

**A Counter-response on “The Divine Action Project”<sup>1</sup>****WESLEY WILDMAN**

I am grateful to Phil Clayton, John Polkinghorne, Bill Stoeger, and Tom Tracy for thoughtful responses (in *Theology and Science* 2, no. 2) to my survey of the Divine Action Project (in *Theology and Science* 2, no. 2). The diversity and high quality of these responses gives an indication of the marvelously rich and complex discussion that the Divine Action Project has engendered among both its participants and those who shared in the project through its publications. My counter-response is partial, inevitably, but focused on what I take to be vital issues for the ongoing debate. I begin with a slightly technical response to Polkinghorne and subsequently move toward more theological territory. Less technically minded readers might want to skip a few pages and begin with my reply to Tracy, returning later to the Polkinghorne discussion.

**A Response to John Polkinghorne**

Concerning Polkinghorne’s response, and his “proposal to use chaos theory (metaphysically interpreted as being ontologically open) to form the starting point for a discussion of divine action,” I am delighted to note a significant degree of shared understanding of the virtues and challenges of this approach. I do concur with Polkinghorne that his proposal is worth pursuing, at least for theologians with suitable views of God (I am not one of them but Polkinghorne is far from alone). Ideas of God are diverse, and theologians value divine attributes differently, so the fact that the scientific account of the physical world is patchy and metaphysically equivocal, as Polkinghorne rightly says, is of little use to some. To Polkinghorne and those who share his desire to defend a concept of God as intentionally and providentially active in the world, however, these features of contemporary science seem promising. They invite a theory of divine action built on ontological openness in physical reality such that God does not need to work against created structures of nature in order to accomplish providentially relevant purposes. Polkinghorne offers his proposal humbly, aware that this conception of divine action magnifies the challenge to God’s goodness and justice, but ready to answer the challenge by means of a concept of divine self-limitation (*kenosis*). Like several others making concrete

proposals for divine action, he is especially eager to defeat the defeaters, thereby making room for the rationality of faith, in the tradition of apologists from Justin Martyr to Alvin Plantinga. My view of ultimate reality is quite different from Polkinghorne's but I admire the apologetic and evangelical impulses in his theological work and support his efforts to push human truth-seeking ingenuity as far as possible in this direction. A mystical theologian of my sort is happy to see such projects advance, both for the light they may shed on the God-world relationship and for the testimony that their ultimate failure makes, namely, that ultimate reality, which is infinitely intimate, also infinitely surpasses human reason.

Can Polkinghorne's proposal advance? The greatest technical challenge is quantum chaosology, of course, but that is almost unapproachable at present. Other challenges are more within reach, and here I raise two. Both arise in the context of the distinction between the mathematics of non-linear dynamical systems (mathematical chaos theory) and complex physical systems that we might try to model with mathematical chaos theory. Some publications on chaos theory lack clarity on this vital point. I appreciate Polkinghorne's willingness to maintain the distinction.

The first challenge in light of this distinction is making sense of Polkinghorne's notion that God's action does not add energy to a physical system. This idea depends on the infinite closeness of orbits in chaotic attractors; a characteristic of mathematical chaos that Polkinghorne hopes exists also in the physical world. Even if there were a perfect match between the mathematics of chaos and the dynamics of complex physical systems, I am not sure that zero-energy action makes sense. After all, there is no orbit arc "right next door" to any given orbit arc; infinite closeness means density of orbit arcs in certain regions. Thus, to kick a system from one part of a chaotic orbit to another part close by always involves a move of finite size, just as to kick the number two to a nearby rational number always involves a jump of finite size, despite the density of rational numbers in the real numbers. We can imagine a limit process (though the epistemological limitations of chaos prevent us from actually constructing one) whereby the kick decreases to zero, presumably along with the energy required to cause the kick, as potential target orbit arcs approach the original orbit arc. However, divine action in such situations is not at the end of a limit process; to make a difference of any size there must be a finite kick, which necessarily means non-zero energy input into the system.

All this obtains, as I say, even when there is a perfect match between the mathematics of chaos and the dynamics of complex physical systems. However, there most certainly is not such a perfect match, and considerations from the likely non-existence of chaotic orbits in nature to quantum lumpiness rapidly multiply the difficulties with the idea of zero-energy divine action. Perhaps Polkinghorne should surrender the idea of zero-energy divine action. This would make God so much like another creature in mode of action that we might judge the theological cost to be too high, even for personalist theists such as Polkinghorne, whose tolerance for relatively literal language about God as personal and intentional is higher than for some other theologians. Alter-

natively, Polkinghorne may prefer to maintain the zero-energy theory of divine action while remaining agnostic about the causal joint of God's action, saying simply that it "might have something to do with the ontologically open suppleness of reality." This back-pedaling is unattractive, obviously, so it is easy to see why Polkinghorne speculated more decisively on the infinite closeness of orbits within chaotic attractors as a way to make robust the hypothesis of zero-energy divine action. Again, Polkinghorne may care to experiment with a different approach to specifying a causal joint for zero-energy divine action. Perhaps there is an option at the intersection of chaos theory and quantum mechanics whereby particles jump across orbits of something like a chaotic attractor in a manner akin to quantum tunneling. This would require a synthesis of chaos theory and quantum-level approaches to divine action but it reduces reliance on the hypothesis of chaotic attractors in nature (which seems inconceivable) and perhaps still preserves a concept of zero-energy divine action. At the same time, it would give Polkinghorne his own way of answering his important question about how quantum-level divine action could ever have providentially relevant macroscopic effects.

The second challenge concerns whether there really is a relevant "extended correspondence principle" that can give confidence that mathematical chaos tells us something about nature. It is tempting to accept this quickly, because correspondence principles work so well in other parts of physics in the many transitions from the classical theories of nature to more recent theories. However, the particular correspondence principle that Polkinghorne needs is tricky, and not precisely analogous to other such principles.

Consider a standard example, the correspondence principle linking Newtonian mechanics and the mechanics of Einstein's special theory of relativity (STR). This correspondence principle states that predictions of STR tend towards predictions of the older theory when some variable (specifically, the relative speed between inertial frames of reference) approaches zero. For any other value of this variable, the difference between the predictions of the two theories is completely explicable and quantifiable. Polkinghorne's "extended correspondence principle" that links "classical physics to a more accurate account of physical reality" is difficult to interpret in these terms. To maintain the analogy with STR, we would need two theories with testable predictions, and a variable in one theory that, when it approaches some key value, leads to predictions that tend toward the predictions of the other theory. That is not the situation here.

Another kind of correspondence principle is between the classical and quantum worlds. In this case, we again have two theories with testable predictions—Polkinghorne's example of continuum mechanics and atomic theory will serve—but the connection between the two is obscure. The variable in question seems to be scale, in some sense, but it is poorly understood precisely how the world we observe around us, which continuum mechanics describes in one way, emerges from the quantum theory of the atom. Nevertheless, experimental data force us to speak of a correspondence principle that links the two theories, but in a different sense than for STR because changing scale from the small to the large introduces

emergent properties that are familiar from classical mechanics but not evident in quantum mechanics. This kind of correspondence principle may serve as a model for linking classical chaos theory (thought of as a physical theory) and quantum chaos theory, but that is not what Polkinghorne needs, either.

A third option for interpreting “correspondence principle” may be as follows. Polkinghorne requires the mathematical description of non-linear dynamical systems to serve as a model for the dynamics of complex physical systems. Some parts of mathematical chaos theory have proved quite useful for modeling physical systems, especially periodic behavior, bifurcation cascades, and fractal geometry in non-linear dynamical systems. The eventual unpredictability of mathematical chaos, the most famous feature of non-linear dynamical systems, prevents its effective use in quantitatively precise modeling of the dynamics of physical systems. Most people do not care about this, of course, because it is quite satisfying to get a mathematical model even of a part of a complex system. However, Polkinghorne needs more to support his proposal for zero-energy divine action; he needs dynamics in nature that have the properties of mathematical chaos itself. The correspondence principle he needs, therefore, is between two modeling applications of chaos theory: in non-chaotic but still complex regimes and in supposedly chaotic regimes of a physical system. In a given situation, the first could be in principle a testable theory with actual predictions; the second can never be a testable theory because of the intrinsic limitations on testing chaos-based models. The variable that serves to link the two theories tunes non-linear dynamical systems in such a way that the very same system can produce both non-chaotic and chaotic dynamics. We have a testable theory when the tuning variable is set to make the mathematical model produce non-chaotic dynamics. This is evidence that the model is correct. Then we change the tuning variable to force the mathematical model to produce chaotic dynamics. We can no longer test the model effectively but an “extended correspondence principle” justifies the claim that features of mathematical chaos are actually present in the physical system.

This is not a case of two prediction-yielding physical theories that we must accommodate to one another—the usual meaning of correspondence principle—but rather a case of evaluating the domain of application of a mathematical model for complex dynamics in a physical system. This kind of evaluation is an ordinary part of physics. In fact, to cite the precedent of scientific practice as Polkinghorne does, it is extremely common for scientists to use a mathematical model for one domain of a physical system and to reject it in another. Polkinghorne acknowledges that quantum mechanics gives a strong reason to reject applying the mathematical model of chaos theory in regimes where “tuning conditions” produce actually chaotic dynamics but he still claims that something like chaos (meaning especially infinitely close orbits on chaotic attractors, which is what he wants for zero-energy divine action) could still exist in nature. Nevertheless, I suspect this is to confuse two meanings of correspondence principle: one in which the key variable pertains to scale that does not apply here, and one in which it applies to regimes of the dynamical model, which does apply. Chaos is not a micro-scale property of a system, but an infinitely sensitive system-wide property.

If we do not have chaos at the very small scale, we do not have it anywhere, and vice versa.

Obviously, the dynamics of complex physical systems are extremely, well, complex. They are not complex in the very precise sense of mathematical chaos. Nature is too messy for chaos, in the sense of not causally rigid enough. Actually, if Polkinghorne is right about nature being ontologically open, then the mathematically precise sense of chaos cannot occur in nature. Even sensitive dependence does not apply in the strict sense, because system noise wipes out almost all small variations in initial conditions immediately; tiny disturbances can only have a discernible effect in the context of a perfectly causally rigid system, which is the only context for accurately speaking of the butterfly effect. That is why you can never have true chaos in a thermodynamically open physical system; it would have to be the universe as a whole or nothing. So what kinds of features can physical systems have, if not the features of strictly mathematical chaos? As far as Polkinghorne’s proposal is concerned, the answer seems to be none that are relevant to zero-energy divine action, regardless of the interpretation of “extended correspondence principle,” at least not without blending complexity with something like zero-energy quantum tunneling, as described above. Deciding what to do with the concept of zero-energy divine action and clarifying the meaning of correspondence principle are two significant challenges facing Polkinghorne’s proposal.

### A Response to Tom Tracy

I turn now to Tracy’s elegant response, beginning with his list of three modes of divine action. To identify my own view in his terms, I should say that I have no theological interest in the third possibility (God “affecting the nexus of created causes”), because it mistakes vibrant biblical imagery of God as a person for a metaphysically viable theory of the God-world relation. I have serious theological questions about the sense in which the second possibility can be valid (God acting “indirectly by means of the lawful operation of created (i.e. secondary) causes”), because it is crucially vague on the question of whether God is a being that intends so to act; to the extent that this meaning is ruled out (as it is in Aristotle but not in Thomas Aquinas) I can affirm the second mode of divine action. I have no problem with the first possibility (God acting “directly as the absolute ontological ground (the primary cause) of every entity or event”) so long as, once again, direct creating and sustaining action is not rendered the intentional action of a divine being.

In short, in my view, divine action is anthropomorphic symbolism. Its truth lies in the aptness of its invitation to human beings to regard reality as amenable to our attempts to shape nature and history in the best way we can, in light of our best understanding of the structures of value we engage in the world—value structures that express the Logos structure of created reality. Its brokenness lies in its attribution to God of characteristics (intentions, plans, purposes, capacities to act) that we only properly predicate of finite agents.

Some take views of God such as this to be spiritually inert, or worse, as when one writer says that Maurice Wiles' view of God has "rather bleak devotional consequences."<sup>1</sup> I see things differently. In fact, I think this judgment of spiritual bleakness is a result of not grasping the depth and value of "the other," conjoined perhaps with anachronistic projection of modern personalist theism back through history, and neglect of both the mystical tradition of theology within Christianity and the ideas of ultimate reality that spiritually nurture many adherents within other religious traditions. In the context of any mystical theology worthy of the name, there is intellectual room, and spiritual necessity, for many views of God, all broken yet all illuminating in various ways.

It follows that I do not share the supposition that Tracy entertains for the sake of argument (note that this cautious philosopher does not say here what he actually believes), namely, that "theology needs this third possibility in its conceptual toolbox." I would not contest any prediction that theistic religions inevitably will use such symbolism extensively, and I do appreciate Tracy's insistence that we cannot confine discussions of divine action to one mode or type (thus, the toolbox), but theology can proceed by means of metaphysical criticism rather than affirmation of the idea of divine action in Tracy's third sense. The Divine Action Project was significantly devoted to exploring the feasibility of Tracy's third possibility and I have tried hard to enter into theologically different territory in order both to understand the minds that labor there and the ideas they produce, and to evaluate my own less personalist conception of God. I am particularly interested in comparing the way my own hypothesis about ultimate reality collapses under the weight of its own pretensions with the way other hypotheses break down. I suspect that it is in this comparative exercise that we press furthest toward a true conception of ultimacy before finally lapsing, perforce, into silence in the face of the divine mystery. Thus, I have a strong interest in studying and evaluating alternative theological portrayals of God.

- ② I hesitate to accept Tracy's criticism of my Figure A1, and his associated suggestion that compatibilists typically reject objective special divine action. Rather, I think that compatibilists (in my sense) require the objectivity (in some sense) of special divine action for the compatibilist strategy to make any sense. As in the philosophical debates over freedom and determinism in relation to human action, compatibilism requires objective action and at least the possibility of determinism in nature even to get started. This is built into the grammar of the word "compatible."

I also remain unconvinced that the tetralemma argument I outlined can be dismissed as easily as Tracy does. Of course, if we hold that the strong-ontological interpretation of the laws of nature is incoherent, as Tracy does, the tetralemma argument loses its fourth premise and cannot even get started, at least as I formulated it. Nevertheless, I do not accept this claim of incoherence—and I can do that without taking a position on which view of the laws of nature (ontological or strong ontological) is correct. Anyway, quibbles such as this do not blunt the driving insight of the tetralemma argument, as I shall point out in what follows.

## Response to Phil Clayton

Clayton's response is one of the most rhetorically spectacular pieces I have read from him. I am honored by his attempt to clarify my argumentation and unmask my real motives; close and creative reading is rare and always valuable. I cannot accept his gift of reinterpretation, however, though in one important respect, Clayton does get at my theological agenda, and I shall come to that presently. We will not get to the root of the disagreement between us by reanalyzing argumentation. As a famous politician once said, "it's a vision thing." Therefore, I shall attempt to go right to the core of the disagreement and work outwards from there.

Clayton and I espouse different ways of handling the inevitable failure of human reason, but we do so against a background of shared ideas about human inquiry, as follows.<sup>2</sup> We both accept that reason is powerful but also limited, whether we apply it to divine or earthly matters. We both reject foundationalist epistemologies, whether in Descartes' or Locke's or Kant's forms, as unfaithful to the way human beings actually know. We both accept that we learn and generate beliefs by reflexively or deliberately formulating hypotheses, which entails fallibilism. We both affirm that we can, if energy and circumstances permit, seek to correct hypotheses in a wide variety of ways, including intersubjective dialogue, coherence and consistency constraints, empirical adequacy—and to these I would add socially borne aesthetic and moral criteria, perhaps with more definiteness than Clayton might. We both insist that equilibrating conflicting beliefs is often a complex process that may require centuries of effort, if it is even possible, and that the extent to which we can resolve conflicting beliefs is an empirical matter involving human ingenuity, social organization, and disciplined labor. I think we both recognize that the condition for the possibility of such theories of inquiry is something about the world (let us call it a "feedback mechanism") that enables hypothesis correction. We both see that the rationality of the process of hypotheses formation and correction cannot be secured formally from within the framework of the theory of inquiry. I suspect this is why we are both theologically minded philosophers apt to vest in the idea of divine creation the final reason for the possibility of successful inquiry and why, too, we find process theology's removal of God from that role philosophically unsatisfactory (there are other reasons to find it *theologically* unsatisfactory). With regard to metaphysics, including theology, we both reject Kant's argument in the transcendental dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that we can have no knowledge of such matters and that every attempt to form beliefs produces the antinomian chaos of irrational arbitrariness. Kant's arguments about the antinomy of pure reason are not conclusive and nothing else he says decisively impugns the rationality of hypothesis formation and correction in metaphysics and theology. Indeed, the much-analyzed philosophical arc from Lock and Hume through Kant and Fichte to Schelling and Hegel showed that Kant's own account of reason presupposed an unanalyzed perspective from which the judgment of limits on knowledge arises, whereas the thorough consideration of this perspective collapses Kant's foundationalist aspirations for human knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Metaphysics

lives again, along with theology and transcendental psychology, albeit in the sometimes desperate realm of apparently (if not actually) perpetually intractable disagreement.

This is rather a lot to agree on, but even as sensitive dependence within chaos theory requires a rigid causal framework, surely it is only closely coordinated philosophical points of view that are capable of being forced apart dramatically and colorfully by philosophical subtleties. In the case of Clayton and me, the philosophical subtlety is the way we gear our theories of inquiry to slightly different expectations about how successful metaphysics and theology can be under the post-Kantian, non-foundationalist, massively interdisciplinary, and spaciouly cross-cultural modes that we propose for them. Clayton is more optimistic and I less—note, I am no pessimist, as Kant or A. J. Ayer were, merely less of an optimist than Clayton is. His greater optimism leads him to stay the course of intersubjective dialogue by which we might correct metaphysical and theological hypotheses, and to maximize traction for the sake of keeping this process of intersubjective dialogue and correction going at any cost. My lesser optimism leads me to formulate hypotheses about the way consensus breaks down and the reason disagreements might be intractable. Clayton's motto is "Don't rush to explain why the process of inquiry will fail in some crucial respects when we could still work the process for more illumination!" My response is, "Why not? I want to float another kind of hypothesis for evaluation, one borne not on the rational tradition of early modern metaphysics, which in some ways is your (Clayton's) home turf, but on the skeptical tradition of apophatic mystical theology." I suspect that Clayton's complaint about my viewpoint is, at root, a strategic disagreement, and an appeal for greater loyalty among otherwise similar intellectual projects. Witness his closing appeal: "If she [a participant in the debate] is committed to maintaining traction with science all the way, following the force of the better argument to the bitter end (sink or swim, as it were), then she sets out with a small company on a voyage fraught with peril. I hope that I will not be alone in accepting the call to journey onward."

Now this is conjecture, of course, and Clayton and I may not agree on this analysis. I offer it open-heartedly, confident that both of us are deeply involved in theological inquiry in something like the same mineshaft, even if along different tunnels. To support my interpretation of our intellectual differences, however, I need to address Clayton's reading of my use of Kant.

From my remarks above it is evident that, and cursorily also why, I think Kant is mistaken about the possibility of metaphysics and theology. Stopping the Kantian hordes at the border does not necessarily improve conditions for theology within the land. Contrary to, say, Karl Barth's ingenious but ineffective way of responding to Kant, nothing in my reply to Kant guarantees triumph for theology or even establishes grounds for thinking that theology may be partially successful. Estimating the prospects for theology is an empirical matter involving ingenuity and discipline borne on complex traditions of inquiry, as I have said, and ultimately success depends on whether the "feedback mechanism" can be coaxed into replying to intelligently formed hypotheses about theological matters. Evidence for a good fit between feedback mechanism and theological hypotheses



is better in some areas than in others. For example, I think a scientifically credible, cross-culturally viable theological anthropology is emerging, which is testimony to a good fit between feedback mechanism and theological hypotheses in that area. In the area of the divine nature, I think the fit is poor, and that the few considerations that exist to adjudicate the competition among wildly divergent visions of ultimate reality have little constraining, reconciling, or synthesizing power. In the case of theological anthropology, therefore, I am inclined to invest my energy in constructive theories, reaching for the imagined synthesis of scientific and theological perspectives that now seems just beyond the horizon.<sup>4</sup> In the case of theological ideas of ultimacy, by contrast, I am more intrigued by hypotheses about the ground of apparently intractable disagreements, and particularly fascinated by the precise ways, and reasons, that otherwise similar views diverge from one another.

As the essay to which Clayton has responded makes clear, my view is that ideas of God lie at the core of debates over divine action. This is evident in the way I drew the distinction between special and general divine action, and especially in the "decision tree diagram" of Appendix A. Accordingly, I have worked less in constructive mode and more in the mode of comparative analysis throughout the Divine Action Project. This is far from theologically innocent, as Clayton rightly points out. I want to measure the strengths and liabilities of many views of God and divine action, in order to illumine what decisions are made and why. For this reason, I think that some of the most important observations of the original paper concern issues of theological taste or style (p. 44), points on which no respondents commented. These instincts and motivations fundamentally influence theological decisions about the nature of God, a fact sometimes partially masked by a heavy but finally unconvincing overlay of theological argumentation. I believe that the array of views about objective special divine action ultimately supports my working hypothesis that there is no such thing, because God is not that kind of thing. So yes, I have an agenda, and it is similar to the agenda that Clayton attributes to me, but my hypothesis derives its support in the way I have just described, and by virtue of the deconstructive argument about suffering, not from the tetralemma argument that Clayton focuses on in his response. I conclude this phase of my reply, therefore, by explaining what the tetralemma argument does, in my view of it.

Kant may have been fundamentally wrong about metaphysics and the limits of human knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but there are brilliant insights there, nonetheless. One of his deepest and most compelling insights is that categories of freedom and categories of causation do not mesh. Meshing here means consistency on the terms of mutual translation of categories, so that human freedom should appear within an optimal causal analysis of the natural world. This failure of the ideal of meshing drove Kant to a dramatic form of compatibilism in which he gave human life parallel descriptions under the terms of freedom and morality (practical reason) and under the terms of causation and science (pure reason), both levels of description being complete on their own terms. We can appreciate this insight of Kant's without swallowing his full argument in the transcendental dialectic about the impossibility of metaphysics as

traditionally understood. The tetralemma argument is no more and no less than my attempt to appreciate this insight. The quest for causal joints, whether for human action or divine action, will fail, if Kant is right about freedom and causation. This is so even if God is in fact a personal agent, and even if Kant is wrong about metaphysics and the associated possibility of meaningful dialogue between theology and science. The tetralemma argument illuminates the fascinating ways that participants in the Divine Action Project cope with the stress imposed on their proposals by the fact, as I see it and in my terminology, that Kant is right about the ultimate failure of quests for causal joints. Where Clayton sees an argument for a failed project, I see an analysis of theologians at intelligent play, with worthy and comprehensible motivations, but under real pressures from structures of reason that make the search for a causal joint of divine action ultimately futile. This is what Austin Farrer grasped so clearly, and I also think why he refused to be drawn on questions about the causal joint of divine action.

Can my way of developing the tetralemma argument be extended, against my intentions, to a more aggressive argument against the entire Divine Action Project, and even against the science-theology enterprise, as Clayton suggests? Not on my terms, it cannot. To see the argument that way involves understanding the arbitrariness of only partially constrained theological play as a failure of rationality. A strong optimist about human rationality and the world's feedback mechanism, such as Clayton, may be able to make that interpretation. A weaker optimist of my ilk never could. On the topic of divine action, where ideas of God are everything, rationality consists precisely in tradition-borne play, with a variety of styles and motivations, satisfying diverse theological instincts and agendas, always in search of correction. Perhaps debates over divine action some day will resemble the more tractable debates over theological anthropology, but I do not think this will be soon, if it ever happens. In the meantime, the grand hypothesis that is my theory of inquiry has room for the rational formation of multiple conflicting hypotheses about the divine nature vainly in search of correction—perhaps temporarily in vain, or perhaps forever in vain. I suspect that certain fundamentally impressive ideas of ultimate reality are irreducibly in conflict for reasons that we can understand to some degree by examining the details of the disagreements. I conjecture that this is so because the apophatic mystical theologians are correct in their belief that superfluity of meaning in divine reality overflows all conceptual containers, breaks all religious symbols, and forces perspectival scattering of theological portrayals of God.

### **Response to Bill Stoeger**

With this I come, finally, to Stoeger's response. From everything I have said, it will not surprise the reader that Stoeger has been the core participant of the Divine Action Project with whose views I have felt most at home. Stoeger's fidelity to the "protocol against idolatry" suits me very nicely. I do not object to his way of parsing the categories that distinguish positions on divine action, or even to his

appeal for "a much more nuanced parsing of these concepts." I suspect that parsing things in Stoeger's terms is less useful for getting at the lines of debate as they actually unfolded in the Project. Stoeger's view of God and divine action is common enough in theological circles but it is not so common within the Divine Action Project itself, at least among the theologians, who are predominantly personalist theists of one or another sort. While everyone repudiates idolatry, many Divine Action Project participants do not agree with Stoeger about the extent to which the protocol against idolatry forces them to reject the idea of God as "another entity, or another cause or agent, alongside other entities, causes, or agents we are familiar with." Their appeal is to the Bible before Aristotle, and even before Saint Thomas. They see no philosophical problem with a subtly developed view of God as an intentional agent, though they are intensely sensitive to the ways this can happen without offending their own theological convictions. I stand by my way of defining the terms of the debate, accordingly, and prefer to enter my objections to personalist theism at a level other than the way I parse the debate itself.

The deep point that Stoeger raises about religious language expresses a particularly difficult and storied theological problem. In the original paper, I bracketed the question of the status of theological language about divine action and the divine nature, and simply stated that we have to assume that there is some meaningful way of speaking theologically with varying "degrees of literalness." Stoeger is quite correct that much more needs to be said about this. In view of the extended failure of theology to come to terms with this challenge, however, I did not think that a review of the Divine Action Project was the place to get into the topic.

The fundamental fault line in debates over degrees of literalness in theological language distinguishes the *analogia entis* (analogy of being), on the one side, from the univocity of being, on the other. Debates on this topic energized late medieval Christian theology. Thomas Aquinas conceived being as something that could occur in more than one mode, or with varying intensity. He argued that we apply predicates to God based on what they mean when applied to the finite world, with the difference in meaning regulated proportionally by the difference between divine and finite being. This "analogy of proportionality" suffers from the fact that we do not actually know how the divine being differs from human or other finite being, so we cannot properly use this distinction to control the analogical extension of predicates such as "love" or "agent" from the human realm to the divine. Thomas's willingness to accord being this fundamental role in stabilizing theological language about God seems too hopeful, accordingly, yet the move itself is somehow deeply appealing. It is a medieval version of the Greek philosophical instinct to recognize variations in intensity or mode of being, expressed so powerfully in Plato's Divided Line (from the *Republic*), Aristotle's Great Chain of Being, and (much later) Plotinus's Neoplatonic vision of cascading worlds of beings emanating from and finally returning to the One. If the idea of proportionality does not establish the *analogia entis*, however, to what can theologians turn? How should they understand this ancient and vast Greek intuition underlying and inspiring the so-called

ontotheological tradition of western philosophy and theology, as well as its repudiations?

Those affirming the univocity of being assert that this grand tradition was simply mistaken in a fundamental yet understandable way. John Duns Scotus, for example, argued that “variations in intensity of being” was an incoherent idea. He admitted that being had two modes, finite being and infinite being, but in both cases, “being” has the same meaning. Similarly, “being” does not change its fundamental meaning or reference when thought of as substance or qualified with attributes; the univocity of being holds that “being” means just one thing in all instances, even if it is difficult to specify this meaning precisely. Some versions of the univocity of being go further than Scotus and propose a grammatical reduction of “being” to a syntactic placeholder with no positive semantic content. While we do have to account for emergence in nature, and for the God-world distinction, all forms of the univocity of being insist that degrees of being or levels of being or varying intensities of being are ultimately misleading ways to do that. In its most theologically optimistic forms (as in Charles Hartshorne’s philosophical theology), the univocity of being justifies literal talk about the divine reality, God’s attributes, and God’s activities. However, this solves the problem with such boldness that most have been unconvinced. More commonly, the univocity of being grounds a kind of speechlessness about the divine reality while marginalizing natural theology and massively increasing reliance on the concept of revelation, thought of as the indispensable process by which God and God’s nature is given to human speech. In Karl Barth’s theology, for instance, there was no analogy of being (*analogia entis*), no path from the created world to God (natural theology), no sign of the Trinity in the natural order (*vestigium trinitatis*), only revelation and faith (*analogia fidei*).

On both sides of this fault line, we find mystical theologians. It is difficult to generalize about them, accordingly. Speaking for myself as a mystical theologian, the analogy of being is but one way to project the human imagination toward the finally incomprehensible (and therefore partially, in the sense of preliminarily, intelligible) ultimate reality. There are other trajectories by which we conjure our flickering images of the divine. The hearty but exhausted metaphysics of ontotheology yields among mystical theologians to play across differences, to paradoxical juxtapositions, to tradition-borne liturgical practices, or to disciplined experimentation with conceptual trajectories such as the *via negativa* (the way of progressively negating divine predicates) and the *via positiva* (the way of progressively affirming divine predicates). If the challenge of articulating “degrees of literalness” in theological talk of divine action is not thereby resolved, it certainly is engaged. In the process of ongoing engagement, my sense is that the definiteness of the fault line between approaches to being shudders a little, inviting interpretations of the struggle for God talk that turn less narrowly on being and more broadly on all of the ways human beings reach for the highest and best that they can imagine.

Well, this does say more about the status of theological language, but no doubt less than Stoeger would want, and certainly less than should be said. Stoeger rightly problematizes all speech about divine action. In particular, and the

ongoing lack of a solution within theology to the problem of "degrees of literalness in God talk" calls into question the value of highly intricate speculations about the God-world causal joint.

I thank the respondents once again for their thoughtful and in places extremely shrewd essays. I trust that my reply advances discussion of the issue of divine action and, beyond that, enhances our mutual celebration of the work accomplished in the Divine Action Project.

## Endnotes

- 1 For example, see Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25.
- 2 For Clayton's theory of inquiry, see especially *Explanation from Physics to Theology*. For mine, see "The Resilience of Religion in Secular Social Environments: A Pragmatic Analysis," in Hermann Deuser, ed., *Religion in Dialogue with Science: Tradition and Plural Cultures* (forthcoming). ③
- 3 Garth W. Green argues that Kant himself fully grasped this toward the end of his life; see his dissertation, "The Aporia of inner Sense" (Boston University, 2004), which analyzes this line of argument in Kant's *Opus Postumum*.
- 4 For example, see Wesley J. Wildman, "The Challenge of Theological Anthropology: Coordinating Biological, Social, and Religious Visions of Humanity," *Zygon* 33, no. 4 (1998).

## Biographical Notes

**Wesley J. Wildman** is Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at Boston University, School of Theology. He is ordained in the Uniting Church of Australia. Dr Wildman is Associate Editor of *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion* (Macmillan Reference, 2003). His publications include, *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century* (SUNY, 1998), (co-editor of) *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue* (Routledge, 1996).

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