings: Diversity of Models of Ultimate Reality

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Part XIII

Practical Implications

Introduction to Practical Implications

Sallie McFague

Forty years ago when I was writing *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, there were few sources in theology on models or on metaphor. I turned to literature for insight into metaphor and to science for help with understanding the nature of models. This impressive volume, *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, as well as many other publications, witnesses to how far we have come in four decades. It is now widely accepted that thinking in terms of models and metaphors is crucial to many areas, including the sciences, philosophy, and religion, among others.

I was delighted to be asked to write a brief introduction to four essays on the practical aspects of models of ultimate reality, since, increasingly I believe that this is their most important feature for our time. Once one accepts that all of our most basic assumptions about who we are in the scheme of things (and therefore how we should act) come from mostly sub-conscious root models of reality, one can see that the most critical questions of our day—the twin crises of economic meltdown and climate change—depend on models. A reigning model of Western capitalist culture, that we are autonomous individuals competing with other such individuals for our own profit and well-being, is behind the seemingly impossible task of getting people to change their behavior in regard to economic justice and ecological responsibility. A new model must become the assumption of our actions: a model that claims that we are interrelated, interdependent creatures living in, with, through, and by all other living entities on the planet. We make our daily decisions on the basis of the model that is “natural,” accepted, and conventional in our society. Hence, the importance of the practical implications of models cannot be exaggerated: the flourishing of our planet in the twenty-first century may be at stake on the models we accept as our guides for living.

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The four essays in this section of the volume investigate the importance of models on various issues: an analysis and critique of the model of “the world as God’s body”; implications of models of just war; models as a way of criticizing idolatry; and the effects of feminist models of the self on both men and women. All the essays have as their concern, either centrally or as background, “ultimate reality,” that is, how one speaks of God or other ultimate realities with reason and confidence. Thus, the metaphysical or epistemological issue is present, but so is the pragmatic one: the first essay on the world as God’s body is concerned mainly with the theological and philosophical legitimization of this particular model of God, while the other three essays focus on the practical implications of particular models or models in general. Both issues are important, and I must confess, as Charles Taliaferro points out in his fine critique of my analysis of the world as God’s body, that my emphasis is on the latter issue. He writes: “In other words, integrative theism [his position] can offer reasons why the world is like God’s body, but we are not given such an account by McFague.”(12) He is correct: I do not give such an account; in other words, my main task is not to answer questions of the ontological status of the model or to satisfy questions that he asks such as “Does God’s power, knowledge, love, and wisdom, depend on the ongoing stability of the laws of physics and chemistry? Did God come into being with the Big Bang or did God expand with the Big Bang?” (9). However, I deeply appreciate the fact that Taliaferro has done this work for me in his essay! My background is in literature, specifically the importance and power of language, and especially the nature of poetic and religious language, for intimating with a “soft-focus” or “assertorial lightness” what God is and is not (as he quotes from my most recent book). Metaphorical assertions are necessarily of this sort, since they are not descriptions, but interpretations, and interpretations of what we do not know and have not seen (the subjects of poetry such as love and loss and of religion, ultimate reality). Hence, at most, metaphorical theology is only marginally metaphysical, finding minimalism the necessary position. Perhaps this comment is nothing more than the realization that different commentators contribute different things: Taliaferro is a “philosophical theist,” whose main interest is understanding the metaphysical and scientific implications of the model, while I am a “metaphorical theologian,” whose principal concern is the power of models to influence behavior. Both are necessary tasks and part of the collegiality that we need among thinkers concerned with such things as climate change is appreciation for the contribution of people who do different, but complementary, tasks. Taliaferro’s closing comment sums up well, I think, the kind of collaboration that I am talking about. “Integrated theism is even able to see the cosmos as very much like the very body of God, though not with the shortcomings of Sallie McFague’s admirable but problematic model of God.” (15). What he has done in this essay is what I could not do, given the limitations of my training and interests, which is to fill in some of the unanswered questions that any good model attracts. Models are intrinsically suggestive and problem-oriented, they raise many questions that need examination, so I am grateful to Taliaferro for his careful reading of my position and his contribution to its improvement.

One qualification I would add: I do not think that “integrative theism” is a model—it certainly is not a metaphor—rather, it seems to me to be a concept. The

difference between the two is admittedly fuzzy, and if one is working principally with a definition of model from science, where the explanatory feature is primary, then “integrative theism” might qualify. But if one is working with the definition of model from literature, from metaphor, then it does not. I believe that theological models are closer to literary models than to scientific models: the model of God the father, for instance, is an initial metaphor that has become a model through its extensive use and increasing explanatory usefulness. But at the heart of the model is the power of fathers, and all the associations, both positive and negative, that are associated with fathers. Thus, “the world as God’s body” is a metaphorical model in a way that “integrative theism” is not, though I agree with Taliaferro that the two share many similarities; for instance, both are panentheistic, since both have transcendent and immanent features. However, I cannot see that “integrative theism” will do much to combat global warming; it lacks guts, punch, and power. It has little shock potential, whereas the thought that the ecological degradation caused by climate change might actually make God suffer (if the world is God’s body) can be a powerful deterrent. It calls forth a kind of religious horror—and that might be all to the good. I recall Paul Ricoeur’s discussion of the relation between “symbol” and “concept,” in which the symbol gives rise to thought and thought depends upon symbol. Perhaps “the world as God’s body” and “integrative theism” have such a relationship, with each contributing to the other. Such a position of reciprocity is very different from Hegel’s understanding of the relationship between images and thought, in which one leaves images behind as one climbs the ladder toward the truth of concepts. In fact, Hegel allowed as how the language of images is only suitable for children, primitives, and women!

Needless to say, the present volume, *Models of God and Other Ultimate Realities*, is not Hegelian. The other three models in this section focus on particular issues where the model employed can make a difference in behavior and in each case the author is primarily concerned with the pragmatic results of the model rather than its metaphysical implications. In “Models of God and Just War Theory,” Philip J. Rossi, SJ argues that the ultimate frame of reference for “just war” theory—whether it be necessity/chance or providential—contributes to the possibility that the goal of just war is not simply the ending of violence for the time being, but a more peaceful society. The providential frame of reference—that a personal God is the framework for just war theory—gives hope (and therefore affects the practice) of combatants. As Rossi claims, “How we construe the ultimate frame of reference for the ordering of the cosmos, including our human place within that order, has an important bearing upon how we then construe our human responsibilities for establishing an international order that will be effective for bringing warfare to a conclusive end.”(2) While Rossi does not believe that Augustine’s model of divine freedom or the understanding of “providence” provided by Kant are the only bases for the goal of establishing enduring peace, they are persuasive candidates. We need to believe that our moral efforts make a difference, and that such a difference is supported by a model of both divine and human freedom.

Moreover, Kant’s notion of “cosmopolitan perspective,” or the mutual relationship of respect of all for each other—Kant’s “kingdom of ends”—provides a model

of universal inclusivity which must increasingly be practiced by human beings, not only for each other, but also for all other creatures and the planet itself. It is impossible to imagine an enduring peace in the twenty-first century which did not extend Kant's kingdom of ends to include all living beings as well as the systems that support them (water, air, soil, climate, etc.) Rossi is not claiming that a personal reference (both divine and human) for just war theory will result in Utopia, but he is suggesting that it is one of the influences toward planetary flourishing that could help us along the way. If "reality," ultimate reality, is understood on the model of divine and human freedom, we have hope that something other than perpetual war might be our future. At this time of desperate planetary crisis, there is probably nothing that we need more than hope—deep down, hope in the future. As Rossi notes, for us twenty-first century skeptics, this hope will necessarily be minimal. In Kant's account of the human moral life, "he does consider it absolutely fundamental that *any affirmation of the divine recognize that it inscrutably yet ungrudgingly leaves space for human freedom to be exercised in ways that make a real difference to the course of history and to our destiny as a species*" (italics in original, 9). For many of us, this much would be enough to give us hope and keep us working.

Jeremy R. Hustwit's essay, "Models, Idols, and the Great White Whale: Toward a Christian Faith of Nonattachment," suggests a model (the whale) to express the nature of models. He focuses on the central and often forgotten point that models are not descriptions; in fact, he claims that "model-based theology" is "an aversion to one of the most seductive and misvalued idols of our age: the love of certainty. In this respect, God-modeling actually subverts idolatry." (6) YES! In a time of rampant Biblical literalism, when many fail to recognize that most Biblical language is metaphorical, Hustwit's lively essay reminds us of the central point of all theological language: "The term 'models' calls attention, like a blinking neon sign, to [the] gap between our metaphors and God's reality. A model is a self-conscious admission that language, at least for now, fails to capture reality." (4) The author then uses this insight into the nature of model to "model" what he means with the help of Moby Dick. Just as Moby Dick is infinitely inscrutable, yet endlessly fascinating and attractive, so also is theology (theos-logos: words about God). Ishmael cites whale experts, who lament constructing a systematic cetology (as many have agonized over a systematic theology). Whale experts find an "impenetrable veil covering our knowledge of the cetacean" and an "unfitness to pursue our research in unfathomable waters." (7). Like poor Ahab, obsessed with the impossible task of uncovering the mystery of mystery itself, theologians become obsessed, and sometimes pathological in their concern with the certainty of their paltry systems. As Hustwit comments, "Ahab is not doomed because of his mystical streak, seeking that which is hidden beyond common appearances. Ahab's doom is his idolatrous conviction, grown monstrous. As his preoccupation is fed, it masters him, leads to an imbalance in character, and undermines his moral obligation to provide for the safety of his crew."(8)

Is contemporary theology also obsessed with certainty, so obsessed that it misses its more urgent tasks? Hustwit seems to think so; in fact, he thinks some forms of current theology could benefit from instruction by Buddhist theories of non-attachment,

or in Christian terms, kenosis (self-emptying). He notes the dangers of opinionated views which ignore our epistemic limitations, preclude new revelations of God, fuel the engine of egotism, and reinforce alienation between the self and the other. Hustwit then contrasts opinionated views with the model of “faith” which he describes as being situated between conviction and skepticism, holding together belief, suspicion, wonder, and ignorance. He believes such a model helps to focus our attention on Christian discipleship rather than on battles over certainty. And this brings us back to models of God which, Huswit claims, “in their resistance to finality, are more likely to facilitate than to sabotage Christian discipleship.” (16) In other words, the way we talk about God and the way we attempt to live as disciples of Christ share a common characteristic: non-attachment to our own views of God and willingness to enter into a relationship of faith with God—one that involves trust, confidence, and action. “Faith” then is a theological virtue, a way of knowing God that involves not certainty, but thinking and living between a model and a mystery.

Pamela Sue Anderson’s fine essay, “Feminist Challenges to Conceptions of God: Exploring Divine Ideals,” is also about “thinking and living,” specifically thinking in an Enlightenment fashion and living with one of its goals—“reflective critical openness,” in the hope of realistic, relative, and relational human interactions. She contrasts this goal with the work of Luce Irigaray to create the divine feminine as a solution to women’s oppression. “The fundamental task is to have women and men recognize themselves as subjects who are autonomous, yet relational in formative ethical practices and in new discursive religious formations. However, I insist that this task is not to become divine subjects or to achieve a God’s eye point of view.” (4). Or, as she wittily adds, “feminist philosophy is not about creating divas.” (8) The similarities between Irigaray’s feminine divine and Catholic Mariology, which both glorify virginity, reveal their oppressive, patriarchal potential: “...virginity, which when kept in tact, constitutes a woman’s bodily integrity as her self-worth.”(10). What results is solipsism, and a false transcendence, which has little to do with women’s actual social and historical reality. With this analysis, Anderson is pointing to the age-old problem of elevating women outside of the human realm, presumably to give them status (the Southern belle, the pure virgin of many religious traditions, the unapproachable ideal of innocence and/or suffering). However, what this “elevation” does, in both Mariology and in Irigaray’s philosophy, is to avoid dealing with actual, situated, oppressed women in favor of an ideal “woman” who does not exist. Hence, the model at work here is of utmost importance. The model that Anderson proposes, in contrast, is a “second-person” one—an “encounter between two parties’ first-person perspectives” rather than an exclusive focus on an impossible third-person ideal (the divine transcendent). This second-person model “would be grounded in everyday acts of self-transcendence in relation to another self.”(13). Her humble model of dialogue and action between two subjects is itself a form of transcendence, a form necessary for the ethical actions facing us. “Human subjects self-transcend all the time, often unwittingly. In this light solicitude is the real grounding for attention to the intrinsic goodness of each and every subject. In religious terms this original attention to another has the potential to

develop a collective reality: we might find, so to speak, ‘God amongst us.’ Yet notice that this reality is neither a wholly transcendent nor a fully knowable ideal.”⁵ I believe that the model of reciprocity, openness, and attention that Anderson is articulating is similar to my attempts to differentiate subject-object and subject-subject models of knowing (see Chapters 4 and 5 in McFague 1997). The subject-object model “knows” the other as an object (the Arrogant Eye) whereas the subject-subject model “knows” the other as another subject (the Loving Eye). The relevance of these two epistemologies is evident in a time of ecological destruction, in which human beings have assumed that everything that is not human is an object for their use (and often abuse). A similar concern motivates Anderson, I believe, for she too wants to promote a model of knowing and acting that respects the intrinsic merit of the other, quite apart from idealizations of the female, either by men or by other women. To put it bluntly, women are just plain, old human beings like everyone else and everyone else (all the other creatures) are also just plain, old creatures, all of us together on this mysterious planet, trying to figure out a way to survive and flourish.

As I look at these three essays leaning to the pragmatic side of the issue of models, I am struck by how determined the authors are to hold on to some scraps of hope even while, at the same time, they are unwilling to accept any cheap or easy “super-natural” or idealistic solution to our looming problems. Rossi’s just war analysis with the hope of ending, not just enduring, war; Hustwit’s insistence that theology must be a form of faith-knowing, existing somewhere between metaphor and model; and Anderson’s desire for a “light solicitude” as the grounding and goal of our “reflective critical openness” to one another—all of these are minimalist trajectories of hope, with feet flat on the ground, and a determination not to give up. Each of these essays, in a variety of ways, depends upon and enrich metaphors and models as the appropriate epistemology for our time, whatever the issue. I find it heartening that metaphorical thinking is proving useful, especially at a time where religious certainty among many traditions is gaining ground. Metaphorical thinking does say Yes, but it also says, No: the world is/is not the body of God, and even as we search desperately for answers to our economic and ecological crises, we must never forget both lessons from metaphor.

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Models of God and Global Warming

Charles Taliaferro

The Facts of Global Warming

For present purposes, I take as beyond serious doubt that global warming is occurring, that it is due to human causes, and that without radical, coordinated global action, the consequences for many, especially the poor and future generations, are dire. Skeptics should read Part One of *A New Climate for Theology*. Only a conspiracy theorist of the first rank can deny the findings of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and the abundant, clear consensus of climate scientists about the facts of global warming. McFague rightly underscores the need for scholars to address the fact of global warming. Those of us who are scholars can seek for the root causes that lie behind the processes that led us to the current state of affairs. McFague locates the causes in terms of worldviews. According to McFague, we have adopted a dangerous anthropology that privileges human life above all other forms of life; we have adopted a theology of a remote God; Christian theology is further faulted for being too individualistic, overly concerned with interior life, and focused on salvation in the next life. Also troubling is that we tend to operate largely from self-interest in keeping with neoclassical economic theory, rather than out of compassion for others. McFague offers a sustained critique of these root causes, and she develops an alternative model of God's relation to the world, the incarnation, and the church. In what follows, I reply to her critique of traditional Christian theism, and then critically assess her alternative, ecological theology. While I suggest her view of the world as God's body is deeply problematic, I offer an alternative model, integrative theism, that is able to speak to the deep concerns she has about global warming and the articulation of an ecologically informed Christian theology.

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The Problem of Transcendence and the Promise of an Embodied God

McFague contends that “a supernatural, transcendent God is neither faithful to the [Christian] tradition’s incarnationalism nor relevant for our times.”¹ She highlights the danger of thinking of God as a remote reality:

If I imagine God (deep down) to be a super-being, residing somewhere above and apart from the world, who created and judges the world but otherwise is absent from it, then I will conduct my affairs largely without day-to-day concern about God. If the God I believe in is supernatural, transcendent, and only occasionally interested in the world, then this God is not a factor in my daily actions. Whether I treat myself to that high-emissions car is certainly not relevant to such a God.²

Her principle case against the transcendence of God is built on her conception of the incarnation. On her view, belief in the incarnation of God as Jesus Christ gives us good reason to see ourselves as living within God. In the following passage McFague juxtaposes the traditional picture of the God-world relationship with her proposed alternative:

God is imagined as occupying another world while we human beings are sojourners on earth, hoping to return eventually to our true home in heaven. God is seen as spirit, the earth as flesh, and our task is to leave the flesh and attain life in the spirit. This is a strange understanding for an incarnational religion. One of the most distinctive characteristics of Christianity is its insistence that God is with us in the flesh, here and now, on our earth. Jesus Christ is the paradigm, the explicit good news, that we are not alone on the earth and that we do not belong somewhere else. God is not anti-flesh or anti-world; in fact, just the opposite: the incarnation says that God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being in as fleshly, earthly creatures. God does not despise the world; God loves the world, and expects us to do so as well.³

McFague outlines four models of a transcendent God that she rejects by way of leading up to her preferred model: the deistic model, the monarchical model, the dialogic model, and the agential model. She contends that a deistic model is “sterile, distant, and impersonal … flat and uninteresting as well as on-Christian.”⁴ The dialogic model is one that McFague finds in Kierkegaard and others who encounter God in personal experience. “It is too narrow, excluding nature from the God-world relationship and focusing fulfillment entirely on human individuals.”⁵ Thinking of God as a King is also faulted: “A king is both distant from the natural world and indifferent to it.”⁶ As for conceiving of God as an agent, McFague is more sympathetic, but only if we think of God in terms of being embodied or in terms of a mind and body.

¹ McFague (1997, 3).

² Ibid., 31.

³ Ibid., 34.

⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁵ Ibid., 68.

⁶ Ibid., 69.

What if the model was revised so that God as “person” would be not just mind, but also body? What if we did not insist on radical dualism between God and the world, with God being all spirit and the world being all matter or body, but imagined a model with God and the world being both? That is, what if the world were seen to be God’s body, which is infused by, empowered by, loved by, given life by God?⁷

This brings us to McFague’s preferred model.

McFague appeals to the incarnation in articulating her ecological understanding of God. Interpreting the God-world relationship based on the belief that God is incarnate in the world implies rethinking the issues of creation and providence in light of the world as internally related to God – the world as within God or the world as God’s “body” – rather than externally related as an artist is to his or her production. The thesis is, then, that the doctrines of creation and providence have implications drawn from our most basic belief about the God-world relationship, and for Christians this relationship is incarnational: God is with us here and now, in this world. Our doctrines of creation and providence do not stand alone: they are offshoots of our deepest beliefs about the nature of God’s relation to the world. If we believe God and the world are wholly other, we will see creation and providence in that light; if we believe God and the world are intrinsically intimate, we will understand creation and providence from within that perspective. An incarnational context for understanding the God-world relationship has implications of our response to climate change. It means that we and God are in the same place and that we share responsibility for the world.⁸

I offer a critical response to this model in the next section, but I note that by thinking of the world as God’s body, it is important to realize that McFague seems to fall short of claiming that the world is the very same thing as God. For her, it seems that there is still a recalcitrant sense in which God is not identical with the world, but its source. For example, McFague writes: “God is the source of all existence, the one in whom we are born and reborn. In this view, the world is not just matter while God is spirit; rather, there is a continuity (though not an identity) between God and the world.”⁹ McFague explicitly denies that her model is pantheistic. “This model has been criticized by some as pantheistic, as identifying God and the world. I do not believe it is. If God is to the universe as each of us is to our bodies, then God and the world are not identical.”¹⁰

In terms of her methodology, McFague is clear that her theology is not so much a matter of metaphysics as it is a matter of metaphors. She seems to equate metaphysics with epistemology in the following passage.

I accept metaphor; it is all the theologian, I believe, needs. Metaphysical language – the language of certainty, of the absolute, claims to know God. But metaphor does not; it is modest. It makes a claim, but only with “assertorial lightness” or “soft focus,” undercutting it immediately with the “is not.” The world was/is not the body of God. Both analogy and

⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰ Ibid., 76.

symbol make much bolder assertions...Metaphor is more of a heuristic fiction than a metaphysical claim.¹¹

While it may be somewhat unclear about where she does stand metaphysically, she seems clearly committed to the practical consequences of her model: it means caring for the earth, opposing a merely consumer orientation to the world, and it means recognizing that, despite the evils of the cosmos, God is in charge. It is not crystal clear what she means about *God being in charge*, for she does not commit herself to the view that God is a provident agent acting in history in specific events such as freeing the people of Israel from Egypt or Christ overcoming death through the miracle of the resurrection. But McFague wants to preserve some role for the resurrection.

All that lives depends on God or comes from God; evil does not depend on God or come from God. This does not make it less powerful, less prevalent, or less tragic, but it does suggest that evil is not in charge, all appearances to the contrary. Christians believe that ultimately God is in charge: a doctrine of creation and providence without resurrection would be a doctrine of despair.... In the model of the world as God's body, God does not control all events, but God is in charge. WE are partners with God in helping the world to flourish – or we can contribute to its destruction as we are presently doing with climate change. But in ways we do not understand but believe to be true, we are not finally in charge: God is, so says the Yes of the resurrection.¹²

A False Choice

I suggest that McFague has set up a false dilemma by asking us to choose between a transcendent, largely absent God and embracing her ecological account of the world as God's body. Consider first the fact that traditional Christian theism embraces the transcendence as well as the immanence and omnipresence of God. There is no place where God is absent. I have elsewhere defended divine ubiquity in terms of God's knowledge, power, and affective response to the creation.¹³ So, God's knowledge of the cosmos is unsurpassed, the cosmos would not exist or endure for an instant without God's ongoing creative conservation (whether God is timelessly eternal or everlasting), and God is affectively responsive to the values of the creation as God delights in cosmic goods and sorrows over cosmic ills. This last thesis reflects the notion shared by a number of contemporary theists (such as Alvin Plantinga) that God is not impassable. So, it is false to claim that traditional theists view God as "occupying another world." God is everywhere throughout the creation and never absent. Moreover, traditional theism holds that God is internally related to the world as a matter of God's love and superabundant goodness. McFague seems to completely place to one side such matters of goodness and love when she describes

¹¹ Ibid., 107.

¹² Ibid., 78.

¹³ Taliaferro (1994).

the traditional account of creation. “That story, in its simplest form, claims that an absolute, all-powerful, transcendent God created the world (universe) from nothing for entirely gratuitous reasons. God did not need creation, nor is God internally related to it; it was created solely for God’s glory.”¹⁴ Traditional theists hold that God’s creation is free and not determined (and because creation was not compelled it was and is “gratuitous” in a sense) but the tradition also claims that God created and conserves the cosmos out of love. The glory of God is further traditionally understood in terms of God’s goodness and love, which McFague seems to bypass.

By way of a further challenge to the dilemma that McFague poses, consider the fact that most theists who do defend the idea of an afterlife are careful not to subordinate this life as a mere passage to the next life. Most contemporary theists (such as Jerry Walls) treat the very idea of a next life as integral to this life. In a sense, heaven or hell begin right here and now.¹⁵ If you make your current life (or “home”) hell now, this is something liable to become magnified in the next life (according to traditional theism), likewise if you make your life or home heaven now, this is something that may be magnified in the next life. If there is a next life, it is fully integrated with this one. Moreover, many contemporary theists now embrace the Orthodox theology that redemption involves a redeeming of all creation. Keith Ward provides an overview of such a comprehensive theological vision:

One must remember that the Christian belief is that there is an existence after earthly life which is so glorious that it makes an earthly suffering pale in comparison; and that such eternal life is internally related to the acts and sufferings of worldly life, so that they contribute to, and are essential parts of, the sorts of glory which is to come. The Christian paradigm here is the resurrection body of Jesus, which is glorious beyond description, but which still bears the wounds of the cross. So the sufferings of this life are not just obliterated; they are transfigured by joy, but always remain as contributory factors to make us the sort of individual beings we are eternally. This must be true for the whole of creation, insofar as it has sentience at all. If there is any sentient being which suffers pain, that being – whatever it is and however it is manifested – must find that pain transfigured by a greater joy. I am quite agnostic as to how this is to happen; but that it must be asserted to be true follows from the doctrine that God is love, and would not therefore create any being whose sole destiny was to suffer pain. In the case of person, the truth of this claim requires the existence of a continuous personal life after death. The Christian will then say that his sufferings, whatever they are, help to make him the unique individual he is. To wish for a better world is to wish for one’s non-existence, as the person one is. Often one may indeed wish for that; but the Christian would say that, if one could clearly see the future which is prepared for one, such doubts and fears would disappear and the resurrection of Jesus is given to confirm this faith.¹⁶

A traditional theist may well agree with McFague when she writes: “If salvation means the redemption of individuals from their sins so that they might live eternally in another world, then economics is not a central religious concern.”¹⁷ But traditional

¹⁴ McFague (2008, 64).

¹⁵ See the magnificent collection *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, Walls (2008).

¹⁶ See Ward (1988).

¹⁷ McFague (2008, 36).

Christians have abundant reasons to think that salvation and redemption involves action and life in this world, including our action in economic contexts.

McFague also seems to offer a false choice when it comes to the incarnation. She seems to think that traditional theists hold that the goal of salvation involves leaving the world of the flesh and embracing a life of spirit, while traditional theism holds that God's becoming incarnate was a hallowing or blessing of bodily life. Traditional Christianity opposed the Gnostic teaching that the body is evil. The traditional teaching about the resurrection of the body is an extraordinary affirmation that human flesh is good and that embodied life transcending death is a great good. But if it be granted that McFague has set up a false portrait of traditional theism, that alone does not give us reasons for preferring the traditional model to her alternative, ecologically grounded concept of God.

The World as God's Body and Other Models of God's Relation to the World

One of the difficulties of assessing McFague's thesis is that it is unclear in terms of metaphysics (an arena she seems to renounce). We have seen earlier that she equate metaphysics with certainty, but that is not at all in keeping with historical or contemporary usage of "metaphysics." One may adopt a metaphysic (theism, naturalism, idealism et al.) and yet not be at all certain that one is right. But if we do try to think metaphysically or (putting matters more in line with McFague) we try to unpack the metaphors of McFague's proposal that the world is God's body, it is not clear how to do so. Does God depend on the world as we depend on bodily organs? Does God think with any or all physical processes, in which one or more or all galaxies are like a gigantic (infinite?) brain? Does God's power, knowledge, love, and wisdom, depend on the ongoing stability of the laws of physics and chemistry? Did God come into being with the Big Bang or did God expand with the Big Bang? Also, what might McFague mean by saying "Yes" to the resurrection? She clearly rejects the notion of an afterlife, assuming only this life exists. Consider this passage in which she employs a Biblical narrative that is traditionally treated as speaking about the afterlife:

As we try to overcome our denial about climate change and accept the lifestyle changes at personal and public levels that it demands, we know that we are not alone. We live within God and with all the others who are called to share the feast. The human task, while awesome and frightening, is not ours alone – nature and God are there before us and with us. In closing, we recall the wonderful passage about the dry bones from the book of Ezekiel in which God asks the prophet, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel, with what we can imagine was considerable hesitation if not incredulity, answers, "O Lord God, you know." Then God says, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." Thus says the Lord God to these bones: "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live (Ezek 37:3–5)." And so we too ask, can these dry bones live? Can our overheating, dry, and dying planet be healthy?...To the question, can the power of life override the

reality of death? The answer is yes, with the help of God's partners, human beings and nature itself.¹⁸

But if there is no afterlife, “the power of life” seems to be a reference to our corporate opportunity to act in a life-affirming fashion. There is no repairing, restoring resurrection of persons after death. In this sense, the language of resurrection seems drained of its original meaning. While McFague’s identifying the world as God’s body gives one a sense of God’s proximity, she leaves us unclear about what kind of proximity this amounts to. Can we petition God for aid in advancing the power of life?

Some of the reasons why theists do not affirm that God is identical with the cosmos include the following: God exists necessarily, whereas the cosmos is contingent; the cosmos had a beginning, whereas God had no temporal beginning; God is the creator of the cosmos, whereas the cosmos is created; God is all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful, whereas the cosmos is not all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful. If the cosmos is God’s body, then it appears that cosmic changes may impair God. McFague agrees that God is not identical with the cosmos, so perhaps such reasoning need not deter her, but they seem to undermine the motive for thinking that the world is God’s body. For example: why think that a necessarily existing being (a being who cannot but exist and whose nonexistence is impossible) would have a physical, contingent body?

McFague’s key reasons on behalf of viewing the world as God’s body involve an appeal to Christian revelation and ecology. Does Christian revelation (or Christian theology in general) give us good reason for thinking that the world is God’s body? Scripture and reflection on the incarnation gives one good reason to think God is not remote but present in the cosmos, but this is a point that has been upheld by traditional theology without the further claim that the world is God’s body. As for the second matter, does McFague’s model offer us an ecological ethic or theology missing on the traditional model? Here is where integrative theism comes into play.

The Promise of Integrative Theism

In *Consciousness and the Mind of God*, I sought to defend the person-body relationship as profoundly integrated and yet not a matter of strict identity.¹⁹ This allows for the affirmation that a person may survive the death or annihilation of her body (and her body may survive the death or annihilation of the person) and yet in a healthy embodiment a person functions as a unity. The book, and subsequently published papers, seek to overcome the widespread assumption that dualism leaves one with an implausible bifurcation of person and body.²⁰ Gilbert Ryle, famously, depicted

¹⁸ Ibid., 80.

¹⁹ Taliaferro (1994).

²⁰ See Taliaferro (2001).

dualism as positing ghost inhabiting a machine (a body).²¹ Ryle's student, Daniel Dennett, essentially raises the same charge.²² Antony Flew charged that dualism is in tension with our ordinary experience of each other: we meet other people in ordinary life, not their containers.²³ And *tout le monde* think dualism suffers from the fatal problem of accounting for the causal interaction of person and body. In different publications, I argue that such critics of dualism get at least one thing wrong: sometimes a person can be so damaged that she is like a ghost inhabiting a body or a person's body can be like a container or vessel. But under healthy, ordinary conditions an embodied person (from the standpoint of what I call *integrative dualism*) is a functional unity. The objection from causal interaction (I suggest) begs the question. I do not see how one can a priori rule out causal interaction of person and body (in dualism).²⁴ Obviously a great deal more needs to be said to gain a proper hearing for dualism, but there are serious problems facing the chief rival of dualism, materialism (especially the hard problem of accounting for consciousness), and there are a growing number of philosophers defending dualism today.²⁵ The important point I am trying to secure here is the supposition that dualism can warrant a fully integrated understanding of embodiment.

Having secured this modest sketch of integrative dualism, consider integrative theism. On this view the cosmos is not God's body insofar as God is not sustained by the cosmos (the cosmos does not enable God to have knowledge the way your body enables you to have knowledge, for example) nor is God sensorially effected by cosmic processes (an exploding star does not give God pain) nor does God's power of agency rests upon cosmic laws (the way you and I depend on our bodies, laws of nature and so on, in order to act). While integrative theism resists any full blooded metaphysics in which God is embodied in the world (apart from the unique incarnation of God as Jesus Christ), it upholds that God's affective, love of the cosmos does support a sense in which the world functions like God's body. So, for example, when the innocent are treated with cruel injustice, this may be seen as an act that violates God's will; it is a source of divine sorrow (and perhaps rage). And, as we come to realize the profound harms we are inflicting on ourselves, other life forms, and future generations, this action may also be seen as a way in which ecological upheaval counts as a harm to God's life and love. On this model, the world is akin to God's body and this is accounted for in terms of God's goodness, love, power and knowledge. This understanding of the God-World relationship rejects the traditional belief in divine impassability and insists, instead, that God is passable insofar as God is affectively responsive to the goods and ills of the creation. The

²¹ See Ryle (1984).

²² See Dennett (1991).

²³ See Flew (1984).

²⁴ See Collins (2008).

²⁵ See work by Richard Swinburne, John Foster, Dean Zimmerman, W.D. Hart, Stewart Goetz, John Bealer, Howard Robinson, Keith Yandell, Alvin Plantinga, G. Maddel, Daniel Robinson, Mark Baker, Raymond Tallis, William Hasker, Peter Unger, and others.

goods in the cosmos meet with divine joy, while the ills meet with divine sorrow.²⁶ In other words, integrative theism can offer reasons why the world is like God's body, but we are not given such an account by McFague. By explicitly underscoring the integration of the life of God and the life of the world, integrative theism is able to explicitly renounce the charges of distance and remoteness that McFague launches against traditional theology. Integrative theism can thereby affirm the urgency and importance of ecology here and now, without renouncing the traditional affirmation that life is such an abundant good that it is good in both this life and the next. Integrative dualism also avoids the problems facing McFague's model, for God's life does not metaphysically depend on creation. The well-being of creation matters to God in virtue of God's love and goodness, but not in virtue of God's material constitution.

In response to my proposal, Jeanine Diller writes: "I see that, even though God is neither embodied in the world nor strictly identical with it, God's love, goodness, power and knowledge of the world make it "like" or "akin" to God's body, I think to the point of creating recoil in God when the world is harmed (for us, "don't hurt my body"; for God, "don't hurt my world"?). But how exactly – what is the mechanism or metaphysical basis of the integration – in your words, what are the reasons why the world is like God's body, what is the account?"²⁷

In a fuller treatment of theism, especially focusing on omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness, there would need to be a defense of the intelligibility of basic divine power. From a classical theistic perspective, God's power is basic in the sense that it is unmediated and not dependent upon any intermediary causal powers or laws. God's causal conservation of the cosmos and knowledge, for example, do not require any mechanism, nor does God's affective response to the cosmos (God's sorrow over cosmic ills require God to have any corporeal or incorporeal mechanisms). I have defended the concept of unmediated action elsewhere, arguing that if action always required mediation (for my choice to do A to be efficacious I had to do another act, B, and for that act to be efficacious there must be a further act, C, *ad infinitum*) there would be no action. I further suggest that, for similar reasons, physical causation also requires the concept of unmediated, basic causal power.²⁸ If this is correct, then the fact that theism recognizes unmediated, basic divine power is not philosophically suspect or capricious.²⁹

While I have been critical of McFague's critique and proposal, I believe she has done a brilliant service by challenging us to think philosophically and theologically about the world in terms of the growing, massive danger of climate change. I hope that philosophical theists might also be moved to take climate change seriously as we reflect on the philosophy of God and our personal, moral, religious and political

²⁶ See Taliaferro (1994, chapter 4).

²⁷ Personal correspondence.

²⁸ See Goetz and Taliaferro (2008). See also Taliaferro (1994) for arguments on basic causal powers.

²⁹ For a further defense of basic, teleological explanations, see *A Brief History of the Soul* by Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming).

responsibilities. We have fortunately moved beyond the days of Lynn White and his famous 1967 essay “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” accusing historical Christianity for virtually all our modern ecological problems.³⁰ A sturdy philosophy and theology of Christian stewardship has achieved a solid hearing in the contemporary literature (as one can see in the work of Holmes Rolston III, Gary Comstock and others), but the threat of global warming calls for further, focused attention.³¹

To summarize: versions of person-body dualism can offer a non-integrated portrait of embodiment. Consider, for example, Richard Swinburne’s account of what it is to have a body:

We humans have bodies. A body is a physical object through which we can make a difference to the world and learn about the world; and ordinary humans are tied down to acting and acquiring information through their bodies. I can only make a difference to the world by doing something with some part of my body- by using my arm to move something, or my mouth to tell you something. And I can only learn about the world by stimuli landing on my sense organs (light rays landing on my eyes or sound waves landing on my ears, for example).³²

Under difficult, perhaps damaged circumstances, a person might feel merely tied to their body or feel that their body is like some communicative, learning device. But dualists can offer a completely integrated understanding of embodiment in which the embodied person functions as a unity. Similarly classical theism can endorse a distant impassable view of the divine (as McFague contends), but if we take seriously God’s affective omnipotent loving, omniscient omnipresence we can secure a profoundly integrated model of God and the cosmos. Integrated theism is even able to see the cosmos as very much like the very body of God, though not with the shortcomings of Sallie McFague’s admirable but problematic model of God.³³

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³⁰ See <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>.

³¹ See, for example, *Genes, Genesis and God* by Holmes Rolston III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³² Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford University Press 2008), 6–7. Despite my pointing out that Swinburne does not offer what I think is a properly integral understanding of the person-body relationship, I thoroughly endorse much of his defense of dualism in *The Evolution of the Soul* and elsewhere.

³³ I thank Jeanine Diller and Therese Cotter for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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Models of God and Just War Theory

Philip J. Rossi, SJ

The formative matrices for the origin and development of just war theory—a body of principles articulating moral criteria for decisions to wage war, for the conduct of combatants in the course of waging war, and for restoring an order of peace after war—lie along the intersections of a variety of philosophical, religious-theological, and legal-political forces that have been operative at different times and circumstances in Western culture during the course of more than two millennia. Concepts basic to “just war” thinking have early roots in Greco-Roman philosophies (such as Stoicism) that construed the metaphysical structure and the ultimate workings of the cosmic order, and humanity’s place within that order, according to elements and laws that functioned impersonally throughout nature. The later articulation of these concepts (initially by Augustine, then by Aquinas, and later by Suarez and Vitoria) into a theory of the moral use of military power by sovereign rulers took place within a matrix of theological concepts in which humanity’s relation to a personal God who creates and governs the cosmic order provided the context for understanding the responsibility that human beings—particularly those entrusted with civil authority—have for maintaining the civil order and for protecting those who live subject to their authority within that order. More recently, however, as various principles of just war theory have become elements within a body of international law enshrined in international treaties and covenants and applied in the still-developing practices of international courts and tribunals, the earlier cosmological, metaphysical, and theological contexts that shaped its emergence have receded well into the background.¹

¹ In this regard, just war theory is representative of the bifurcation of ethics and metaphysics that has become deeply embedded in much of the philosophy of late modernity. For two different lines of criticism of such bifurcation, see Taylor (1989) and Neiman (2002).

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One consequence of the trajectory of this historical development is that today one does not have to be a Stoic or a Suarezian in one's metaphysical or epistemological commitments to see the moral force of the *ad bellum* criteria such as just cause or competent authority; nor does one need to be a believer in the Christian God—or for that matter in any god—to comprehend the *in bello* criteria of discrimination and proportionality. In consequence, one may legitimately ask whether these large overarching and all-encompassing conceptual frames of reference, such as cosmic order governed by the Stoic *logos*, or the personal and providential God of Christian faith, as important as they each might have been in the origin and development of just war theory, can or should continue to have a bearing upon contemporary articulations and applications of the moral principles that constitute just war theory. When just war theory has entered into the moral discourse of what Charles Taylor (2007) has called “a secular age,” which has placed in question the presupposition that humanity’s moral relation to the ultimate ordering principle of the cosmos is fundamentally personal, it seems to require us to examine with a critical eye the extent such a presupposition can still function as a requirement for the intelligibility and moral plausibility of just war theory. Given that just war principles have been accepted by a range of theorists and practitioners engaged with issues of war and peace—e.g., philosophers, theologians, political theorists, international lawyers and jurists, military educators and command staff—who have no evident common overarching frame of reference regarding ultimate principles ordering the cosmos, it seems that whatever model one may have of God, or of any ultimate structuring principle for understanding or ordering reality, will be irrelevant to the conceptual shape of just war theory or to its in-practice application in the twenty-first century.

Against the background of this historical trajectory, this essay will argue against such a dismissal of the relevance of ultimate frames of reference for just war theory with respect, first, to understanding fully the historical emergence and development of this theory and, second, with respect to current discussions about the relevance and application of just war theory to contemporary circumstances of warfare. As noted in the opening paragraph a key element in the appropriation and reshaping of just war concepts from their original Greco-Roman philosophical milieu was the shift by which Augustine and subsequent thinkers construed humanity’s moral relation to the ultimate ordering principle of the cosmos as one that is fundamentally personal rather than impersonal. In Sect. “[Just War Theory and the Ordering Principle of the Cosmos](#)”, I will argue that this shift makes possible a re-ordering of the moral finality of just war theory from that of merely minimizing the harm of war as an evil that is inevitably woven into dynamics of human society to that of actively pursuing conditions that, by properly fostering a stable order for peace, will serve to render war as more and more an “unnecessary evil.” I will further argue in Sect. “[Human Freedom, Divine Freedom: Enabling Peace as the Finality of Just War Theory](#)” that inasmuch as the work of re-ordering the finality of just war theory to the fostering of peace has yet to be completed, a model of the ultimate ordering of the world as personal continues to have relevance for this important moral theory: How we construe the ultimate frame of reference for the ordering of the cosmos,

including our human place within that order, has an important bearing upon how we then construe our human responsibilities for establishing an international order that will be effective for bringing warfare to a conclusive end.

Just War Theory and the Ordering Principle of the Cosmos

Augustine's placement of the concepts that later become formative of what is now considered "classical" just war theory into a context in which humanity's moral relation to the cosmos is conceived of personally rather than impersonally effected a shift that, as I will argue below, has turned out to be fundamental for altering the trajectory of just war thinking. In order to understand this shift and its importance, it will be helpful to place it within the context of some larger and more encompassing elements in Augustine's philosophical and theological thought, most notably his understanding of God as the Creator who acts freely and of humans as agents endowed with genuine, though finite, freedom. Freedom—both divine and human—is fundamental to the structure of an Augustinian universe in a way that makes such a universe and its dynamisms qualitatively different from the structures of necessity and emanation, on the one hand, and randomness and chance, on the other, that were central to the main accounts that contended with each other in Greco-Roman cosmic speculation, even as they were set over against the Christian theological view articulated by Augustine.² Freedom, as it functions within the dynamisms that Augustine sees at work in human history and culture, imparts to the workings of the cosmos, at least within the historical space within which humans dwell and act, possibilities that are not reducible to the outcomes that issue merely from chance, or from necessity, or from their interplay. Within those latter forms of construing the ultimate workings of the world, war (like everything else) can be understood only as particular form of the conflict and violence that—whether their origins be in chance, or in necessity, or in their interplay—cannot be eliminated from the order of reality. In these accounts of the ultimate working of the world, war has an inevitability that allows us only to hope for and work for its containment, or for some moderation of its destructive consequences, but not its elimination. The crucial claim for my argument here is that Augustine's placement of freedom as fundamental to the workings of the cosmos and its Creator is what will make it possible for later developments in just war thinking to re-orient the finality of this theory from that of merely limiting the violence of war—which is all its finality can be in a cosmos governed only by necessity and chance—to the task of establishing conditions for a stable order of peace that will make war unnecessary.

Because his thought is so thoroughly structured in terms of seeing the cosmos as ordered in its origin and finality to a personal principle in the God whose activity of

² Burrell (1993) explores the fundamental contrast between construing the cosmos as an order that is necessitated through emanation from a first principle and as the outcome of divine free creation.

freely creating has thereby enabled human freedom, Augustine does not always fully articulate the bearing that this fundamental presupposition has upon every particular position or principle which he then sets forth. Such is the case for his appropriation of the concepts from which he fashions his account of the responsibilities and limits of civil authority in waging war. As a result, the full consequences of the placement of his nascent account of “just war theory” within this larger presupposition has aspects to it that may be more readily discerned only retrospectively, as its implications later unfold in the development of the theory after Augustine. Just war theory becomes more fully developed through more than a millennium of reflection by thinkers who share, to one degree or another, Augustine’s presupposition about the ultimate ordering of the cosmos in terms of a personal principle.³ As it goes through this development, and as shifts in the material conditions of its application emerge in modernity—such the modern nation-state, representative political orders, advanced military technology, and growing levels of global interdependence—it becomes increasingly possible to discern how its finality may be appropriately re-directed beyond that encompassed only by an aim to constrain and limit the violence of wars that form an unavoidably recurring feature of human society. Such new finality will place just war theory as part of a larger human moral enterprise that seeks to establish a stable order for peace, an enterprise that is considered possible in view of a judgment that human freedom has been entrusted with the responsibility—and thus with the power—to render war unnecessary.

It is important to note that Augustine’s own account of war and of the ruler’s responsibility to limit its scope and consequences provides, in the roles it gives to divine and human freedom, only the pivot for this re-orientation of the finality of just war theory; his account does not itself effect such a full orientation. For Augustine, the concepts and arguments of his nascent just war theory do not yet form a configuration that orders them fully to a finality of peacemaking made possible through human action, that, as I shall argue in Sect. “[Human Freedom, Divine Freedom: Enabling Peace as the Finality of Just War Theory](#)”, we are now in a position to affirm as crucial to the moral adequacy of just war theory. For him, these concepts are, instead, elements he constitutes as principles necessary for rulers to provide measures for appropriate “damage control” in consequence of the disorder that has been introduced both into the cosmos and into the dynamics of human social life and organization as a result of sin. Augustine’s account, as well as that of many of his successors, thus continues to affirm an inevitability to war, though its inevitability does not now issue from the eternal ordering of the

³ Intertwined in such development is a range of different articulations of the relationship between the transcendent, inasmuch as it can be intelligibly construed in terms of a principle of personal agency in relation to the cosmos, and the immanent workings of the cosmos, including the working of human agency within it. Burrell (1986, 1993) provides an account—that is both historically and philosophically astute—of how a retrieval of key elements from the medieval interchange among the Abrahamic faiths on how properly to construe and articulate the divine relation to the cosmos, provides resources to overcome the influential “zero-sum” construal of this relationship, pitting human freedom against divine freedom, that has loomed exceedingly large in much modern discussion of divine agency.

cosmos, but in consequence of the historical misuse of human freedom that has become embedded in the workings of the cosmos. It is important to note, however, that such inevitability is historical and contingent in its origin; war is not ultimately a structural feature of the order of the cosmos, even though the human misuse of freedom has woven it so fully into the fabric of history that it renders futile all human efforts to draw it out.

Human Freedom, Divine Freedom: Enabling Peace as the Finality of Just War Theory

Freedom, as I hope Sect. “[Just War Theory and the Ordering Principle of the Cosmos](#)” has indicated, is crucial to Augustine’s construal of the personal character of the human moral relationship to the ultimate ordering principle of the cosmos within which he places the concepts that will later be formative of classical just war theory. Freedom, both human and divine, thus forms the central point of the “pivot” on which turns the re-orientation of finality of just war theory for which I am arguing.⁴ Many thinkers subsequent to Augustine who have engaged and refined just war theory have helped to provide an impetus for such a re-orientation; my discussion in this part, however, will focus only on the way in which Immanuel Kant’s account of just war theory, as he it places in the context of the ideal of a “perpetual peace,” and as he articulates it as a moral task that reason sets for the exercise of our human freedom, stands as a decisive moment for such re-orientation. I focus on Kant not only in view of the historical importance his work has for this re-orientation, but because I believe that his account also sets the terms for the work that still needs to be done to complete the re-orientation of the finality of just war theory toward the establishment of an effective order of stable peace.

Kant terms the re-orientation he proposes a “cosmopolitan perspective”: this is the vantage point, enabled by the proper exercise of human practical (moral) reason—i.e., by our freedom—from which we empower ourselves and each another to envision the effects of our actions upon the socio-cultural matrix that constitutes the dynamics of history (Rossi, [2008](#)). It is a view upon our actions that sees them

⁴ Augustine’s understanding of the relationship between God’s freedom and human freedom is open to a wide range of interpretation, particularly in view its long course of development in the matrix of a variety of controversies in which Augustine was engaged, not the least of which were ones that involved questions of what may be referred to (in “theological shorthand”) as matters of “grace” and “predestination.” The line of interpretation that I am presupposing in this discussion takes Augustine’s fundamental view to be that the divine freedom that enables human freedom does not thereby set these two freedoms in irreconcilable opposition to one another (e.g., in the manner of a zero-sum game) but rather allows the exercise of each of them to have decisive impact upon the contingent course of history. Not all readers of Augustine would affirm this interpretation and it is also important to note that this interpretation does not settle the question of the extent to which he adequately or consistently articulated such view and advanced cogent arguments to support it.

in terms of the social import they have in imparting a trajectory to the course of human history that is in accord with the moral worth and dignity proper to the freedom that human rational agents exercise as they stand in the mutual relationship of respect for each other that Kant images as “a kingdom of ends” (Rossi 2005: 87–111) Embedded within Kant’s account of a cosmopolitan perspective is a principle on which he and Augustine stand in fundamental agreement: human freedom and action make a real difference to the course of history and to our destiny as individuals and as a species. In consequence, a cosmopolitan perspective enables us to envision peace not as a utopian velleity that remains an unfulfilled wish ever beyond our capacity to effect it, but instead as a concrete outcome that is made increasingly possible by human activities that are effectively ordered to the construction of a world order providing conditions for lasting peace. It allows us to shape our actions with a view to making conditions conducive to peace the actual outcome of concrete activities and policies that are within our human power to put into effect.

I have already noted that Augustine’s affirmation of freedom as fundamental to the character of the cosmos was made over against the accounts that Greco-Roman philosophies offered in which chance and necessity rendered the ultimate impact of freedom null and void. Kant’s account of a cosmopolitan perspective and its role for undertaking the task of establishing perpetual peace can be viewed as a response to a similar challenge. Within the context of Kant’s account of the dynamics of history, a cosmopolitan perspective stands as the practical counter-point to the way that our reason urges us to envision history from what he terms a “theoretical” perspective, viz., as merely the outcome of the causally necessary workings of “nature”—a nature that includes our own self-regarding human inclinations and interests. From that vantage point, humanity is led to wherever nature’s course (including what we are inclined to see as serving our “interest”) takes it; humanity has no power of its own to guide the course of history or to take responsibility for imparting to it a direction toward a definitive state of human weal or woe.

In terms of one of the main images that has shaped the theory and practice of polities in modernity, what we see from this vantage point is the “state of nature” as depicted by Thomas Hobbes: a condition of human social interaction constituted by the unavoidability of war: *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Within this condition, though it may be desirable for a variety of reasons to suspend this constant state of war, the only means envisioned as effective for so doing are the means of war itself, now transposed as the legitimate coercive powers of the state. From the perspective of “nature,” peace can be envisioned as, at best, the cessation of active hostilities in favor of what is, at its best, only an armed truce. In this condition, the inversion of Clausewitz’s dictum, “War is a mere continuation of politics by other means,” also holds true, as politics becomes in turn the continuation of war by other means. It is thus not without significance that, in his “Perpetual Peace” essay, Kant considers the achievement of such a cessation of active hostility to be the outcome of what he terms the “preliminary” articles for perpetual peace, articles that function within a context that continues to presuppose the inevitability of war. In order to move beyond this state, one must contest the inevitability of the “state of nature”—and

thus the inevitability of war—envisioned by Hobbes.⁵ Kant takes this further step in setting forth what he terms the “definitive” articles for perpetual peace, in conjunction with his discussion, in the “First Supplement,” of the “guarantee” of perpetual peace that is provided by “nature” as it functions in its guise of “providence.”

The re-orientation that Kant envisions for the finality of just war theory once it is viewed in a “cosmopolitan perspective” comes about in consequence of placing these principles in a context in which war is no longer presumed to be an inevitable feature of our human condition. That presumption limits the function and finality of the principles of just war theory merely to ends that had only in view the constraint and cessation of armed hostility; these ends concretely involve, first, limiting the circumstances that allow some wars to be judged morally justified and, second, of constraining the violence of war when it occurs—as, according to the Hobbesian presumption, it surely will. Within the purview of a “cosmopolitan perspective,” however, just war theory can take on an added and larger finality that directs it to securing stable conditions for peace as a proper end. It can now function as a key *preliminary* step in bringing about the conditions for international peace as a result of human effort. In terms of the structure of the essay on “Perpetual Peace,” just war theory thus has its most proper function within the ambit of the “preliminary articles.” Once those articles are in place, space is thereby opened for humans to exercise their freedom for the adoption of the “definitive articles,” which would then have, as a consequence of their adoption, rendering otiose the future need for a theory of just war, since whatever previously might have been put forth as a *casus belli* would now be presumed to be subject to the forms of international adjudication that are established in accord with the “definitive articles.”⁶

To the extent that Kant’s account of the human movement from war to peace that takes place in the transition from the “preliminary” to the “definitive” articles for perpetual peace pivots around the effective exercise of *human* freedom upon the shape of history, it may appear that this movement—along with its effect of shifting the finality of just war theory—takes place without reference to an ultimate ordering principle for the cosmos. Kant seems to be affirming that the hoped-for effect of securing an enduring peace will come about entirely through what humans do; as a result, his essay on “Perpetual Peace” can be considered to stand wholly in within the dynamics of “a secular age” in which human freedom may stand in personal relation only to and within an “immanent frame” whose self-constitution is totally of human making. Such a reading, however, overlooks the clear recognition Kant expresses, most notably in this essay in the “First Supplement,” that human effort *alone* is not sufficient for bringing about such conditions, in view of the very constitution of our humanity as the intersection of the workings of nature and freedom. Given that nature and freedom are mutually constitutive of our humanity,

⁵ One clear indication that Kant contests such a view is in his affirmation that “[t]he concept of the right of nations as that of the right to go to war is, strictly speaking, unintelligible” (Kant 1795:356; Gregor 1996: 328).

⁶ On this point, Kant’s discussions in “Theory and Practice” (1793), “Perpetual Peace” (1795), and *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) all indicate that a key feature of a cosmopolitan world order involves the establishment of mechanisms to adjudicate disputes that would otherwise serve as *casus belli* under the conditions of a “state of nature” among nations.

the conditions that bring about peace will in their turn be the outcome of what is done from human freedom as well as from what results from the working of the governing principles in the cosmos. Kant terms the workings of the latter principles “nature,” when they are coordinate to our understanding of those workings in terms of the theoretical use of our reason, and “providence,” when they are coordinate to our understanding of those workings in terms of the practical use of our reason.⁷

When viewed from the perspective of the traditions of the philosophical theology with which Kant’s work engaged, his understanding of “providence” and its workings are quite circumspect in the range they claim for divine freedom, particularly when placed in comparison to Augustine’s understanding of personal character of divine freedom. Kant’s account stands squarely within the stream of apophatic philosophical reflection upon the divine that recognizes that the radical character of its otherness with respect to the cosmic and the human renders it beyond any human imaginative, linguistic, or conceptual capacity to express with adequacy. Yet—and this is the crucial point with respect to just war theory (as it is to Kant’s whole account of human moral life)—he does consider it absolutely fundamental that *any affirmation of the divine recognize that it inscrutably yet ungrudgingly leaves space for human freedom to be exercised in ways that make a real difference to the course of history and to our destiny as a species.* As Susan Neiman has pointed out, Kant takes the inscrutability of the divine freedom that he terms “providence” to be what enables us to have genuine hope that our moral efforts make the difference they ought to have upon the workings of the world and the shape of human existence.⁸ The model of God, the model of ultimate reality, that has the most significant bearing upon just war theory is one that enables us to take our human freedom seriously as an effective power for the bringing about lasting good—in this case, the good of a peace that will be sturdy enough to stand against our human dynamisms of contention that lead to deadly violence against one another.⁹

⁷ See Kleingeld (2001). In a way that is similar to the issue noted earlier (footnote 3) with respect to interpreting Augustine’s understanding of the relationship between divine freedom and human freedom, there are different and often competing interpretations of Kant’s understanding of the relationship between human freedom and the ultimate principles of nature that govern the workings of the cosmos of which humans are a part and in which they dwell. The reading of Kant that I am proposing here is a similar in a crucial way to the one I earlier proposed of Augustine in that it takes Kant to affirm that human freedom and the ultimate principle for ordering of the cosmos do not work in irreconcilable opposition to each other. As part of this affirmation, moreover, Kant takes it to be the case that the operation of both is required for there to be moral intelligibility to the cosmos.

⁸ Neiman (2002: 327): “if we knew that God existed, freedom and virtue would disappear. It’s an act of Providence that the nature of Providence will forever remain uncertain.”

⁹ My argument and conclusion here does not also include a claim that this model of God—which functions both in terms of a robust affirmation of the compatibility of transcendent divine agency with the efficacy of human freedom in the workings of history and within the limits of a Kantian moral apophaticism with respect to particulars (as distinct from the trajectory) of divine providence—is the *only* model of God that has consequences for the framing of just war theory. One could, for instance, construe the efficacy of human freedom to be so compromised in consequence of sin that peace cannot be envisioned (as Kant does) as attainable in consequence of anything that humans may be able to effect within history. Peace then becomes solely the outcome of divine agency—and the finality of just war theory remains, as it would be in a cosmos of impersonal forces and/or in a Hobbesian order of human interaction, the limitation of some small range of conflict and violence.

A model of God, a model of the ultimate reality governing the cosmos that provides possibilities for human freedom to stand effectively against violence and, in so doing, to make a real difference in history is thus one that continues to have relevance for the articulation of just war theory in the twenty-first century. It provides a horizon of hope for the effective power of human freedom that stretches beyond that envisioned by a “realism” that accepts the violence of war as an irremovable and inevitable feature of human life, for which just war theory provides, at best, an imperfect tool for its occasional moderation. Within the more expansive horizon that is provided by taking an effective order of peace to be the more fundamental finality of just war theory, we can begin to see that the increasing attention that is now being given to the importance of *post-bellum* considerations may represent more than just the articulation of an additional set of criteria (parallel to those bearing upon *ad bellum* and *in bello* circumstances) for judging the moral adequacy of particular policies or conduct upon the cessation of armed hostilities. At work in the articulation of these *post-bellum* criteria may very well be a principle for a practical re-orientation of our thinking, of the kind Kant termed “a cosmopolitan perspective,” about the capacity human beings have, as agent participants in the history of the human species, for enacting peace in the face of the dynamics of war that issue from the human dynamism of contention that he aptly termed our “unsociable sociability.”¹⁰ While I would not argue that we can envision our human freedom being effective in history for the establishment of peace only in virtue of the model of divine freedom provided by Augustine or that of “providence” provided by Kant, I do think that a strong case can be made that, in the context of the space for human freedom that those models create, just war theory can be appropriately reoriented to the finality of establishing an order of enduring peace.

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¹⁰ Kant describes “unsociable sociability” as “the propensity [of human beings] to enter into society, which, however, is combined with a thoroughgoing resistance that constantly threatens to break up this society” (Kant 1784: 20; Humphrey 1983: 31–32).

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Models, Idols, and the Great White Whale: Toward a Christian Faith of Nonattachment

Jeremy R. Hustwit

“What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this leviathan?”

-Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

Can we put our faith in a model? On the surface, the question is nonsensical—a paradox. Models, at least when used in the sciences, are tentative constructs. We use models to stand in for a thing when that thing’s properties are obscured.¹ Faith, on the other hand, is commonly thought of as supreme confidence, which is opposed to the hypothetical restraint of models. Scientists typically are not “born again” to the Rutherford atom, nor should economists accept supply side theories as their rock and redeemer. It seems downright confused to have unassailable confidence in a hypothesis. By the same token, many Christians will find models antithetical to faith. In fact, the critic of God-modeling will surely notice a resemblance to the Judeo-Christian tradition’s elder statesman of sin: idolatry. After all, God-modeling tends to be pluralistic, hypothetical, and often subversive. By examining the allegories of Melville’s *Moby Dick* and the metaphysical reticence of early Buddhism, we will see that the resemblance is only superficial. If there is a danger of idolatry, it lies in the love of certainty. Once we jettison certainty as the goal of Christian discipleship, it appears that models of God are actually boons to the faithful.

¹ In this essay, I am assuming that models are primarily used as attempts to emulate some external reality. This is not a universal view among theologians. There are many who insist that placing models into a correspondence relation with an objective thing-in-itself is to buy into a discredited subject-object dualism. For arguments for and against my assumption, see “Can Models of God Compete?” in this volume.

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The Varieties of Idolaters

For better or worse, models have been employed throughout the history of Christianity. We need only to look at the controversies embroiling the early Church to see, for example, trinitarian models of God side by side with Arian Binitarian, Gnostic Ditheistic, Adoptionist, and Sabellian models. Despite these esoteric labels, such models defined the thoughts, prayers, and devotion of Christian lives. But they also were denounced as examples of the one sin that is sure to rouse the ire of Yahweh: idolatry. In order to decide if models of God are idolatrous, we need to determine what exactly constitutes idolatry and why it is so pernicious. Unsurprisingly, iconoclasts have not spoken with one voice on the issue, and we can tease out at least three distinct types of idolaters that may describe God-modelers.

Whores

The oldest accusations of idolatry involve an obligation of loyalty between two parties, and its betrayal. This is the view most commonly found in the Hebrew Bible. During the First Temple period and subsequent exile, the notion of a binding covenant between God and Israel was central to Hebrew religion. Furthermore, this covenant was fulfilled by Israel's performance of rituals. The blistering criticism of the prophets rarely focused on incorrect beliefs, or improper sentiments. Actions—usually sacrifices—were how Israel was to remain faithful, and actions were how Israel could betray God. As a result, Israel's relationship with God was described by Hosea, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah as an adulterous marriage:

But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your fame, and lavished your whorings on any passer-by.... You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and my silver that I had given you, and made for yourself male images, and with them played the whore... (Eze 16:15, 16:17)

This earliest notion of idolatry applies only to actions performed before physical representations of foreign deities. The sexual comparison is unmistakable. The offense lies in the betrayal of loyalty owed to God, which is parallel in many ways to the loyalty expected in a marriage.

The prospect of betraying God with ritual worship only makes sense in a monotheistic system, in which other Gods are admitted to exist, but are prohibited. One would have to make a conscious decision to petition a deity other than Yahweh. So, by the fifth century BCE, when strict monotheism's victory was nearly complete, the salience of the betrayal model had waned. Furthermore, God-modeling today tends to be an imaginative task more than anything. The abstractions of modern theologians are fashioned with words, not wood or stone. Even if today's God-modelers did propitiate physical idols, those who think of models of God as metaphors for a single divine being would not necessarily be betraying God, as their worship is aimed at the one true God, albeit by means of diverse symbols.

Contemporary God-modelers may be many things, but they are not, by this definition, whores. “Ritual betrayal,” however, are not the last words in idolatry, and God-modelers are still under suspicion.

Fools

In late antiquity and the early medieval period, idolatry, in concept and practice, was internalized. Worship was directed at ideas rather than golden statues. But perhaps this is more dangerous. If our ideas fail to match the reality of God, then many theologians argue we have made an idol out of our misconceptions. If so, should we be held accountable for their beliefs as well as their actions? Jewish philosopher Maimonides thinks so. He argues that any language about God is to be condemned because it either (a) anthropomorphizes God into having a body and/or psyche, or (b) falsely divides God into a multiplicity by means of the subject-predicate structure of language (Halbertal and Margalit 1998; Maimonides 1956). God, according to Maimonides, is so transcendent that any positive language about God, including mental language, must be false. A significant portion of Christians may agree with Maimonides and go so far as Calvin, who exclaims that human speculation about God’s nature, i.e. constructing models of God, is “folly, nay madness,” (Calvin 1975, 100).

It’s important to point out two crucial features of models that undermine Calvin’s charges of folly and madness. First, it is almost certainly true that our models of God, despite our best efforts, fail spectacularly to capture God’s essence. Where the overzealous iconoclasts see the distance between a model and reality as an error, the truth is that this distance is what allows modelers to resist idolatry. The term “models” calls attention, like a blinking neon sign, to that gap between our metaphors and God’s reality. A model is a *self-conscious* admission that language, at least for now, fails to capture reality. Furthermore, the label of “model” is an agonist, which continually refreshes the tension between every metaphor’s tenor and vehicle.² It preserves against the gradual death of theological metaphors. Metaphors like “Unmoved Mover,” and “Poet of the Universe,” when labeled as models, are preserved as hypothetical constructs.³ Those who self-consciously model God are reminded again and again that their constructs will always fall short of ultimate reality. As long as these metaphors are wedded to the category of “models,” they cannot collapse into dead idols.

Second, the drive to innovate is inherent in the use of models. After all, if we thought a model were perfect, it would cease to be a model. So, models proliferate

² For an in-depth theory of metaphor based on the tensive interaction between tenor and vehicle, see Paul Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Semantics of Discourse,” *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 65–100.

³ “Holy Trinity,” for most Christians, has been robbed of its status as model, and in its demotion to orthodoxy, has lost the creative tension between tenor and vehicle that enriches and multiplies its meaning.

and invite revision. The inherent plurality of God-modeling draws attention to the limitations of each model. That irritating grain of uncertainty, which pushes speculation ever onward, also prevents the petrification of fresh ideas. It seems then, as long as models are self consciously labeled as such, cognitive error is hardly a danger. The distance between model and Truth is essential to the very concept of a model.

These two considerations imply that most Christians who use models in their devotions will not mistake those models for divine reality, and thus fall into idolatrous error. But even if they did, there are good reasons to believe that foolish beliefs about God are not, in fact, grave. Many models of God that play up God's mystery and transcendence suggest that accurate knowledge of God is difficult, if not impossible, for humans. Many religious disputes cannot be settled by natural revelation nor by scripture. This ambiguity is multiplied by hermeneutical insights about the profound differences in the way individuals interpret the world. Expecting humans to adhere to orthodoxy is a fight against entropy—not just herding cats, but expecting cats to herd themselves. The unlikelihood of consensus is not necessarily a reason to abandon it, but it does prompt some critical examination, and though there is insufficient space to argue it here, it seems the primary injunctions of the Gospels have little to do with correct belief.

Philistines

If our culture no longer struggles with ritual infidelity, and the specter of error has lost its teeth, we must look elsewhere for idolatry. Many have construed idolatry as a problem with values rather than propositional beliefs—a matter of misvaluation. When we confuse a means for an end, or mistake a limited good as the final Good, we have made an idol of it. A church leader who spends millions of dollars in donations on a new bowling alley may be an idolater. The bowling alley has become an idol, as the minister values it more than other, higher goods. It is not hard to imagine thousands of variations on this theme, in which our projects capture more and more of our attention until they eclipse what should be our ultimate concern. Misvaluation, unlike definitions based on betrayal or error, seems to really capture the existential struggle faced by Christians in the post-industrial West.

Does God-modeling warp the values and priorities of Christians? No, models of God will largely reflect the values of the modeler. But if there is an assertion of value implicit in model-based theology, it an aversion to one of the most seductive and misvalued idols of our age: the love of certainty. In this respect, God-modeling actually subverts idolatry.

The Danger of Harpoons

In our exploration of God-modeling, it may help to turn our attentions to the sea. *Moby Dick*, Melville's famous allegory of an obsessed whaler chasing after a white sperm whale, is a striking meditation upon holding on and letting go, of hubris and

humility, of attachment and equanimity. If there is one man who can speak to us of idols, attachment, and life out of balance, it is Ahab.

Melville's allegory seems clear enough. As the whaling vessels venture out into the chaotic waters in pursuit of Biblical leviathans, they parallel our religious impulses, perpetually fishing bounty up from the murky depths. The whale is God, or rather every whale is a model of God. The science of whales and whaling is theology. Ishamel even cites whale experts, who lament the difficulty of constructing a systematic cetology, as there is an "impenetrable veil covering our knowledge of the cetacean," and an "unfitness to pursue our research in unfathomable waters," (Melville 1993, 109). There is clearly a tension between the desirability of these submerged beasts, and the mystery that surrounds them. We crave them despite (because of?) their obscurity.

In the quest for god-whales, less heroic men on firm ground make do with their own fabrications. Father Mapple, for instance, tries to convince his congregation that Jonah shows "true and faithful repentance," when in fact Jonah only submits after God crushes him physically and emotionally—quite a dubious reading. Mapple's sophistry is paralleled by Queequeg, who spends the sermon whittling away at the idol in his pocket in order to give it a more pleasing appearance (Melville 1993, 39, 41). As Lawrence Thompson notes, each manipulates his separate God until it suits him—Mapple uses rhetoric while Queequeg uses a jackknife (Thompson 1952, 164). The implication is that all religion involves a degree of artifice. Jean Calvin, official theologian of New England whalers, agrees, observing, "man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols," (Calvin 1975, 108). Calvin would have us rely on unsullied revelation as opposed to the madness of speculation. But Melville's point is that even Biblical revelation goes under the knife of our perspectives and interests—for better or worse. We cannot help but interpret God's nature according to a complex array of criteria, both conscious and unconscious.

Ahab however, has no patience for the safe accommodation of human speculation. He strikes out beyond the pale, into the chaos, to dominate the one whale that is either principal or agent of the malevolent God. In the beginning of the voyage, Ahab is reclusive, but as the voyage progresses, both nature and other whalers feed him rumors and hints of his prey, and his obsession is exacerbated until in a fiery climax, he taunts a violent lightning storm, and demands to "be welded" with the "unsuffusing thing beyond," (Melville 1993, 423). Of course, his demand is his doom, as Ahab does eventually meet with the whale, but is yanked overboard by the ties that bind him to the harpooned object of his obsession.

Most literary critics locate Ahab's tragic flaw in his desire to transcend mortal limitations and know the unknowable, and this is surely one layer of meaning in the tale. But perhaps the object of Ahab's quest was not the problem. Perhaps it was the tenacity with which he pursued it. After all, not every whaler who wrestles a Leviathan from the deep meets an untimely end. Instead, what sets Ahab apart from other whalers is his pathological desire—his obsession. Ahab is not doomed because of his mystical streak, seeking that which is hidden beyond common appearances. Ahab's doom is his idolatrous conviction, grown monstrous. As his preoccupation is fed, it masters him, leads to an imbalance in character, and undermines his moral obligation to provide for the safety of his crew.

Perhaps Ahab is an object lesson to the theologian: suffering awaits those who lash themselves too securely to one model. The obscurity of God's reality can cause anxiety and rage, and there is something seductive about the idea of unsullied revelation. But our desire for truth, like any other desire, can burgeon into malignancy. When we get too attached to one model in particular, the self becomes parasitic upon the model, and we have become Ahab. Absolute certainty causes imbalance when our convictions work for us. When our chosen model is sunk, which may be inevitable, our attachment to it drags us down as well. *Moby Dick* shows us that if there is an idol to be feared, it is not the constructive artifice of Mapple and Queequeg—there is no alternative to that. The falsest idol is overweening conviction.

An Unsteady Raft

If reflection upon models of God pushes us from the love of certainty, then what alternative is left? Should we remain beatifically muddled, refusing to take any position? The Christian traditions overflow with expertise in cementing beliefs in place, but when it comes to mental flexibility, we often find ourselves flailing. The temptation is to assume the only alternative to attachment is its opposite: apathy. This, however, is a false dilemma, and our Buddhist friends can help us balance engagement with nonattachment to models of God.

Early Buddhism is unique in that it is perhaps one of the only religions that deliberately avoids metaphysical speculations, which are labeled “opinionated views” by the Buddha.⁴ Questions about such views—the nature of the self, cosmos, and the afterlife—were asked of the Buddha again and again, who refused to comment. On one occasion, a young monk by the name of Malunkayaputta decided to abandon the Buddha’s teachings because the Buddha would neither confirm nor deny opinionated views. The Buddha’s reply:

“Just as a person—having been pierced by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and relatives, having procured a surgeon—might speak thus: ‘I will not have this arrow withdrawn until I know whether the person who wounded me is either a nobleman, a Brahmin, a merchant-farmer, or a worker... has a certain name and a certain clan... is tall or short or medium height... This person would still be ignorant of those things, and then that person would die.’” (*Cula-malunkya Sutta*, 429)

Here, the Buddha warns against pursuing opinionated views because they “are not useful in attaining the goal,” which is to escape the bondage of suffering

⁴ The distrust of speculation did not last long and Abhidharma schools quickly arose. These schools used the early discourses to construct what appear to be systematic ontologies based on the Buddha’s teachings. Both Buddhist reformers and contemporary scholars disagree as to whether the Abhidharma schools were producing “opinionated views” or not. Charles Goodman, for instance, argues that Abhidharma was the construction of a minimally defensible ontology of the ultimate constituents of reality (Goodman 2004). Edward Conze, on the other hand, claims that Abhidharma is not theoretical metaphysics at all, but a practical attempt to deconstruct common-sense intuitions (Conze 1959).

(Cula-malunkya Sutta, 431). Knowing the truth about metaphysical matters is neither sufficient nor necessary for achieving salvation. In fact, attachment to opinionated views is listed as one of the primary *causes* of suffering, along with attachment to vows and attachment to material objects. Every conviction becomes “a jungle of views, a wilderness of views, a wriggling of views, a writhing of views, the fetter of views, bringing suffering, vexation, despair, and agony,” (Aggivacchagotta Sutta, 486). The more we invest in convictions, the more we resemble a convict.

Opinionated views are believed to cause suffering for at least two reasons. First, those who crave final answers are looking for permanence and stability in a world that affords none. The Buddhist conception of the world is one of profound impermanence. Any theological doctrine held with finality tries to nail down and define a reality that will not hold still. The result is always disillusionment and sometimes worse. Even if we do not accept the teaching of impermanence, which is by no means alien to the Christian tradition, every individual’s finite perspective achieves the same effect. No matter how adequate a model of God we produce, it will eventually be found lacking.⁵ This is especially true given the problem of agreeing on what counts as an adequate model of God.

Second, the very act of taking a stand for a view is an ego-reinforcing action. This is true on the level of everyday vice—being right tends to inflate us with conceit, especially when others are so very, very wrong. But attachment reinforces ego on a more radical level. The whole game of “truth versus error” is predicated upon an ontology of permanent selves who enjoy the future benefits of knowledge and avoid the stigma of falsehood. Though we tend to glorify the quest for truth and knowledge as a noble cause, it also is a highly individualistic pursuit. Knowledge benefits the self first and is only shared afterwards. Furthermore, the game of knowledge acquisition presupposes that the self is identified with knowledge, and both are opposed to and pitted against the objects of knowledge. These dualistic currents run deep and subtle, and contribute to feelings of alienation and anxiety—especially when the object of knowledge is also a means of salvation. These two critiques present a radical challenge to Christianity: if we define faith in the traditional way—as the cultivation of unassailable convictions about God—then faith looks to be spiritually damaging, and we must abandon it or redefine it.

At this point, some may object that we have imported entirely too many Buddhist teachings and that these criticisms hold no water for Christians, who among other things, accept the existence of an enduring self. To these objectors, we must point out that Buddhist and Christian teachings are not entirely incommensurable on the self’s substantiality. The notion of *kenosis*, or self-emptying, has long served Christians as a description of both God’s nature, Christ’s significance, and an ethical

⁵ Even if a verbal model were produced that corresponded perfectly with God, verification of that correspondence would still elude us. How would we know? The modeling process would drive us past the truth, requiring some future U-turn.

ideal for humanity.⁶ Perhaps those who deny the existence of the self and those who believe it exists but should be subverted might share spiritual pointers. Even those Christians who anticipate the soul's resurrection may recognize the value of ego-diminishing practices, including nonattachment to opinionated views.

We should be careful, though, to distinguish between the attachment to views and the holding of views.⁷ The goal is not to flush away all judgments and sit befuddled in a haze of indecision. The danger lies in the attachment, not in the view. Views can be held tentatively and without finality. We all have the experience of using a working hypothesis. The Buddha himself puts forward metaphysical teachings like the impermanence of all things, the nonexistence of the self, and the dependent origination of all things. These teachings are offered in a spirit consistent with the norm of nonattachment. Another parable unpacks the way to hold views without clinging to them. A monk is travelling and encounters a wide and treacherous body of water. With no other means of getting across, the monk gathers leaves and sticks to construct a raft, which safely ferries him across. Now that he is on the other side, should he heft the raft onto his shoulder and carry it with him all of his days? No, the raft is for using, not for reassurance, or valuable for its own sake. (*Alagadupama Sutta*, 134–135). The Buddha explains that teachings and opinionated views have instrumental value, but one must maintain a critical distance from them while using them as tools. The correct disposition is one in which belief and skepticism are entertained simultaneously.

From Dead Idols to Living Faith

In sum, Ahab's idolatrous madness and the Buddha's equanimity suggest that traditional Christian faith, when understood as unassailably conviction, is spiritually unprofitable. This is so because clinging to belief (a) ignores our own epistemic limitations, (b) precludes novel revelations about a mysterious and inordinately complex God, (c) fuels the egotism of being right while others are wrong, and (d) reinforces the alienation between self and other. Faith-as-conviction, in fact, becomes an idol for many people in the sense that possessing the “correct” beliefs about God has become more important than the moral and existential injunctions of

⁶ See Mark 8:34–35, Luke 14:25–33, Jn 12:24, Gal 5:24, Col 3:3–7, Rom 6–8, Rom 12:1–2, etc. Also, Thomas J. Oord's *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (New York: Chalice Press, 2010) is a good recent example of Christian kenotic theology. For kenotic parallels to *anatman*, see Abe, Masao. 1982. “God, Emptiness, and the True Self,” In *The Buddha eye*, ed. Frederick Franck, 61–74. New York: Crossroad; and Loy, David. 1989. “A Zen cloud? Comparing Zen *koan* practice with *The Cloud of the Unknowing*” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 9:43–60.

⁷ Along the same lines, the Buddhist criticism of subject-object dualism referenced above pertains to the integration of knowledge and selfhood. But this need not obliterate the tensive opposition between a “subject’s” confidence in a model and the divine reality. If our subjects and objects are softened and made porous to each other, and beliefs are only loosely associated with the personality, then suffering is reduced.

Christ's ministry. By way of constructive conclusion, I offer three rehabilitated models of faith that Christians may find useful.

Faith, Hypothetically

One way to recover the notion of faith is to insist that confidence and uncertainty are not mutually exclusive. That is, we have relative degrees of confidence in all sorts of propositions. It is raining right now and I am very confident it will continue to rain. My relative confidence is based on the accumulation of evidence: the testimony of experts, the appearance of the sky, and so on. Likewise, I am not very confident at all that the Punjab cricket team will win the Ranji trophy. Because I know next-to-nothing about how the game of cricket is played, much less India's teams, I cannot say one way or the other. Perhaps Christian doctrine ought to be maintained on a scale of relative confidence as well.

Philosophers of logic and science have developed apparatuses to assign probabilities and make comparative judgments among empirical claims; we can develop an analogous apparatus for religious claims.⁸ Here, models of God could be evaluated with respect to explanatory power, predictive fruitfulness, internal coherence, aesthetic appeal, or even existential salience. Thus, models of God would be, as Wesley Wildman observes, placed in a "non-decisive rational landscape," which allows comparative judgment, but no final decision (Wildman 2006, 189).

Thorough critics may point out, however, that although this approach remedies the dangers of epistemic hubris and theological stagnation (the aforementioned vices a and b), it really just exchanges one type of belief (the certain) for another (the best explanation). That is, it is still possible to be attached to our best explanations, as fallible as they are. For example, I could still feel proud that my model of God is more coherent than my neighbor's sorry excuse for a model, which she doesn't even realize is only a model! Furthermore, replacing certainty with nondecisive rationalities could actually exacerbate the alienation felt by the benighted believer. Without a corresponding change in how one values beliefs, reigning in our epistemic expectations could cause despair at the obscurity of the divine nature.

Faithfulness

A second model broadens faith from the category of belief to a temporal integration of inner and outer states. That is, faith is more properly an evolving pattern of moral decisions and behaviors than the compartmentalized pursuit of propositional assent.

⁸ For an excellent exposition of what this would look like, see Wildman, Wesley J. 2006. Comparative natural theology. *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 27(2–3):173–190.

John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Lull argue for a version of this in their commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. They argue that Paul's use of *pistis* means more than just confident assent to this or that doctrine. *Pistis* is a relation between two persons that involves trust, confidence, and corresponding action. Cobb and Lull translate *pistis* as "faithfulness" to indicate the broader sense of the term (Cobb and Lull 2005). Ahab demonstrated an abundance of faith, i.e. confidence that the whale was either an agent or principal of God's malevolence. Ahab however, did not demonstrate faithfulness. He did not trust the whale or God, and arguably did not trust his own crew. Nor did Ahab act faithfully to God, whale, or crew; his maddening conviction blinded him to their needs. Faithfulness presupposes community, and Ahab was cut off from faithfulness by his faith.

Of course, the specter of egophilia can be found in the realm of action and sentiment as well as belief. The Buddha warns against attachment to precepts and vows as much as he warns of attachment to views. But perhaps the point is that genuine faithfulness is oriented toward the well-being and principles of the other to whom one is related. Genuine faithfulness is not a self-aggrandized dedication to veganism or celibacy, but a dedication to something beyond the ego, and this selfless dedication subverts both the attachment and its effects.

It should be noted that this model of faith fits better with some models of God than others—more personal and revelatory models of God facilitate a relationship of faithfulness. It is difficult to begin a relationship with being itself. More mysterious, transcendent and non-personal models of God will be less likely to inspire faithfulness.

Virtuous Discipline

It may also be helpful to conceive of faith as a theological virtue. Classical virtues are defined as habits of character—a propensity to act in certain ways in certain situations. Furthermore, virtues are a “golden mean” between an extreme of excess and an extreme of deficiency. Courage, for example, is the mean disposition between cowardice and foolhardiness. Perhaps faith, as a virtue, concerns when and to what degree we make up our minds. Some of us have an excessive propensity to form judgments, with a mind like a bear trap—it snaps shut easily and is difficult to reopen. Others have difficulty forming judgments at all and refuse to take positions about anything. Faith, then, would be the mean between these two extremes. It is situated between conviction and skepticism. Inspired by the man who tells Jesus, “I believe, help my disbelief,” the faithful hold together belief, suspicion, wonder, and ignorance (Mk. 9:24). Conviction is easy. So is debilitating skepticism. It takes emotional and intellectual discipline to live life in the tension between a model and a mystery—an answer and a question—without backsliding into the easy extremes. Models of God exercise this discipline while dogma does not.

The above models of faith are not mutually exclusive. In fact, there is more than likely overlap between them. Nor does one strike me as the best hypothesis, the

most faithful to God, or the most virtuous. For now, it must be enough to argue that models are not idols, but the craving of certainty is an idol. Upon examination, it seems that models of God, in their resistance to finality, are more likely to facilitate than to sabotage Christian discipleship.

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Feminist Challenges to Conceptions of God: Exploring Divine Ideals

Pamela Sue Anderson

The Challenge

In the 2007 session of the APA Pacific Division Mini-Conference on Models of God, I initiated a feminist intervention into discussions on the nature of the relation of human subjects to a divine ideal. The third-person ideal has been given various names from ‘the competent judge’ to ‘the ideal observer’ whose view is either from everywhere or from nowhere. Philosophers of religion are not alone in treating the ideal observer as omniscient and impartial. In popular philosophical jargon, ‘the God’s eye view’ has become another name for the ideal perspective of contemporary epistemology, ethics and philosophy of religion. However, feminist philosophers of religion have challenged this ideal point of view for its gender-blind partiality; feminist standpoint epistemologists are also notable for challenging the class-blindness of the ideal. The ideal agent may be male-neutral, that is, unwittingly masculinist and create an oppressive situation for women and some men (Anderson 1998, 2005).

Why have Anglo-American philosophers found it necessary to establish an ethically significant perspective on human subjects informed by God’s omniscient and impartial point of view? It is helpful to mention two examples of constructive, contemporary attempts in philosophy of religion to modify, and then, defend the ideal-conception of God. First, Charles Taliaferro’s ideal observer theory requires not only the impartiality and omniscience, but the omni-percipience of the God’s eye view. Second, Linda Zagzebski’s divine motivation theory requires the ideal motives

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represented by a moral exemplar who, in the Christian case, is the one supreme exemplar: God (in Christ). A feminist challenge to each of these can be formulated in the terms of Irigarayan psycholinguistics. Yet, here I would like to focus critically upon the latter feminist position as much, if not more than the former, two Anglo-American positions. The question is whether my own philosophical arguments against Irigaray's projection-theory inevitably appeal to the impartiality of the ideal observer theory.

In contemporary philosophy, serious issues are being raised concerning the nature and role of personal perspectives in the ethical and epistemological formation of human subjects. These issues are also significant for subject formation by religious knowledge and practice. The crucial question of this subject formation (for me) is: Do we require the divine to achieve a third-person perspective on the reality and truth of the human subject's knowledge, ethics and religion? Alternatively in Zagzebski's terms, do we require the divine as an ideally motivated (virtuous) agent to establish a mutual exchange between first and second-person perspectives? Irigaray and Zagzebski each seem to challenge – for different reasons – the exclusive view of the ideal observer-God for its problematic third-person perspective on human subjects. Irigaray objects to this privileged perspective on gender-grounds and Zagzebski objects on value-grounds, since the requirement is an exemplar whose motives are ideal for all ethical subjects. Yet I wonder whether Irigaray at least falls into a similar trap as the masculinist philosopher who defends a gender-exclusive ideal observer of reality when she seeks the ideal (horizon) as a divine in the feminine.

Irigaray: A Pivotal Figure for Feminists Today

It is fair to say that Irigaray wants women to be able to transcend, in the sense of going beyond, the self-enclosed space in which they have been trapped by the imaginary of western philosophy. This philosophical imaginary forms and is formed by the metaphors and conceptual imagery which are latent in the books written by western philosophers and other men of ideas (Le Doeuff 2002). Feminists like Irigaray who follow Simone de Beauvoir identify immanence (*en-soi*) metaphorically as the prison of the female body which must be transcended to become *pour-soi*. However unlike Beauvoir, Irigaray proposes that women should become divine: women are to gain their own gendered subjectivity by becoming a divine in the feminine; in this way, a female divine constitutes the ideal horizon for sexual difference. An anticipated consequence of Irigaray's becoming divine is the possibility of mutual recognition for women and men, whereby love between two different subjects would become 'love to you' (Irigaray 1996). However, in previous essays I have raised significant questions concerning the possibilities for Irigaray's divine women (Anderson 2009, 2012). Most significant here is that Irigaray's preoccupation with the imagery of auto-affection, of virginity (representing fidelity) to self

and of apotheosis (representing the transformation of oneself into a divine subject) can easily undermine self-transcending relations between human subjects.

Those feminist conceptions of God which build upon Irigaray tend to assume that once each subject becomes divine, then men and women will achieve relations of symmetry and reciprocity. Yet nowhere is this achievement evident or the assumption justified. Instead the asymmetry of a woman's relations to man continues to plague the Irigarayan divine: she remains trapped within the inevitable self-enclosure of a divine in her own image and, more than likely, within an ethical solipsism. As far as I can tell, Irigaray fails to configure any successful formation for self-transcending relations to and with others.

My contention for feminist philosophers has been similar to that of Irigaray, insofar as women need to get beyond what has been conceived to be the prison of their own bodily immanence. The fundamental task is to have women and men recognize themselves as subjects who are autonomous, yet relational in formative ethical practices and in new discursive religious formations.¹ However, I insist that this task is not to become divine subjects, or to achieve a God's eye point of view. Even if we inevitably seek the latter, the crucial awareness is that the ideal horizon, whether a view from nowhere or a view from everywhere, is unachievable. Recognition of this limitation makes all the difference. Instead of becoming a third person, ideal observer, or a divine ideal, the fundamental task for any human subject is to recognize the ways in which true transcendence actually connects us in solicitude to others and to the self as another. In fact, the significant point is simple. Human subjects self-transcend all of the time, often unwittingly. In this light solicitude is the real grounding for attention to the intrinsic goodness of each and every subject. In religious terms this original attention to one another has the potential to develop a collective reality: we might find, so to speak, 'God amongst us.' Yet notice that this reality is neither a wholly transcendent nor a fully knowable ideal.

The challenge to the above comes from post-modern, Irigarayan critiques of modern philosophy of religion. Yet ironically these Irigarayan critiques have relied upon a fixed hierarchy of gender ideals that arguably derives from pre-modern theology, especially Roman Catholic Mariology (Beattie 2002, 2004). These portraits of divine women and men have been further coloured by a sweeping rejection of Enlightenment values as 'irredeemably secular' (Milbank 1992; Ward 1999). As a result, unwittingly or not Irigaray's philosophy of a divine in the feminine has supported contemporary 'post-secular philosophy' (Blond 1998).

To situate my own position here, I reject the post-modern and post-secular problematic as a serious distortion of our contemporary situation that is inevitably shaped both negatively and positively by Enlightenment philosophies. In other words, over and against a reduction and virtual rejection of modern philosophy including Anglo-American philosophy of religion, I contend that critical engagement

¹For my recent Spinozist proposal for 'God' as 'Nature', or an eternal, finite active power – of which each individual being is a 'mode' – and the power of each being increases or decreases according to their interaction as passive or active subjects, see Anderson 2011, 83–108; 2012, 140–154.

with Enlightenment philosophers provide a better, if not historically necessary way to rethink the pre-modern categories of fixed gender ideals. Feminist philosophers who depart from Irigaray and from post-secular philosophy can, then, learn from the reflective critical openness² of contemporary feminist epistemology, including secular perspectives on personal and social reality (Anderson 2004). To repeat, an earlier pleading:

To recognize the motivation to know is first represented by Eve – in whom we have personified a misplaced mistrust of women – we need to imagine her social identity differently. And then, we need to develop a reflective critical openness to the testimonies of those who, like Eve, symbolically and literally, have lacked rational authority (Anderson 2004, 92).

In other words, intellectual virtues such as reflective critical openness need to be cultivated, if contemporary (feminist) philosophers of religion are to be critically and socially informed. Openness to critical interaction and imaginative self-reflection build upon the self-transcending relations that make up our everyday practices as well as new cultural formations. Furthermore, I continue to maintain that

Incorporation of reflexive critical openness into philosophy of religion means thinking more effectively by shaping our epistemic practices with the help of the philosophical capacities for reflective, imaginative and interactive understanding. We seek to listen to the testimonies of those who are not merely trusted because of certain, largely exclusive social markers of rational authority, but because the informant genuinely acquires and offers a true account of the matter, whether of religious experience, practice or belief (*Ibid.*, 90).

Knowledge and ethics in philosophy of religion can no longer be built upon any naïve assumption concerning neutral or direct access to truth. Philosophers need to develop cognitive capacities that work to avoid male-neutral bias, but also to recognize the range of qualities of trustworthy knowers. More generally in philosophy of religion, the epistemic practice of mutually interactive dialogues between men and women, but also between different religious and secular philosophers should be a normative strategy that does not always give privilege to the ideal perspective of traditional theism.

The Formation of Divine Ideals

The transformation of subjectivity by way of divinity has been a strategy for developing feminist philosophy of religion (Jantzen 1998; cf. Anderson 2012, 39–47, 56–68). Yet I continue to have serious reservations about female apotheosis and, more generally, the transformation of human subjects into the divine. In what sense is apotheosis achievable? And is this goal a prudential task for men or women? It is

² I am indebted for the conception of this intellectual virtue to Fricker (2003): reflective critical openness is cultivated as a cognitive disposition by developing capacities for testimonial sensibility; that is, sensibilities concerning who to believe and how to avoid unfair stereotypes, especially stereotypes that have rendered women untrustworthy knowers. For an account of reflective critical openness in feminist philosophy of religion, see Anderson (2004, 89–92 and 98–100).

not simply a question of the transformation of oppressive relations between male and female subject positions in western philosophy. Irigaray's goal is to establish new relations that take into account sexual difference. Yet positing an irreducible difference between masculine and feminine bodily origins does not necessarily overcome the asymmetry of male and female subjects. Even if a sexually specific bodily formation and a feminine ideal establish sexual difference, these Irigarayan 'natural' and 'transcendental' conditions might not overcome oppressive relations.

One historically significant dimension of oppression continues for women in philosophy. The philosophical imaginary that shapes philosophy's gendered practices continues to devalue and dis-inherit women who as feminine are not imagined to have ideas of their own. The imaginary exclusion and real subordination of women's ideas cannot be undone by the apotheosis of a woman alone, especially if this means a language in the shape of female bodies. Instead this psycho-sexual imaginary must be transcended, in the sense of transformed by moving beyond what have been misogynist practices. Instead of real, concrete and positive changes in our thinking and acting, feminist philosophers continue to be inhibited by both the deification of a woman's bodily nature and the self-deification of the female psyche. Deified women do not help, but in fact hinder the transformation of oppressive relations in philosophical practices.³

In today's jargon, feminist philosophy is not about creating divas. In fact Irigaray herself would probably agree with this. Yet the constant danger for those who seek to 'become divine' (*à la* Irigaray 1993) is destabilizing a woman's self-worth with either perniciously sacrificial or dangerously ethereal deifications. Instead of such deification (or false transcendence) I suggest that true transcendence would mean the recognition of the intrinsic goodness of persons: each person would move outside of herself to the right degree.

As mentioned at the outset of this paper, Irigaray's psycholinguistics place the source of female degradation, of a woman's bodily immanence and psychological subordination to men, in the loss of virginity, implying a violent and damaging sexual encounter. For Irigaray, preserving female virginity symbolically, if not literally, enables a simple apotheosis: virginity ensures a fidelity to self (Martin 2000). Yet valuing the female threshold in preoccupation with one's own virginity could prevent one from seeing what is actually there *outside* of oneself. Although Irigaray's work on love aims to see the other, obsession with one's own female or male virginity obscures the concrete everyday reality of self-transcendence for women who give up their virginity as a matter of course, as mothers, lovers, or simply put, as sexually active – and this is without the intervention of the all powerful God.

Irigaray's psychosexually specific and subversive miming of the philosophical statements of the canonized western male philosophers on divinity are provocative – and often metaphysically and epistemologically significant. For example, Irigaray's miming of female self-affection confronts the philosophical paradox of the Kantian self who is both active and passive in bringing intuitions under concepts.

³ For a critical, literary exploration of what it would be like to be immortal, in a way deified by timelessness, see Beauvoir (2003).

The decisive difference between Irigaray's mime of self-affection and Kant's empirical and transcendental subject(s) remains the deification by which Irigaray seeks to render the female subject both sensible and transcendental. Ironically Irigaray's sensible transcendental seems both too disembodied, since deified as transcendent virgin (or construed to be a third-person divine ideal) and too gender-specific, since deified as feminine sensibility (or construed to be a first-person divine in the feminine) to achieve its sensible and transcendental horizon. Instead of the impossible achievement of a divine ideal – or indeed, instead of a 'personal fantasy' of virginity – I propose that self-transcendence in practical actions has a better chance to connect each of us with one another in concrete exchanges of mutual goodness. This could mean ethical interaction between autonomous, second-person perspectives.

Personal Perspectives and Moral Exemplars

As seen above, a danger with Irigaray's feminism of sexual difference is to mask what exactly is going on when talking about a divine in the feminine. Consider an example from her feminist theology. A gender specific anxiety exists over the Irigarayan (or post-secular) claim to apotheosis of Mary as Christ's mother: the story of Mary's annunciation and assumption creates a mythical exemplar. This Mariology subordinates a woman's practical reasoning about goodness in relation to herself and to other selves, to the man-God⁴: the exemplar consents to her divine role as the mother of God's son. This means consent to an omnipotent God who is given a masculine role as the ultimate authority in determining her choice to give birth to the divine. If compelled by an all-powerful God, her choice is determined in the strongest sense. Mary's story as the ultimate exemplar of apotheosis for the God-mother creates a haunting attraction in the ambiguity of a virgin mother's consent.

As an avowedly Protestant and Kantian feminist philosopher of religion, I would challenge any mysterious, potentially mystifying statements about Mary as the moral exemplar for women in becoming divine. Irigaray's distinctive feminist gloss on Mary's story is that the virgin woman freely consents to become pregnant and to give birth to a divine son; roughly, a woman talks to a man-God and agrees with him before giving up her virginity. This gloss includes a conception of virginity, which when kept in tact, constitutes a woman's bodily integrity as her self-worth. Consistent with Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference, this Mariology gives each woman a choice in belonging to herself as a body-psyche unity and in preserving her dignity as a divine-mother. In the terms of Irigaray, virginity becomes the transcendental condition for giving birth to the divine; this virginity is supposed to be true of men

⁴This claim should be seen in relation to a counter-claim concerning the profound significance that the Virgin Mary has had for women in the history of Christianity and could have for feminist philosophy of religion. For criticism of the position taken in the present paper, and strong defence of Mariology, including Irigaray's contribution on the Virgin Mary, see Beattie (2004, 107–122).

as the divine father-son, as well as women who have the possibility of becoming the divine mother-son incarnation.

However, despite these positive reconfigurations of virginity as a fidelity to self, a bodily integrity and a transcendental condition for giving birth to the divine, the consenting virgin continues to generate the traditional dangers for women – and arguably for Christ-like men – in deifying an impossible sexual ideal. Whether a woman suffers or refuses to suffer in silent consent to privileging the incarnation of a divine (man) in her own body, the Virgin Mary continues to give ethical and metaphysical ground for patriarchal oppression.⁵ Notwithstanding the best intentions in reconfiguring Mary in the form of a woman's heroic suffering in freely consenting to the God-man's act of transcendence, this distinctive female bodily formation, uncritically accepted by an innocent mother and a faithful lover, adversely affects women not just as individuals, but as a collectivity.

Irigaray's vision of female apotheosis represents the sort of illusion which such women philosophers as Beauvoir and most recently Michèle Le Doeuff, have uncovered and decisively criticized (Beauvoir 1997; Le Doeuff 2003, 2007; Anderson 2009). Basically, the criticism is that a debilitating obsession with self-image destabilizes Irigaray's sensible transcendental in the erotic account of female mystical experiences and of female consent to virginity. If this criticism sticks, then the danger becomes the pernicious patterns that block the reciprocity of subjects in love, especially blocking the capacity to be mutually self-giving and self-making with another sexuate – i.e. physically and psychologically belonging to the male or female – subject. Solipsism would also block a collective historical awareness of other women who have and do struggle on behalf of all women to transform the conditions of their subordination. Today, for instance, philosophical thinking (by feminists at least) needs to be able to challenge divine ideals which re-enforce twenty-first century forms of self-harm, masochistic or sado-masochistic abuse due to hatred of one's non-ideal sexually specific body.

We face the question of reality. What is the object or independent reality to which Irigaray's concept of becoming divine points? Is it a first or third person perspective on social or historical reality? In other words, does Irigaray propose a feminine version of a God's eye view? If so, can this be the perspective of a third-person knower who accurately testifies to the ethics (e.g. virtues) shaped by a specific social reality? Alternatively, does her perspective claim a false transcendence, which like the God's eye point of view, betrays the situatedness – even the bias – of its own gendered perspective. If so, then like the God's eye view, Irigaray's divine horizon (as an ideal feminine perspective) is not impartial but rather female-neutral as opposed to male-neutral. A *Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (1998) contains my first argument against Anglo-American philosophers of religion for their mistaken, male-perspective on reality. Although Irigaray openly admits to a feminine divine, she

⁵ For a sustained defence of the symbolic meaning of Mary for contemporary Roman Catholic Theology, see Beattie (2002) For a concise theological and feminist defence of the profound role that can be played by Mary's virginity on several levels of interpretation, see Beattie (2004, 111–113 and 115–118).

equally wrongly assumes that the divine ideal should be the goal for women's subjectivity, for achieving autonomy and sovereignty for all women. In this light, she seems to create the same sort of problem for the other gender that the ideal observer theory creates: an oscillation between the first-person partial perspective and the third-person ideal perspective.

I conclude that such idealizations of a gendered divine remove the masculine or feminine subject from reality. A better proposal for both men and women would be a second-person exchange whereby persons in dialogue acknowledge their partial perspectives, reasons and desires. Zagzebski advocates an appropriate alternative:

... a model for responding to the diversity of moral beliefs according to which the ideal perspective on the self is neither the first-person perspective nor the third-person perspective of an impartial observer. It is the perspective on oneself that one gets from close interaction with others, particularly those others who are wise and who know us intimately. I call this the second-person perspective (Zagzebski 2004, 372).

Zagzebski goes on to defend,

...the second-person perspective involves an encounter between two persons' first-person perspectives where **each of them understands and appreciates the other**. Each also has a first-person perspective on the other's first-person perspective, which the other can then come to understand and appreciate. This model assumes ideal conditions of communication, which we are rarely able to enjoy. Nonetheless, I do not think that the less-than-ideal conditions that we actually face falsify the point of the model. They just make it more complicated and more difficult to apply (*ibid.*, 375; emphasis added).

Zagzebski's second-person perspective may not have all the answers. Yet this moves in a significant new direction for philosophers who attempt to bring epistemology and ethics together in creating a virtue epistemology (Anderson 2004). Consideration of the second-person – as above “an encounter between two parties' first-person perspectives” – rather than an exclusive preoccupation with an impossible third-person ideal would be grounded in everyday acts of self-transcendence in relation to another self.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have suggested both feminist and non-feminist challenges to the traditional masculine, or male-neutral conception of a transcendent God as omniscient, impartial, omni-percipient, yet without a body. These challenges recommend a thorough re-assessment of the role of the third-person perspective, its objectivity and impartiality. We need to clarify if, and possibly when this perspective should be sought. Whether an idealization of personal perspectives, or an integration of more and more personal perspectives, the divine ideal struggles with both incoherence and its own impossibility?

Taliaferro has modified the ideal observer theory, defending its coherence, possibility and even its inevitability for thinking in philosophy of religion (2005). Yet to conclude I turn to Bernard Williams' criticism of Peter Singer's ideal observer.

Let us reflect upon the significance of this criticism for our implicit or explicit appeals to a divine ideal:

the project of trying to transcend altogether the ways in which human beings understand themselves and make sense of their practices could end up ... dangerously close to the risk of self-hatred. **When the hope is to improve humanity to the point at which every aspect of its hold on the world can be justified before a higher court, the result is likely to be either self-deception**, if you think that you have succeeded, **or self-hatred and self-contempt** when you recognize that you will always fail. The self-hatred, in this case, is a hatred of humanity (Williams 2006, 152; emphasis added).

The crucial distinction for me is the nature of transcendence: can we maintain thinking and acting shaped by self-transcendence without an appeal to debilitating forms of either masculine transcendence or feminine immanence?

To retrace the argument in this paper: if the God's eye point of view remains exclusively the perspective of a masculine, sovereign subject who transcends the body and its partiality, then a problem of immanence persists for women. Irigaray and Beauvoir before her have demonstrated the philosophical and personal dangers in trapping women in bodily immanence. However the response to this in seeking new forms of female transcendence-immanence has its own dangers. There is the inevitable failure of an overly idealized transcendence – and the obscurity of Irigaray's sensible transcendental (Anderson 2009). Women are easily imprisoned in the immanence of their own body and psyche, but men also easily fall into self-deception – surely, this is an old lesson taught by Beauvoir – supposedly to Jean-Paul Sartre (Beauvoir 1997).

Today I see serious problems in the Irigarayan revival of an orthodox Christian form of gendered deification: that is, deification of man as the Father-Son and of woman as the virgin Mother. Post-secular philosophy simply returns us to the degrading aspects of a masculine transcendence and a deified feminine immanence. My contention has been that deification of the female body-psyché is not ultimately better than its denial: neither seems to render the wisdom of mutual interaction possible for women and men. We can easily recognize the danger in re-enforcing twenty-first century forms of self-harm and abuse. Nevertheless, self-deception and/or self-hatred due to a general lack of self-knowledge, including the limitations on personal, relational knowledge, continue to plague conceptions of divine subjects, notably as diva.

In the end, I urge further critical debate about the ways in which divine ideals have shaped our ethical, social and material relations. For the sake of women and men of all kinds, we must not fail to find more realistic ethical-knowers who reveal the self-transcending nature of a truth that could be mutually recognized – through self-reflective, imaginative and interactive understanding – and then, constructively enacted.

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Suggested Readings: Practical Implications

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Epilogue

Jeanine Diller

What might a reader take away from this collection? One of the many things I am taking away as an editor is a deeper appreciation of the way in which the many models of God, gods, and other ultimate realities relate to each other. In particular, I have two observations about the relationships between the many models displayed here.

The first observation, which I had long assumed but now see displayed in the volume in great force and breadth, is that there is *intratraditional disagreement* about how to model God or ultimate reality. This is true for several traditions. To see this, go to Parts II–X in the Table of Contents where the models are displayed and focus on a single tradition, looking for where it appears across the sections. Notice that, for almost all the traditions we covered, each tradition is *scattered* across the model types. Take the Christian tradition, for instance. Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas all fall under the Classical Theism section, since all see God as ontologically separate from the world and perfect. They disagree with their fellow Christians Nicholas of Cusa and Karl Rahner, who belong under the Panentheism section in virtue of conceiving God as in the world but still beyond it. All these parties in turn disagree with their co-religionist John Bishop who, driven by the problem of evil, sees God as neither separate from nor beyond the world, but as something the world eventually produces and is aiming for, viz., Love. We thus end with what we called in the introduction Christian “model instances” (particular substantive views that constitute tokens) across several “model types:” Christian classical theisms, Christian panentheisms, Christian end of being theology, etc. The same goes for the other traditions represented in the volume. The Hindu ultimate gets conceived variously as monistic (see Puligandla), polytheistic (see Gross), panentheistic (see Clooney) and in terms of process theology (see Long), under the sections that go by these names; the Daoist ultimates get conceived as both multiple (see Miller) and as ground of

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being (see Paper); the Jewish God is understood, in its infancy, as one of many gods (see Mavrodes) and later, as classical (see Dorff), as ground of being (see Paper again), or as unmodelable altogether (see Seeskin on Maimonides' *via negativa*), etc.

How can thinkers from the same tradition disagree so much? The project of developing a substantive view or model instance involves finding a way to deliver a notion of the ultimate at work in a particular tradition. In the case of religious ultimates, the project begins with the religious data of the tradition, meaning the spatio-temporally and conceptually gigantic constellations of stories, practices, doctrines, sacred scriptures, histories, personages, institutional structures and traces, etc. that constitute a religion. But these data do not by themselves explicitly define a model instance of God, gods, or ultimate reality; thinkers aiming to develop a model instance must *interpret* the data in a way that captures as much of the data as it can (for religious adequacy), while also attending to other theoretical concerns such as coherence, plausibility, response to the problems of evil and the one and the many, etc. (for philosophical adequacy). This interpretive step runs in similar enough ways for enough thinkers that the interpretations have been generalized into the well-known model types that structure Parts II–X. The disagreement between thinkers working on the same tradition thus comes from at least two sources: (1) the incredible richness of the tradition that is being interpreted, which is so massive that no one thinker could stay true to it all, making variable emphases on these or those parts of the tradition humanly inevitable; and (2) the enormous range of logically possible options for the interpretation step (see Viney's article in Conceptual Foundations section which finds 256 of them). With this much room for choice, it is no surprise, really, that we see the persistent intratraditional disagreement cited in Observation 1.

The second observation focuses on the fact, already implied above, that thinkers responsible to *different* traditions are turning to the *same* model types to interpret their tradition's religious data. That is, there is *intertraditional agreement* about how to model God or ultimate reality, for several models in this volume. To see this, focus on a single section in Parts II–X at a time. With the exception of the sections on Neo-Classical Theism and Open Theism which for the moment seem to be uniquely Christian views, notice that each model type is instanced by views from *various* religious and philosophical sources. For example, in Part IX we see Hindus (see Gross), High Clarity Daoists (see Miller) and Akans (see Clark) all using divine multiplicity as an apt way to make sense of their ultimates; in Part V, Christians (see Viney), Yorubans (see Coleman), Hindus (see Long) and religiously unaffiliated philosophers (see Weidenbaum on William James) using process theology to deliver their ultimates; in Part VI, Hindus (see Clooney), Christians (see Hudson and Bacik) and religiously unaffiliated philosophers (see Palmquist on Kant, Ottman on Schelling, Magee on Hegel, and Kasser on Peirce) all using panentheism; etc. There are silences here which reflect limits to this intertraditional agreement; Muslim views of God will, I venture, never join the views under the Divine Multiplicity model, even with a fuller treatment of Muslim model instances than this volume provides. Still, the amount of agreement we do see between traditions on model types is considerable.

This second observation is more surprising, in my view, than the first. Once one understands the substantial room for play that conceptual and traditional possibilities permit during the process of interpretation of a tradition, it seems a predictable fact of human nature that thinkers representing a single tradition will disagree. But agreement about model type between thinkers representing various traditions is remarkable: if thinkers within a single tradition cannot manage to agree about model types, how can thinkers of different traditions, varying so greatly in content, in geography, in time, manage to do so? How is it, for instance, that Sankara, embedded in an Indian, Upanishad-steeped religio-cultural context ca. 800 CE conceives of ultimate reality as unified and, nearly a 1,000 years later in the 1600s, flung across the world in a Biblically-steeped European pre-Enlightenment cultural context, so does Spinoza? There are, I am sure, answers here which it would be interesting to unearth, in terms of the transmission of ideas through the public square (in the style of Robert Wright's *Evolution of God*), or how cross-traditional human biology and psychology contribute to thought about the ultimates (see Wesley Wildman's essay in the Diversity section), or perhaps the working out in actual thought of the logically possible options of conceiving ultimate reality which Viney relays so well. Whatever the reasons for it, the frequency with which these kinds of agreements on model types happen again and again, for model type after model type between such a variety of traditions, is striking.

Thus, despite their enormous intrareligious agreements, people representing the same religious tradition are finding themselves disagreeing about how to model their ultimates (first observation), and simultaneously agreeing about this with some of those representing other traditions (second observation). Put together, the two observations suggest that, in some cases, proponents of one tradition agree more with some proponents of another tradition *about model types* (not about model instances, in light of the enormous impact religious data has on these instances, but about the model types used to organize this data) than they do with those in their own. To take a few Christian examples, Aquinas, Bishop and Cusanus agree less with each other about model types than they do with, say, the Muslim Al-Ghazali in Aquinas' case (since both are classical theists), or the religiously unaffiliated philosopher Bacon in Bishop's case (both end of being theologians), or the Hindu who wrote the beautiful Tamil poem highlighted in Clooney's essay, in Cusanus' case (both process theologians). There are thus strange new bedfellows throughout the text – strange because they disagree about religion, but nevertheless bedfellows because they agree about the number, ontological dependence and other aspects of the nature of the ultimates of their religions.

A full appreciation of these observations could have wide-ranging implications for several issues in philosophical theology and philosophy of religion more broadly. For instance, the observations may bring into sharper focus criteria for judging the adequacy of the models. As Asa Kasher wrote in correspondence, “the religion-oriented approach is bottom up, so to speak” by showing how a particular view “is related to a religion: holy writ, prayer books, practices, etc.” while “the model-oriented one is top-down,” since the view is understood by “how it plays a role in some worldview or metaphysical framework.” The two perspectives suggest two

genres for evaluation of a substantive view – is it religiously adequate? is it conceptually so? – with several possible species of each evaluative type. We might well find these two evaluative perspectives in tension in particular cases. Consider, for instance, a thinker trying to deliver a substantive view of a particularly apophasic tradition: the more religiously adequate the view is, the less conceptually informative it becomes.

The observations may also impact how we want to individuate concepts of God, gods, and other ultimate realities. The first observation suggests that terms such as ‘the Jewish God’ or ‘the Hindu ultimate’ are ambiguous because of the many *model* varieties of each religion type. Similarly, terms such as ‘the panentheistic God’, ‘the monistic Unity’, etc. are also ambiguous because of the many *religious* varieties of each model type. The ambiguity in some of these religion types and model types may be profound enough that, at least on a descriptivist theory of reference, descriptions associated with these types might pick out different ultimates (see Knight’s paper in the Classical Theism section for more). One promising way to clear away such ambiguity would be to individuate by *religion-model* type – that is, to produce an array by cross-cutting the religion types and model types. We could thus talk in terms of, e.g., the Hindu Unity type (with three instances in this volume, from Sankara, Ramanuja and Ardhanarisvara, see papers by Puligandla, Adluri and Goldberg, respectively), the philosophical Unity type (with two instances perhaps in Toland and Spinoza, see Curley), etc., or again, the Christian panentheistic type (as in Nicholas of Cusa or Rahner, see Hudson and Bacik, respectively), the Hindu panentheistic type (see Clooney), etc. The advantage of individuating by these more fine-grained types is that the thinkers within each agree *both* on which tradition they are responsible to *and* on which model best captures the ultimate of this tradition, thus creating categories with more agreement about the ultimates than the religion types or model types *per se* have.

Finally, both observations, and especially the one concerning intertraditional agreement about model types, could impact ongoing debates about religious pluralism, some of which are treated in the Diversity of Models section in this volume. Pluralists such as Huxley, Hick and others have rightly identified agreements over ethics between the traditions. Interreligious agreement about model types constitutes a new site of agreement between the traditions to add to these findings. It is an especially important site, because it is about the nature of the ultimate itself – the most central focus of religious concern – and because it is occurring at the most careful level of discussion, among several scholars of several traditions. Comparative theologians could use this agreement about model types to learn from each other: consider what a Christian panentheist can learn about panentheism from a Hindu panentheist. They could also focus on this agreement as a means of identifying and illuminating beliefs about the ultimate shared by thinkers from several traditions. Finally, they might explore whether this intertraditional agreement indicates that the model types point to deeper, more stable truths about the ultimate than beliefs unique to particular religions do.

Agreement among model types could also constitute a new conversation piece for interreligious dialogue. For example, Jewish, Christian and Muslim classical

theologians could notice that they share their classical theism with each other but not with the panentheists, process theologians, etc. in their own traditions. They thus have something fundamental to their religious view in common with some people from other traditions which they do not share with some people from their own. In addition to being intrinsically meaningful, such a realization could properly ground a new kind of pro-attitude between people of different religions. Broadly moral norms ground an attitude of toleration between people committed to different religions. Huxley and Hick's interreligious ethical norms ground an attitude of partnership in interfaith service between them, so critical for improving our world. Interreligious agreement about model types could ground a new way of perceiving people who are committed to different religions but the same model type: they are kindred spirits in the quest to understand the ultimate, or at least to "touch it with one's thought," as Descartes says so well.

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