

## CHAPTER 36

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GROUND-OF-  
BEING  
THEOLOGIES

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INTRODUCTION

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This essay concerns a complex family of theological viewpoints, collected under the name ‘ground-of-being’ theologies. It discusses their relationship to various forms of theism, their shared themes, and their connections with the natural sciences. Ground-of-being theologies have in common two important negations: they *deny that ultimate reality is a determinate entity*, and they *deny that the universe is ontologically self-explanatory*. The positive formulations of ground-of-being theologies vary. Some stay within theism, and others not; some embrace ontological categories, and others repudiate them; some use conceptualities of substance, and others categories of process; some are fundamentally monistic, and others pluralistic; some are indistinguishable from religious naturalism, and others are nurtured within hierarchical cosmologies containing supernatural entities and events.

Ground-of-being theologies are important, because their denial that ultimate reality is a determinate entity establishes a valuable theological contrast with determinate entity theisms such as personal theism and process theism—two ideas of God prominent both in modern theology and in the contemporary science–religion dialogue. Determinate entity views assert that God is an existent entity with determinate features including intentions, plans, and capacities to act, though the various views interpret these features quite differently. 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. They are wary of the *analogia entis* (analogies controlled by the contrast between divine and human being) because, even if the idea of divine being were intelligible, we do not know how to compare human and divine being. They regard determinate entity theisms as excessively vulnerable to anthropomorphic distortion and, in this way, continue the resistance to anthropomorphic idolatry evident in many of the world's sacred religious texts, including the Bible and the Qur'an, the Daodejing and the *Bhagavadgītā*. Of course, many determinate entity theologians are acutely sensitive to the problem of anthropomorphic distortion, and try to build in safeguards, but ground-of-being theology has better intrinsic resistance.

Ground-of-being theologies are also important because their denial that the universe is ontologically self-explanatory resists a flattened-out kind of atheism, affirms that all of reality is ultimately dependent for its very being on an ontological ground, and articulates an authentic basis for religion and value in human affairs. The necessary intimacy between all of being and its ultimate ontological source means that ground-of-being theologies have fascinating interactions with the natural and social sciences. They are complementary to determinate entity theisms in this respect, with the two families of views often responsive to different evidence, and either seeking answers to different questions or else seeking different answers to the same question, as we shall see. Moreover, ground-of-being theologies have impressive intellectual lineages in all large religious and philosophical traditions; they have articulate defenders in all eras; and they are intrinsically interesting both in themselves and as dialogue partners with the natural and social sciences. The relevance of these theologies to the question of divine action will become clear in due course.

## ULTIMATE REALITIES AND THEOLOGICAL MODELLING STRATEGIES

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Religion is often concerned with ultimacy in various modes, such as ultimate realities, ultimate ways of life, ultimate authorities, ultimate wisdoms, ultimate truths, and ultimate concerns. A given religious context tends to subordinate some modes of ultimacy to others, thereby creating a distinctive style of ultimacy speech, one that may not be easily translatable into other styles. Yet it is possible to focus on one mode of ultimacy for the sake of investigation, taking care to avoid inappropriate generalizations about religion. The focus here is on ultimate realities, which is a serviceable cross-cultural comparative category.<sup>1</sup> It does not distort what

<sup>1</sup> This reflects the results of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, which sought to identify through a rigorous process of comparison and analysis which categories work best to

we describe by means of it, provided that we remember that ultimate realities are secondary features in some religions and even within certain theological traditions.<sup>2</sup>

The words 'ultimate' and 'ultimacy' suggest finality, and thus the phrase 'ultimate realities' denotes our bold attempts to express what is most profound and definitive about the whole of reality. Most religious intellectuals—I call them theologians advisedly<sup>3</sup>—acknowledge the difficulty of speech about ultimate matters. This would be unsurprising if there were a cognitive mismatch between human beings and the ultimate realities they seek to describe, or if ultimate realities were so dense with meaning and power that any portrayal is necessarily a fragmented perspective rather than a comprehensive and consistent description. This is reinforced by the diversity of renderings of ultimate realities, the intractable disagreements among theologians, and the testimony of mystics and religious adepts. Some theologians limit themselves to poetic and rhetorically potent modes of discourse as a result, and there is real value in the indirection and grace of such speech. If we are to speak of ultimate realities at all, however, there must be a role for those who attempt to bring all their rational powers to bear on the task and, properly wary of intellectual hubris, approach the challenge as rigorously as possible. This is theological inquiry: perpetually tentative, yet imaginative, disciplined, and systematic.

There is ample evidence in both the history of science and the history of metaphysics that human inquirers build conceptual models in order to understand and explain, and that primary metaphors and analogies support model construction. Mathematical models of the physical world routinely involve tropic elements in their interpretation and application, as when we say that forces are vectors in vector spaces and forces combine as vectors add. The role of primary metaphors is even more prominent in metaphysics and theology, where formal languages such as mathematics are not available to aid modelling. Theologians with systematic

describe what is important about the ideas of world religious traditions, minimizing distortion and arbitrariness. See Neville 2001a, 2001b, 2001c.

<sup>2</sup> In relation to religions, e.g. most forms of Buddhism stress an ultimate way of life as a path to enlightenment. Some Buddhist traditions even regard thinking about ultimate realities as a kind of distraction from which we must detach ourselves if we are to achieve enlightenment. An example for theological traditions would be the youthful tradition of process theology, which does not focus much at all on ultimate reality, but only on God, which is an actual entity with a special role within the whole of reality.

<sup>3</sup> All large religious traditions have an intellectual wing whose members, often organized into numerous sub-traditions, concern themselves with the credibility of their religion's beliefs and practices, and who try to construct compelling rational formulations of them. This activity lacks a common name across traditions, because familiar names such as 'theology' or 'philosophy of religion' involve confusing baggage. Most obviously, the word 'theology' suggests theism, which misses what intellectuals in non-theistic intellectuals are about. Despite this difficulty, and because of the need for a label, the word 'theology' has been catching on; today we have Jewish theology and Islamic theology and even Buddhist theology. I shall use 'theology' to denote this activity, acknowledging the difficulties and also the diversity in theological styles.

inclinations are sharply aware of the limitations of the tropes on which they rely for modelling ultimate realities and try to compensate. They skilfully juxtapose tropes; they strive to be clear about the senses in which metaphors and analogies apply and do not apply; and they regulate the conceptual tensions inherent in using multiple metaphors. This is an intellectually disciplined form of balancing akin to the practical balancing of popular religion, which typically is a riot of images regulated through narrative structures and ritual practices. It is usually only theologians and religious adepts who strive for optimal consistency in conceptual modelling of ultimate realities.

Given this understanding of theology as model construction, a fundamental choice in framing an idea of ultimate realities is the source of primary metaphors. After that, a great deal depends on skilfully combining and regulating tropic elements. Reflection on ultimacy draws our attention to the most profound features of our experience as sources of primary metaphors. Thus, it makes sense to appeal to the most complex and intense form of being that we know to have emerged from the history of nature: namely, ourselves. This is the basis for anthropomorphism in theology, which is inevitable and religiously useful to some degree, and only religiously dangerous or intellectually defective in extreme or rigidly literalized forms. The appeal to human beings as the source of theological metaphors is also the inspiration for the critiques of religion as an illusion serving human existential and social interests. Yet using ourselves as models for God is also a meaningful strategy for expressing what is ultimately important and ultimately real. This is clearest in divine creation theories, where the creator seemingly ought to surpass in dignity and complexity the most intense forms of created being. In these views, the ways in which reality is ultimately personal vary considerably, depending on the features of human being that predominate in the metaphysical model.

The most common personal modelling strategy is to draw primary metaphors from human beings as determinate entities that contrast with their environment, that possess intentions and plans and powers to influence that environment, and that change in response to their environment. This leads to determinate entity theism, which holds that ultimate reality is a determinate divine entity that contrasts with the created world, is influenced by the created world, possesses intentions and plans, and acts providentially within history and nature. This view is prominent within some important sacred religious texts. Because of its humanly comprehensible dimensions, it is the source of many narrative structures that regulate popular religions and their expansive explorations of symbolic material. Some determinate entity modelling strategies make all of reality a kind of home for human beings by rendering reality as the creation of a personal deity who cares about human destiny and each individual human being. These approaches interpret cosmic and cultural history alike as exhibiting the plans of this divine being, weaving the moral and spiritual disasters of human life into a sacred narrative that recounts the historic interactions between God and the world. They make prayer an intimately personal, two-way encounter that is full of expectation for divine conversation and answers to petitions. An everlasting divine person makes an afterlife for human persons easy to conceive

and, given the intimate bond between God and the believer, almost inevitable. The harmony between the narrative elements of such theological models and some traditions of practical religion means that theologians who seek to interpret the convictions and activities of religious groups take determinate entity theism extremely seriously.

Theologians are also well aware of the problems with determinate entity theism. Metaphors and analogies are both like and unlike the objects described by means of them. Human beings are often morally confused and weak in will; they are subject to disease and decay and death; they are profoundly dependent on a natural environment for their survival; they are a social species with an evolutionary history; and they are limited in intelligence and wisdom, patience and power. These features of determinate human beings are typically denied of God because of the role God plays in key religious narratives. For example, if God is the final goal of human relational questing and the source of salvation and liberation, God must be all-wise and morally perfect, by contrast with the moral ambiguity of nature and human life. If God acts everywhere and always in the universe, then God must somehow be present to every part of space and time, by contrast with the local character of the information-conveying causal interactions with which we are more familiar. If God is creator of everything, then God had better not be subject to some cosmic clock. The anthropocentric character of the reasoning here is not necessarily problematic, because this may be the best rational way to grasp ultimate reality of which human beings are capable. But the vocal critics of determinate entity theism can only be held at bay if sympathetic theologians mount a sound articulation and defence of the idea that God acts. Realizing this, numerous supporters of determinate entity theism have given intense attention to this topic in recent decades, with some success.<sup>4</sup>

My task is not to delve into the varieties of determinate entity theism, which run from process theism to deism, and from the philosophical subtleties of Boston Personalism to the dualistic hypostatization of human experiences of pleasure and pain in Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. Nor can I review the fascinating details surrounding the question of divine action in the context of determinate entity theism (though I will comment briefly on the issue below).<sup>5</sup> Rather, with this description of the modelling strategies of determinate entity theism in place, let us note that theologians have made different decisions about the source of primary metaphors for modelling ultimate realities. Most of these lead to ground-of-being theologies along one of two paths.

<sup>4</sup> The conferences and volumes of the so-called Divine Action Project are a leading example. See Russell *et al.* 1993, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Tracy's contribution to this *Handbook* (Ch. 35) for a review of the topic of divine action in relation to determinate entity theism. For my review of the Divine Action Project see Wildman (2004). Responses to this paper from Philip Clayton, John Polkinghorne, William R. Stoeger, and Thomas Tracy appear in *Theology and Science*, 2/2 (Oct. 2004): 173–204. For my reply, see Wildman (2005).

On one path, we stay close to the stream of modelling strategies that flows from the fount of human nature, generalizing a selected feature of human beings to the whole of reality. Instead of focusing on humans as determinate beings with intentions and plans and powers to act, however, we might model ultimate realities in terms of the highest human virtues of goodness, beauty, and truth—understood with Plato as the deep valuational structures that permeate the form of everything real. We might centralize the most mysterious and least understood feature of humans, which surely is consciousness, and use it to model ultimate realities as a kind of ultimate consciousness pervading reality in which we participate in our own way—a common strategy within Hindu philosophy. We might concentrate on human relationality and model ultimate realities as relationality itself, distinct from any related entities—a path that leads to the *pratītya-samutpāda* doctrine of Buddhist philosophy, in which relations constitute entities, rather than the other way around. We might concentrate on the human ability to create novelty, notice that all of nature seems to share this characteristic across the various degrees and dimensions of complexity, and then model ultimate realities as creativity itself—an alternative represented by process metaphysics.<sup>6</sup>

On the other path, we follow alongside a stream with a different source. Instead of appealing to the most intense form of being that we know—human being—we might turn to the most pervasive and general features of reality, in so far as we can cognitively grasp them. This makes as much sense as drawing primary metaphors from human beings, and perhaps it makes more sense in so far as human beings are exceptional rather than typical, so long as the resulting view of ultimate realities can accommodate exceptional phenomena such as human beings. The most direct way to do this is simply to identify ultimate reality with everything there is, which is pantheism. This view in its strict form is quite rare in the history of philosophy, because it explains nothing and offers no moral orientation to the world. It merely proposes a lexical equivalence between the word ‘God’ and everything we already experience. For this reason, it has been more common to interpret ultimate realities in terms of one or more universal characteristics of the whole of reality as we experience it. For example, everything has being and is being; so, with Aristotle, we might say that ultimate reality is Being Itself. Everything realizes its potential as it acts according to its nature; so we might say, again with Aristotle, that ultimate reality is Pure Act, free of any potentiality, and thus also immutable. The fact of having features in common is similarly universal and fundamental, and the basis for speaking, with Plotinus and the Neoplatonists, of ultimate reality as One. Reality seems to be an entanglement of law-like, ordering forces and chance-like, chaotic processes, so we might regard ultimate reality as the co-primal entanglement of fundamental principles of order and chaos, which has been an important option

<sup>6</sup> This has been an important strategy in modern Western theology, with Alfred North Whitehead espousing it in his view of ultimate reality (though not in his view of God, which is an actual entity within the entire creative flux of the universe, and thus a species of determinate entity theism); see Whitehead (1978). Gordon Kaufman (1993, 2004) also articulates it.

pervading Chinese philosophy. These are all ground-of-being theologies. It is possible to combine such ground-of-being views with a world of determinate supernatural entities. For example, the variety of forces and powers in nature and human experience might lead us to hypostatize all of them in a glorious pantheon of personal deities loosely organized by a High God, or not organized at all—there are many such examples in the history of human cultures. As with process theology, this is a picture of determinate divine entities in a wider cosmological environment whose ultimate origins and meaning often remain unexplained. If they were explained, however, a ground-of-being view would usually result.

Along either of these two paths, the resulting models of ultimate realities describe not a determinate entity, but the ontological deep structures of reality itself. It follows that ground-of-being theologies can support the possibility of a God with some determinate characteristics. This determinate character in all cases would be more akin to a principle (such as Dao or Being Itself or Pure Act or the Good or a symbiosis of law-like and chance-like processes) than a personality. Thus, the denial of determinate entity theism remains.

Ground-of-being theologies posit a close relationship between the whole of reality, as human experience discloses it and makes it available for inquiry, and its ultimate metaphysical and religious character. This closeness makes ground-of-being theologies heavily indebted to forms of inquiry that produce our understanding of the world, including especially the social and natural sciences, but also the humanities, the fine arts, and the crafts of politics and economics. Ideas of ultimate realities as a determinate entity have metaphysical leverage for more of a disjunction between the character of the world and the character of God than the ground-of-being family of views can sustain. This can be helpful for producing a hopeful intellectual response to the pervasive realities of evil and suffering; some theologians find it reassuring to imagine that a determinate entity divinity has a moral character different from, higher, and certainly less ambiguous than that of the world as we experience it. Others (including me, I must confess) find this prospect even more disturbing than the morally ambiguous world of our experience. By contrast with this possibility of difference in character between God and the world, ground-of-being theologies model ultimate realities in such a way that the moral ambiguity of reality is a natural outcome deriving from the character of ultimacy itself.

It is important to acknowledge here another way of speaking of ultimate realities: namely, *apophasis*, or saying of ultimate realities that we simply cannot describe them. This is not a modelling strategy, in one respect, because apophatic theology declines modelling for the sake of testimony to a reality that utterly transcends human understanding. Yet the negation techniques of apophatic theologians are well defined.<sup>7</sup> They recur across traditions and languages and religious contexts. They give structure and meaning to communities of religious adepts with their

<sup>7</sup> Michael Sells (1994) argues that mystical techniques of negation and unsaying are regular and describable, and constitute a definite mode of speech. The doctoral dissertation of Timothy Knepper (Boston University, 2005) significantly extends Sell's research.

mystical practices. Thus, there is a kind of modelling at work among apophatic mystics and their theological kin, and certainly a definite kind of lifeworld and language game construction. While apophatic testimony to the incomprehensibility of ultimate realities is neither ground-of-being theology nor determinate entity theism in itself, it has far stronger affinities with ground-of-being theologies because they explicitly place ultimate realities further from human conceptuality by turning away from determinate entity modelling strategies. Thus, it is common to find theologians treating ground-of-being theology as a provisional theoretical discourse on the way to an apophatic destination.<sup>8</sup>

### THREE SHARED FEATURES OF GROUND-OF-BEING THEOLOGIES

I have sketched a diverse range of ground-of-being alternatives to both determinate entity theism and the apophatic refusal to model ultimate realities. Whether their primary metaphors derive from profound features of human beings generalized to all of reality or from universal and fundamental features of the whole of nature, ground-of-being theologies have in common three important characteristics.

First, they throw down the gauntlet to determinate entity theism in a different way than do the anthropomorphic projection critiques of Ludwig Feuerbach and Sigmund Freud and the associated social control analyses of Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim (Friedrich Nietzsche, of course, makes both critiques).<sup>9</sup> The ground-of-being critiques charge many forms of determinate entity theism with philosophical inconsistency on the grounds that the idea of an infinite determinate entity is incoherent.<sup>10</sup> To be determinate is to have features in contrast with an

<sup>8</sup> Among recent Christian theologians this is amply evident in Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Catholic side, and Paul Tillich on the Protestant side. But the most consistent exponents of this approach are the Madhyamaka philosophers of Mahayana Buddhism, such as Nāgārjuna and Bhāvaviveka, who self-consciously frame theoretical talk about ultimate matters (for them, especially the quest for enlightenment) as a kind of middle way between the chattering noise of conventional reality and the blessed silence of emptiness. There are parallels to this in both Vedanta (Śāṅkara) and Daoist philosophy (even in the Daodejing).

<sup>9</sup> These well-known critiques of religion have classical status, but there is an emerging family of critiques from evolutionary biology and neuroscience that equally powerfully support critiques of religion as anthropomorphic misunderstanding. For one of each, see Boyer (2001) and Newberg and D'Aquili (2001).

<sup>10</sup> This is the basis for Hegel's distinction between the bad infinite, which merely extends finite characteristics to an infinite degree, and the good infinite, which transcends finite contrast. If it can be saved at all, the idea of an infinite determinate entity must have recourse



environment, whereas to be infinite is to lack determining contrasts. Thus, it is important for a theological model not to assert determinateness and infinitude of ultimate realities in the same respect. But some forms of determinate entity theism do exactly this. For example, they assert that God is infinite in respect of any temporal view, yet forms specific intentions, which necessarily are temporal conceptions, which give rise to a theological version of the famous metaphysical problem of time and eternity. Again, they assert that God is infinite in power, yet can only act in limited ways to achieve the divine purposes and to alleviate suffering and judge evil, which gives rise to the equally famous problem of theodicy, with associated conundrums of kenoticism and eschatology. The impressive debates over such theological problems show the extent to which theologians have tried to make good on the claim of some forms of determinate entity theism that God can be infinite and determinate in the same respect. Such theologians refuse the critique of incoherence, but often they do not indicate how the concept of an infinite determinate entity is philosophically coherent, the paradox having become taken for granted and so invisible within their local theological communities.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, modern religious philosophers from Johann Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and Georg Hegel to Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and Robert Neville take the critique with complete seriousness, but respond differently. Whitehead and Hartshorne accept that, to have the determinate character they want to assign God in their process cosmologies, God must be subject to determinate contrasts with other features of the determinate world, and cannot be infinite in those respects (Hartshorne 1984). Philosophically consistent forms of determinate entity theism are the result, though the price paid for this is no substantive theory of

to the bad infinite. A classic expression of this critique is that of Johann Fichte, who wrote, 'Only from our idea of duty, and our faith in the inevitable consequences of moral action, arises the belief in a principle of moral order in the world—and this principle is God. But this living principle of a living universe must be Infinite; while all our ideas and conceptions are finite, and applicable only to finite beings—not to the Infinite. Thus we cannot, without inconsistency, apply to the Divinity the common predicates borrowed from finite existence. Consciousness, personality, and even substance, carry with them the idea of necessary limitation, and are the attributes of relative and limited beings; to affirm these of God is to bring Him down to the rank of relative and limited being. The Divinity can thus only be thought of by us as pure Intelligence, spiritual life and energy;—but to comprehend this Intelligence in a conception, or to describe it in words, is manifestly impossible. All attempts to embrace the Infinite in the conceptions of the Finite are, and must be, only accommodations to the frailties of man.' See J. Carl Mickelsen (ed.), 'Memoir of Johann Gottlieb Fichte', in Fichte (1889). Notice that Fichte himself assigns to God determinate characteristics such as pure intelligence, spiritual life, and energy, which begs the question of how he understands divine infinitude in relation to these.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth is an important exception to this trend: he developed a complex theological hermeneutic of the cognitive priority of revelation whereby we do not truly know God in Godself even through revelation, and even though faith is properly grounded in revelation. This affirms the paradox but ventures a kind of theological agnosticism about divine infinity that at least generates an answer in kind to the challenge.

ultimate realities and no solution to the classic philosophical problem of the one and the many.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Whitehead and Hartshorne, Neville insists on God being creator as the way definitively to solve the problem of the one and the many, and so he must protect divine infinitude. But he refuses to allow God to have a determinate character logically prior to creation—after all, what could ‘determinate character of God’ mean when there is nothing to contrast with God’s character? Neville’s uniquely consistent theory of creation has both God’s nature and the world’s becoming determinate in a singular primordial event of creation, accordingly.<sup>13</sup>

This instance of contrasting philosophical and theological intuitions continues a long-standing conflict within Western religious thought, and it is important to approach it with sympathy and understanding. Consider the era of doctrinal formation within Christianity, culminating in the epic Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Chalcedon (451). Despite the unattractive and sometimes deadly politicking of this era, serious intellectual questions were at stake, particularly concerning how to conceive of God. Theologians of the time had inherited two streams of wisdom that were in tension with one another. On the one hand, biblical religion, present especially in the Septuagint and the emerging compilation of early Christian writings that came to be called the New Testament, portrayed God mostly as a divine person who made plans and covenants and plainly acted in history and nature. This portrayal is accompanied especially in the Hebrew Bible by stern warnings about idolatry and occasional comprehension-defying theophanies, but there is no question that the dominant biblical picture of God is as a determinate entity. On the other hand, Greek philosophy, present in this era early on as late Stoicism and Middle Platonism, and later as Neoplatonism, portrayed ultimate reality as a transcendent One from which all determinate things have their life and purpose and value. This God has characteristics such as aseity, immutability, impassibility, and transcendence—all negations conveying essentially the same point that God is not a determinate entity. Arguably, the biblical writings register such features in their critiques of idolatry and in hints that God is beyond human comprehension, but in general the Bible subordinates these abstract features to personal characteristics. The resulting tension established the famous Athens–Jerusalem conflict that has rumbled on throughout the history of Christian theology, and in parallel forms in Jewish and Muslim theology, all of which are inheritors of Greek philosophical traditions as well as sacred textual testimony to God as a determinate—indeed, a personal—entity.

Christian theologians of the doctrinal formation period boldly attempted to forge a synthesis between the two perspectives. This involved fending off extremes on both

<sup>12</sup> Whitehead dramatically reframes the one-and-many problem so that it is about the emergence and dissolution of societies of actual occasions, but offers no answer to the classical, large-scale version of the problem, which has typically received answers in terms of creation within theistic contexts.

<sup>13</sup> This creation is not the act of a determinate divine being. Rather, it is logically prior to determination of anything divine or human (Neville 1968).

sides: unqualified personal theism and unqualified Gnostic philosophies. The former seemed plainly pagan and mythological, while the latter seemed opposed to the intimately personal portrayal of God in the Hebrew Bible and in the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. St Augustine's *Confessions* is a glorious example of this synthesis, combining philosophical acuity with spiritual intimacy. Only a harshly positivist critic would reject this synthesis as a futile jumble of contradictions; these theologians were grappling with two vast intuitions and trying to affirm both, rather than reducing the doctrine of God to one side or the other. In this way, personal characteristics of divine reality were typically set within a ground-of-being philosophical framework, while ground-of-being conceptualities were interpreted with an eye to spiritual vibrancy and salvific relevance. The most systematic examples of striking this balance are the majestic *Summas* of St Thomas Aquinas, for whom God was Being Itself and also Holy Trinity, miraculous actor, and source of grace and salvation.<sup>14</sup> Thomas's view cannot easily be called determinate entity theism, despite supportive textual evidence, because it adopts an *Esse Ipsum, Actus Purus* (Being Itself, Pure Act) conceptual model. But neither is it consistent ground-of-being theology, because Thomas plainly also attributes to God characteristics that properly belong only to determinate entities. It is, rather, the epitome of the Athens–Jerusalem paradox of Christian theology. While determinate entity theisms and ground-of-being theologies are clearly distinguishable from one another in our era, they both have some claim on the classical synthetic theological models of medieval and patristic Christian theology.

Today, the goal of synthesizing Jerusalem and Athens remains, but contemporary Christian theologians have also rehabilitated more one-sided projects in search of

<sup>14</sup> See *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologica*. Retrievals of Aristotelian philosophy long lost in the West, these Christian theological works were initially controversial, but have proved enormously influential. For example, Thomas's influence is evident today in a contrast between Catholic and Protestant approaches to divine action. While post-Reformation biblicism tended to separate theology from its philosophical sources, Catholic theologians continued the synthetic heritage of patristic theology. Contemporary Protestant theologians think of special divine action as natural-law-abrogating miracle or natural-law-conforming causal entries into history and nature, or else they relegate God's action to a single eternal act of creation (with no special acts, as in Friedrich Schleiermacher), or reduce it to purely subjective encounter (as in Rudolf Bultmann—as if human subjectivity were not tied to the brain and its causal interactions). The views affirming special objective divine action presume and entail determinate entity models of God. But these models of God are generally unappealing to most Catholic theologians, and so the models of divine action that imply determinate entity theism are similarly unappealing. Rather, they tend to hold Thomas's ground-of-being view instead, rejecting the idea of God as an actor alongside other finite actors, and affirming that, as Being Itself, God acts in all events as primary cause beneath the flux of ordinary secondary causes with which we are utterly familiar. Making this Thomistic conception of divine action amenable to the idea of special divine acts is famously difficult in our time, in a way that it was not for Thomas himself. The primary–secondary causation model seems to require a distinction in degrees of divine focus of attention to make sense of any distinction between ordinary divine support of all causes and special divine acts. This difficulty recapitulates the more fundamental Athens–Jerusalem paradox of the Christian idea of God.

consistent models of God, freer of the conceptual tensions inherent in the synthetic project. Thus, determinate entity theisms have achieved honourable standing—even in process forms that reject traditional Christian teachings such as creation *ex nihilo*, divine infinitude, and omnipotence. Personal theists routinely reject or radically reinterpret the classical doctrines of divine aseity, immutability, and impassibility as inappropriate incursions of philosophical conceptualities into the biblical portrayal of God as a divine person.<sup>15</sup> For their part, some ground-of-being theologians have also interpreted the synthetic project as impressive but ultimately doomed to futility. They resolve the paradoxical tension by treating personal attributes of God as non-literal symbolic affirmations and privileging the conceptual framework of a plausible metaphysics over the narrative framework of biblical theism.<sup>16</sup> Paul Tillich, a ground-of-being theist, rightly affirmed the continuity of his view with biblical theism, (1964), but this continuity was with the theocentric, prophetic, and iconoclastic elements of the Bible, not with the portrayal of God as a divine person.

In summary, ground-of-being models of ultimate realities—whether as Thomas's Being Itself or Plotinus's One or Plato's Good or Hegel's *Geist* or Tillich's Power of Being or Neville's Creator—present a serious alternative to determinate entity theism. They press critiques against determinate entity theism: religious critiques of anthropomorphism, philosophical critiques of incoherence, and theological critiques of excessive innovation relative to the synthetic heritage of Christian theology, which generally interpreted personal symbolism for God in a ground-of-being framework, despite the insoluble paradox that seems to result.

The second feature that ground-of-being theologies have in common is a rich appreciation of the symbolic life of practical religion. Within a ground-of-being theology, many religious beliefs, including those characteristic of determinate entity theism such as special divine action, make sense only if understood non-literally as symbolic expressions of the religious significance of the world we experience. A cynical interpreter might see this as hostility to practical religious concerns, but ground-of-being theologians take symbolism more seriously than this. To recall one of Paul Tillich's most pointed instructions to his students, we should never say 'merely a symbol'.

Consider the belief, common among all religions, that God (or a given supernatural entity in non-theistic contexts) is a personal being who acts specially to answer prayers. A determinate entity theist typically is willing to affirm this sort of divine responsiveness and intentional activity literally: there really is a divine being who hears, and the world is different from how it would otherwise be if this divine entity chooses to act in response. Ground-of-being theologies regard this belief as mistaken if we interpret it at the level of literalized metaphysics, but as profoundly meaningful if we interpret it non-literally, as a symbolic expression of human dependence on a

<sup>15</sup> A seminal example of this is Harnack (1976), with a more accessible presentation in Harnack (1978). Among contemporary theologians, the standard example is Moltmann (1974).

<sup>16</sup> An excellent example of this is Neville (2001*d*).

ground of being and the sometimes happy way that the creative flux of events sometimes works out for human beings. Metaphysically, this is action without intentional agency and without causal joints between God and nature. Spiritually, ground-of-being theologies treat divine action as religious symbolism that engages people in spiritually transformative praxis within the flow of life-giving and life-threatening events.

Religious symbols are not merely targets for demythologization or remythologization, on this view, but means of engaging the ground of being in our lives. We might imagine that we could live without religious symbols that need to be reinterpreted in a metaphysical framework more plausible than the narrative framework that gave birth to them. I think this is unlikely. Without religious symbols to help us conceive our world and orient ourselves to it, the moral character of human life would be perpetually superficial and localized. The world would remain a terrifying jumble rather than becoming a kind of cosmic home. Other people around us would reinforce our fears rather than being opportunities for deepening understanding through compassion. Our connection to the divine depths of our experience would remain undeveloped. Religious symbols are always broken and of uncertain parentage, but they also enable us to recognize the depths of our world around us and approach life with courage, civility, and creativity.<sup>17</sup>

Symbolizing ultimate realities in personal terms is common, and indeed enormously popular, in all religions. The Bible, the Qur'an, and some Vedic literature encourage this personal view of ultimate reality even while resolutely resisting the anthropomorphic mistakes that so often accompany such symbolism. Even putatively non-theistic religions such as Buddhism are, in popular forms, replete with gods and monsters, bodhisattvas, and discarnate entities that form intentions and act freely in the world to get or give what they want—all relative to the narrative structures that guide daily religious life for Buddhists. The popularity of such symbolism may derive from hard-wired propensities to picture the world in anthropomorphic terms—hence the social success of groups that nurture such symbols.<sup>18</sup> Theologians who believe that they must take the first-order symbolism of religious practice at face value as much as they possibly can would be hard pressed to adopt a theological view other than determinate entity theism. But this approach risks reducing the critical task of theological reflection merely to serving the ideological needs of religious institutions, which properly include rationalizing and legitimating the beliefs that make psychological comfort, corporate identity, and social power possible.

Meanwhile, ground-of-being theologians face their own unappetizing challenge. By refusing the literalized metaphysics of a personal, intentional, active divine entity, they must go beyond generalized approval of the engaging power of religious

<sup>17</sup> One of the most important theories of religious symbolism from a ground-of-being perspective is Neville (1996).

<sup>18</sup> This is one contention of numerous recent works on the religious implications of neuroscientific understandings of human cognition; see Newberg and D'Aquili (2001).

symbols to explain how engagement works and to give careful interpretations of symbols whose literalized metaphysical sense, they hold, is mistaken. The explanatory task is sometimes neglected, as if engagement (or its equivalents) were a self-evident or foundational concept.<sup>19</sup> This interpretative task has been standard fare in the intellectual traditions of all religions with sacred literatures, from ancient times until now. This is not a novel or newly difficult task, therefore, so much as the continued discharging of a perpetual theological obligation.

The third common feature of ground-of-being theologies is that they embrace the whole of reality in all its complexity and ambiguity and speak of ultimate realities as the fundamental reason why things are this way. This is the basis for the analogy of 'ground' in the phrase 'ground of being': ultimate realities are the most basic ontological condition of reality. In so far as we can know anything at all about ultimate realities, we will gain this knowledge by examining not putative supernaturally delivered divine revelation but nature and experience. Indeed, ground-of-being theologians interpret nature and human experience as the primal spring of all revelation, all divine disclosure, all insight, and transformative understanding.<sup>20</sup> Sacred texts testify to these fecund origins, and theological traditions formulate and reflect on the wisdom encountered there.

This amounts to a collapse of the traditional distinction between revealed and natural theology, which depends on two modes of obtaining knowledge about ultimate realities—a distinction ventured in all theistic religions. But if there is one mode only, then revealed theology is not only naturalized, but natural ways of knowing must also be revelation, whether inside or outside theology. If we understand ultimate reality as the ground of being, in any of the various senses that this has been tried, then all knowledge, regardless of subject-matter, is the result of engagement with a reality that grounds and transcends us, that we encounter as given rather than simply at our cognitive disposal, that resists our ideas about it and forces us to adapt. In respect of its givenness, or equivalently our thrownness (to use Martin Heidegger's term), the world is revelation. In respect of its cognitive penetrability and receptiveness, the world is an object of knowledge and a means of theological inquiry.

This understanding of revelation indicates the sense in which ground-of-being theologies resist supernaturalism: supernatural entities are not problematic in themselves, but supernatural modes of gaining information about ultimate realities contradict the very idea of God as ground of being. Such supernatural knowledge reconstitutes the idea of God as a determinate entity that possesses and conveys information otherwise unavailable to human beings. The naturalized understanding

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle may have complained that his teacher, Plato, had not properly explained what participation was or how it worked, but not all Platonists have failed in this task. Neville (1996) explains what engagement means by conceiving truth not as correspondence between propositions and states of affairs but in semiotic and axiological terms as the carry-over of value from something interpreted to the interpreter. This dynamic, causal interpretation of truth means that engagement is present in nature wherever there is interpretation.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. the differently angled approaches of Heidegger (1962) and Hart (1968).

of revelation also indicates the sense in which ground-of-being theologies are tightly knitted into the whole fabric of human knowledge, and dependent on the wisdom and skills of human inquirers for their content and plausibility. Unsurprisingly, therefore, ground-of-being theologies have a lot at stake in the natural and social sciences, as well as other modes of studying the ways in which human beings experience the world.

The closeness between nature and its ontological ground explains why ground-of-being theologies have close affinities with religious forms of naturalism. Indeed, does not ground-of-being theology finally reduce to ground-of-being (or religious) naturalism? Because of pervasive suspicion in many naturalist quarters toward religious traditions, sympathy for theological terminology is often absent there, and the need for distinctive language pronounced. Yet, at the conceptual level, religious naturalism typically is also ground-of-being theology. In fact, naturalism and ground-of-being theologies are overlapping classes of metaphysical views whose common territory can be equally well called 'religious naturalism' or 'ground-of-being naturalism'. Consider the two non-overlapping territories.

On the one hand, some forms of naturalism (not 'religious naturalism') are bluntly opposed to ground-of-being theologies. These are strictly positivistic, physicalist forms of empiricism, entertaining no questions that cannot be answered from within the scope of the physical sciences. From the point of view of ground-of-being theologies, these forms of naturalism are arbitrarily truncated metaphysical theories. They refuse to consider legitimate questions about the ultimate origins and meaning of nature, the reality of aesthetic and moral values, and the ontological basis for the mysterious applicability of mathematics to modelling nature. All of these issues press the question of an ontological ground for nature, and non-religious naturalists cannot answer them without reconstituting an ultimate ontological basis for reality. The better, more adequate way to refuse such questions is explicitly to adopt a kind of ascetic spiritual discipline that refuses speculative theorizing, in a manner akin to some versions of Madhyamaka and Zen Buddhist philosophy, to austere versions of post-modernist deconstruction, and of course to apophatic mysticism in all traditions. Engaged or not, however, the questions remain, and even the refusal to consider them is mute testimony to their importance. I consider it one of the great discoveries of modern philosophy of religion that consistent non-religious naturalism, or equivalently, ontologically and axiologically flattened-out atheism, is intellectually untenable.

On the other hand, there are forms of ground-of-being theology that cannot be given a religious naturalist translation. For example, some ground-of-being theologies propose grand cosmological schemes that are utterly indigestible to a naturalist of any kind, such as the perennial philosophy's Great Chain of Being, with its hierarchically organized gods and angels and demons, its spirits and discarnate entities, its human beings, and its lesser animals and plants and inert matter (Smith 1976). The perennial philosophy belongs to the ground-of-being family because its picture of ultimate reality is God beyond God, God without attributes (*nirguna Brahman*). And religious naturalism belongs for the same reason. But the

latter's relatively sparse ontological inventory is incompatible with the perennial philosophy. It follows that there is a meaningful distinction between naturalism and ground-of-being theologies, even while the two families of views overlap.

## GROUND-OF-BEING THEOLOGIES AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES

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Unsurprisingly, given the necessary closeness between nature and its ontological basis, ground-of-being theologies connect to the natural sciences differently than do determinate entity theisms. To appreciate this difference, consider a concrete example: the design argument. Despite significant differences of detail and context, the design argument works roughly the same way in its medieval form (say, in Thomas Aquinas's Fifth Way in *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 2, Article 3), in its modern form (say, in William Paley 1802), and in its contemporary form (say, in the intelligent design movement - see Dembski 1998): it seeks to infer the activity of a designer from apparent design in natural objects and processes. An eye, complex cellular mechanisms, an ecosystem, our solar system—each has seemed designed to some people, a state of affairs begging for an explanation. The natural impulse to propose that some intelligence actually designed what seems to be designed has historically seemed compelling because no other explanation was available.

David Hume (1780) famously pointed out that even if the inference from apparent design to a designer is a sound one, we can conclude nothing about the character of this designer, or even the number of designers.<sup>21</sup> This was a sound logical point and dented the design argument's usefulness for specifically Christian apologetics, but had little effect on the core of the design argument, which is the inference from apparent design in nature to a designer. Charles Darwin's (1859) theory of evolution, by contrast, had a profound impact on the plausibility of the design argument in its biological version simply by articulating an alternative explanation for apparent design. Now the question became: which hypothesis is the better explanation of apparent design in nature: an intelligent designer (in any number of forms) or biological evolution?

Much the same transformation occurred in the cosmological version of the design argument. In its strongest form, the cosmological design argument takes off from the fine-tuning of the fundamental constants of physics, without which life would be inconceivable (Barrow and Tipler 1986). The apparent contingency of well coordinated and fine-tuned fundamental constants has seemed beyond the ability of

<sup>21</sup> Hume argued through an elegant dialogue form, among other things, that no confirmation of specifically Christian theological claims about God is possible.



science to explain, and thus to be persuasive evidence for intelligent design. Alternative explanations of fine-tuning depend on scenarios with many universes, each with different sets of fundamental constants. A mother universe with daughter universes having different constants was proposed, as was an everlasting cycle of cosmic expansions and contractions with different constants for each big bang, and numerous other variations on the multiverses theme.<sup>22</sup> One version of string theory now supports a rich mathematical model of a multiverse with non-overlapping, expanding regimes, each with distinct settings for basic physical constants. The model provides a quantum-mechanical explanation for the way the set of constants applying in a new section of the universe migrate from the set in place when the new expanding section is born.<sup>23</sup> While still speculative, these mathematical models are robust enough to have an impact on the fine-tuning wing of the design argument. Moreover, these multiverse explanations for fine-tuning will probably become more detailed, and perhaps empirically distinguishable from competitor theories in the years to come. So the question in this case is which hypothesis is the better explanation of apparent design in nature: an intelligent designer (in any number of forms) setting physical conditions for life or a scenario in which a much vaster universe automatically explores countless settings of physical constants, some producing life and others not?

Determinate entity theisms and ground-of-being theologies have quite different responses to these developments in the biological and cosmological versions of the design argument. To put the difference succinctly, ground-of-being theologies have a lot to lose if the design argument succeeds. The success of the design argument would strongly suggest that God is, after all, an entity capable of planning ahead and acting so as to set physical constants or assemble macromolecules and cellular machinery, and this would be powerful support for determinate entity theism. To the extent that this is a genuine possibility, faint though it may be, given the vicissitudes of scientific theories, ground-of-being theologies are vulnerable to falsification—though surely this is a great virtue as far as their intelligibility is concerned. By contrast, determinate entity theisms coexist relatively easily with either the success or the failure of the design argument. Consider the alternatives.

On the one hand, if the design argument succeeds, then otherwise unexplainable contingencies of nature are credited to divine action, including possibly special divine interventions at crucial moments in cosmic and evolutionary history. This outcome would delight some personal theists, including especially theists within the intelligent design movement, for whom this would represent political as well as intellectual triumph. Other personal theists and perhaps most process theists

<sup>22</sup> John Wheeler developed the original version of the oscillating universe in the 1960s, but this proposal was ruled out in work done by Roger Penrose and Stephen Hawking. Paul J. Steinhardt and Neil Turok (2002) have revised the original idea in a more credible way. Andrei Linde (1994) proposed the creation of child universes from a parent universe's 'quantum foam', describing this as the self-reproducing inflationary universe.

<sup>23</sup> The leading version of this view is Susskind (2005).

would probably be less delighted to see God's action on such blunt display, because this would suggest that perhaps God ought to have intervened more decisively at moments of human civilizational mayhem. Despite this complication for theodicy, determinate entity theism would manage quite well if the design argument succeeds.

On the other hand, the design argument may fail, perhaps because contingency in the fundamental constants evaporates with the development of quantum cosmologies and string theory, and because complexity theory succeeds with biochemistry and evolutionary theory in explaining cellular assemblage, organ development, and similar challenges in biology. In that case, determinate entity theism happily falls back on the less aggressive position of theistic evolution. This view holds that God made (and possibly makes) the world in whatever way current science suggests is probably the case, without any need deliberately to set contingencies such as physical constants or miraculously to assemble molecules and cells and organs and ecosystems. Intelligent design theists would not be happy with this at all, because it would confirm their worst fears: namely, that evolution is divinely created to run automatically, without subsequent intervention, or else is just an aspect of the divine depths of nature. But most determinate entity theists would not be perturbed in the least by this outcome.<sup>24</sup>

In either case, therefore, most forms of determinate entity theism fare splendidly. Only extreme types of personal theism are tripped up by the failure of the design argument. By contrast, ground-of-being theologies are inevitably committed to theistic evolution in a particular sense, or to its non-theistic, religious naturalist equivalent. They cannot tolerate the success of the design argument if it suggests deliberative divine action. Indeed, they predict its failure, and correspondingly expect the success of attempts to explain cellular complexity and contingency of fundamental constants without any need to invoke intelligent design. Ground-of-being theologies hypothesize that the contingent elements of the universe do not include physical constants and biological complexity, but merely the vast and bare fact that the universe itself exists.

This difference between the two families of theologies illustrates the sense in which ground-of-being theologies are more tightly knitted into the character of physical reality than determinate entity theisms. In the latter, the particularity of the divine nature allows for the possibility that a determinate entity, God, could make the world in such a way that it contained no hints about the divine character save the sheer fact that God must have the power to create. Ground-of-being theologies do not allow for this possibility, because they frame ultimate reality metaphysically as the ground of the world as we encounter it. This gives ground-of-being theologians strong incentive to support inquiry of every kind into the worlds of nature and value, of experience and consciousness. They all illumine the ground of being through detailing the character of being in all its richness. This also imposes on ground-of-being

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, most or all of the theologians in the Divine Action Project affirm theistic evolution in something like this sense (Russell *et al.* 1993, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2001).

theologians a strong obligation to ensure that what they say about ultimate reality applies to the world in all its dimensions as human inquiry unfolds it.

Two important questions now arise. First, are there renewed prospects for natural theology in the presence of ground-of-being theologies? Critiques of natural theology derive from the insufficiency of human reasoning powers, the intrinsic ambiguity of nature in the face of metaphysical questions, or the transcendence of God such that we cannot expect creation to be informative about the divine nature or existence. Ground-of-being theologies directly affect the third of these critiques. In theistic formulations, the ground of being transcends the world as its mystery and ontological condition; the divine nature is precisely what the world discloses in the depths of its physical and valuational structures and processes. If the first two difficulties can be managed, therefore—and this is a complex matter in itself—ground-of-being theologies do make natural theology more promising.

Second, can the natural sciences or other types of human inquiry leverage a judgement in favour of ground-of-being theologies over determinate entity theisms, or vice versa? It is difficult to assess entire classes of theologies, but their common features permit some room for comparative judgements. We have seen that determinate entity theisms have considerable flexibility in relation to scientific discoveries, because of the way they construct transcendence between God and the world. We have also seen that ground-of-being theories are theological interpretations of the world precisely as the sciences and other forms of inquiry discover it to be. These two considerations entail that the sciences cannot directly discriminate between the two families of theological views. Yet we also saw that the two families have different postures in relation to the question of intelligent design, with the ground-of-being views increasingly vulnerable should scientific inquiry fail to explain the contingency of physical constants and apparent design in the biological realm. This suggests that the *extended failure* of scientific inquiry could have an impact on the decision between ground-of-being theologies and determinate entity theisms in a way that the *success* of science cannot.

Moreover, science and other types of inquiry could have an indirect influence on this metaphysical contest by changing criteria for plausibility. For example, it is conceivable that the natural sciences could strongly reinforce (without directly entailing) a particular philosophy of nature, as Aristotle's science strongly supported his teleological, organismic philosophy of nature. The basic ontological principles of such a philosophy of nature—in Aristotle's case, there must be an ontological basis for purposive phenomena in nature that harmonizes these natural purposes in a kind of teleological ecology—would then function as plausibility conditions for any theological interpretation of nature. In this way—which is to say by means of a philosophy of nature with ontological principles serving as plausibility criteria for theological models—a comparative form of natural theological argumentation may be possible (Wildman 2006). This would not be traditional natural theology, with its pretensions to infer theological truths directly from nature. Nor could it lead to decisive conclusions in favour of one and against another theological proposal. But this mediated and comparative type of natural theology reasoning can put

pressure on some theological views more than others, depending on how poorly or well they harmonize with the plausibility conditions deriving from the philosophy of nature. And this, in turn, may be the most that the natural sciences and other forms of inquiry can offer to the theological competition between ground-of-being theologies and their determinate entity rivals. The rest of the debate remains internal to theology and metaphysics.

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