

INCONGRUOUS GOODNESS, PERILOUS BEAUTY, DISCONCERTING TRUTH: ULTIMATE REALITY AND SUFFERING IN NATURE

Wesley J. Wildman

Introduction

Speaking of ultimate reality is bizarre. Most theologians and a few philosophers are captivated by such speech, however, and choose it even while understanding its final futility. Rejecting the advice of probably wiser but possibly timid souls, theologians go ahead and dream their dreams, spinning them into great tomes of wisdom and ritualized traditions of debate. It is an act of defiance in the face of inevitable human ignorance and an act of simple trust in the receptive grace of ultimate reality. Speaking of ultimate reality is only simple for the ignorant or the young. For theologians who know their labors are the very stuff of dreams, the impossibility of the task is captivating. They bypass the crisp argument to get to the elegant paradox that reflects their warring instincts. They refuse the novel for the sake of ancient insight. They turn from conventional wisdom in the name of loyalty to truth as hard as diamonds. Good theologians never forget the knife-edge character of their journey, strung out between betraying the sacred by saying too much and abandoning their duty by surrendering to the beckoning silence. There is a wax-winged thrusting of the soul heavenwards to the sun.

Nothing conjures theological dreams more than the reality of suffering in nature. Suffering, in one way, is not a problem for theologians; it is the very lifeblood of their book-bent bodies. Every theological tradition draws **its power** from the relentless power of suffering to make us seek dreams. Judaism staggers under the weight of being chosen to suffer, Christianity has a crucifix at its center, and Islam has the most profound construal of surrender imaginable. Hinduism's samsaric vision frames suffering in serenity, Buddhism teaches us how to escape it, and Chinese religion tells us how to organize our lives to manage it. Occasionally we see theologians valiantly defending their faith in face of suffering, but this act of loyalty means something only to needy believers and nasty detractors; such defenses are essentially a public service. Less often we see theologians refusing the question, brushing it aside with a story or a joke, or aggressively attacking defenders of the faith as somehow betraying the very thing they seek to honor and protect. Bless us all. In the ominous light of suffering, all theology is a kind of agonized writhing. But there is nothing to be done for us. Again and again we return to the streets of suffering, scouring the sidewalks for the penny we know must be there, the coin that will make sense of everything.

Cursed to wander in search of secrets, then, let us not waste energy on defending the universe or its divine heart, at least not when we are praying or talking to one another. We will do our spirited public service defenses and our dutiful institutional rationalizations when we must, of course. And there really is no problem with any of that; obviously humanly recognizable

divine goodness can be defended in the face of suffering if we are determined enough. We have all the standard tools ready to hand, from best-of-all-possible-worlds arguments to unavoidable-side-effect-of-overriding-good arguments. If we get desperate, we can fall back on “God can’t stop it,” “God has a bigger plan,” “God suffers with us,” “It is not really real,” or “Just wait until it is all put right.” And if the arguments are not quite as compelling as we would like them to be, neither are the assaults on the overall goodness and meaning of life, the universe, and everything, so there is no need to panic. Our acts of institutional maintenance and defense are certainly successful enough to keep the hostile hordes at bay.

So let’s take a deep breath, set all that aside, and return to our first obsession, our calling and our curse: the theological task of speaking of ultimate reality in face of the proximate reality of suffering in nature. The varied phenomena of suffering in nature press hard upon all theological theories of ultimate reality. It is impossible to approach such an interpretative task without appreciation for the creativity displayed in intellectual efforts past and present, within Western cultures and outside them. Likewise, it is impossible to step so sure-footedly among the shards of past efforts that we forget that before which we wander and play with our theological concepts, that greatest of all realities which drives us to silence when we are most attentive to it and yet suffers our speculations without reproach. Humility is the theologian’s byword on pain of irrelevance.

2 A Reverent Competition among Three Views of God

It is for these reasons that I set out to bypass theodicies and defenses for now and to speak of ultimate realities instead. Rather than presuming a theory of ultimate reality for the sake of a theological meditation on suffering, however, I suggest we take less for granted and use suffering as a source of selective pressure on God ideas. I am particularly interested in the effects of a full awareness of the reality of suffering in nature on a reverent competition among three theological approaches to God, two of which are also accounts of ultimate reality, and all of which are important in the contemporary theological scene: determinate-entity theism, process theism, and ground-of-being theism. In what follows I shall try not merely to describe these three approaches to speaking of God but also to express each one’s beating heart and its fundamental attraction, thereby to discern the resulting theological criteria that each marshals to guide its strategy for making sense of suffering in nature. This reverent competition will allow me to articulate how ground-of-being theism handles the problem of suffering in nature. This theological view is an awkward partner for common human moral expectations but deeply attuned to the ways of nature and resonant with the wisdom about suffering that is encoded in many of the world’s religious and philosophical traditions.

The intended audience for this argument is qualified experts interested in the topic, and it includes broadly theistic theologians, religious naturalists, metaphysicians, and intellectuals from a variety of religious traditions. I fully realize that I cannot completely satisfy the legitimate intellectual demands of such a complex audience, but I am motivated to try because it is the proper audience to evaluate a view of ultimate reality and its relation to the world. Some will object to my attempt to produce a general theologi-

cal interpretation of suffering as intellectually futile and will urge me to pick a smaller audience within which I can realize their favorite theoretical virtue, namely, high confidence in the theological model relative to a religious group that can make use of it. It follows that not everyone is interested in theology as a kind of general inquiry, as I am. While I do not fault such objectors for their less general and more practical interests, I do think they should not prejudice the possible results of theological inquiry in a broader audience, particularly at the dawn of an unfamiliar era of comparative metaphysics.

I pause to comment on a terminological difficulty. I will treat these three views of God as types of theism. Some would argue that the word “theism” has become so closely associated with the personalist elements of determinate-entity and process views that it is misleading as a description of ground-of-being theologies. To put my response compactly, I contend that this personalistic focus in the doctrine of God is excessive. It is a post-Reformation distortion, deeply linked to the “turn to the subject” in modern philosophy and theology. It also tends to reflect the economic and social values of middle-class suburban white Protestants. I am unwilling to allow the general category of theism to be held hostage to what I hope amounts to a passing trend in the history of Western Protestant theology. But I acknowledge the terminological difficulty and do not want it to cloud or mask my view of ultimate reality as ground of being.

2.1 *Determinate-entity Theism*

The first view in our reverent competition is determinate-entity theism, which conceives God as an eternal, all-powerful being with a compassionate awareness of every circumstance and moment of suffering, the ability to act in history and nature, and the moral quality of humanly recognizable goodness to a supreme degree. This view can be called “personal theism” because its initial moves are to analogize the divine nature using the intentional and agential capacities of human persons, but I shall continue to refer to it as determinate-entity theism, which I think is a more accurate term. This is because the best of the determinate-entity views are not slaves to personal analogies. They make allowance for the ill-fitting aspects of personal analogies for God by introducing balancing symbols. For example, the common metaphor of blinding light applied to the divine presence suggests that the divine wisdom would necessarily sometimes have to be incomprehensible and the divine will occasionally inscrutable. These balancing mechanisms resist the ever-present danger of anthropomorphism in God-talk. Indeed, the flatly anthropomorphic versions of these views are the object of aggressive attacks both externally from skeptics and internally in the sacred texts of all major theistic religious traditions. From both directions, the critiques regard excessively anthropomorphic views as superstitious, and thus (like all superstition) constantly in need of special pleading in face of the contraindicating evidence of worldly experience. By contrast, subtler anthropomorphic symbolism, balanced with nonanthropomorphic symbols for the sake of empirical adequacy, has played an essential role in all theistic religions.

The inevitability of anthropomorphism is due to the particularity of the human imagination. To this extent the projection analyses of religion from

Feuerbach to Freud are correct: human beings must picture ultimate reality in terms of the highest and most profound reality they know, which is themselves, or at least their parents, their rulers, their warriors, their shamans, and their priests. And they are also obviously correct that this casts doubt upon all anthropomorphic picturing of ultimate reality. We can allow this and yet insist that nothing about projection strategies for interpreting ultimate reality entails atheism—neither the sheer fact that they occur nor the reflexivity of their occurrence, neither their pervasiveness nor their moral dangers. This is where some of the projection theorists allowed the enthusiasm of new realization to lead them into theoretical distortion. As grappling with these critiques for more than a century has made clear, the world still demands theological interpretation in terms of ultimate realities even though projection reflexes are an inevitable accompaniment of such interpretations. The theological and practical religious challenge is to manage projection-driven anthropomorphism, not to eschew it altogether, and by and large the great theistic traditions have done this fairly well.

What kind of determinate entity is the divine reality? Theologians giddy with the joy of speech may lose track of the fact that they construct answers to this question. They may attempt to evade responsibility by saying that they merely faithfully and thoughtfully update a tradition that bears forward an answer whose origins lie hidden in untold revelatory transactions, or by self-consciously submitting themselves to a purported revelation whose veracity lies beyond question on pain of banishment from one's beloved community of theological companions. It makes no difference: we construct in our hermeneutical glosses, in our conceptual rearrangements, in our ignorant rediscoveries, in our claims of allegiance, in our self-righteous criticisms, and in our charges of improper novelty. And we incur responsibility as we do so. Let us skip past the clever subterfuges whereby we pretend at merely receiving and handling sacred ideas. We should embrace the fate of theologians, which is to speak into life ideas of ultimate realities for each other and on behalf of the great traditions of spiritual practice and social organization that orient the living, including us, as we wander the tangled paths joining living memory to a future unknown, save for the certainty of our own deaths. If we are lucky, our ideas of ultimate realities will **resonate** with the peculiar cosmic harmonies and noisy dissonances that test and constrain our speculations. If we are very lucky, our theological ideas will bring a measure of contentment and conviction, even though we know we will gladly surrender them as our deaths bring us near to the ultimate reality itself, which always looms before and hovers beneath us. And this is really what we are up to on this view: we are trying to make sense of our lives, of the lives of those we love, even of the lives of those we hate or whose experience we cannot comprehend. To this end, we take unto ourselves the power to speak into reality the dreams we dream, to conjure and weave, to construct and argue. We will not shrink from our anthropomorphic instincts and their associated limitations, nor from our simple need to make sense of life in this vale of joy and tears.

With no evasions, then, what will we say is the determinate character of the ultimate reality we call God? We will assert, simply, what we most long to be true: that ultimate reality makes final, beautiful sense of everything; that in God there lies meaningful hope for the downtrodden, and even for our own sorry hearts; that God will make our souls live on in a per-

fectly purified realm whose proportions we can almost imagine but never realize in this world; that God can be the object of our love and will respond to us personally, knowingly, and graciously. Thus, God will be good in a humanly recognizable way, powerful in a way that is relevant to fulfilling our longings, all-knowing in a way that unmasks those longings, and benevolent in a way that forgives our stupid hatred and fear and self-destructiveness. If God needs to take action in our history and nature to secure the possibility of these unendingly desired outcomes, then God's mercy will bend to the task.

In short, God's determinate nature is known in our longings. Everything else we say theologically must serve this overridingly important vision of ultimate reality, and this becomes the *crucial criterion of determinate-entity theism*. It is anthropomorphic, yes. But our humanly shaped imaginative capacities open this reality up for us, so there should be no shame about constructing a theological environment for human life that matches our deepest longings. Our great hope is answered in the booming resonances of cosmic space and time, and the answer is yes! This is good news of the stunning, life-changing, shockingly apt sort.

Determinate-entity theism is fundamentally optimistic, magnificently anthropomorphic, and existentially thrilling. It stays close to the hopes and fears of ordinary human beings. It communicates to most people effectively and inspires sublime art and music and architecture. It requires that sacred texts be submitted to no more than a courteous minimum of demythologization, which really amounts to mere cultural updating. It has relatively few variants, and their battles with one another for credibility do not seriously threaten the big picture. So God may judge and damn the wicked, as our own vengeful hearts demand, or God may run the scythe of judgment through every heart and draw us all into the divine presence with grief-tinged joy and thankfulness; God may send suffering to advance an inscrutable plan or tolerate unwanted suffering for the sake of nurturing souls that can richly long for divine fellowship. Such disagreements do not wreck the coherent and attractive flavor of determinate-entity theism, with its central ideal of perfect personal goodness, so long as we are willing to regard them as subordinate details. Determinate-entity theism's portrayal of the divine personality mutates over cultures and eras, reflecting different fashions and needs. Yet the same basic idea of God persists through all of these variations.

The crucial theological criterion associated with this blessed draft is uncompromising. Theologians devoted to a God that miraculously answers human longings are intensely sensitive to intellectual moves that dilute the strength of the brew or import alien elements that confuse its flavor. They find the most perfect recipes for their preferred drink in the sages of the past and are suspicious of newfangled ideas that always and only seem to wreck perfection in the name of short-sighted, arrogant innovation. Yet they are also unafraid to translate their favorite recipe in the language of the day; there is not a trace of secret gnosis here. Theirs is a welcome and healing draft, after all, and compassionate souls can only commend it to their self-deluded and self-destructive companions on the way. More concretely, they unfailingly diagnose theological compromises with alien cultural wisdom as seductions to be resisted, and they typically see demythologization programs as advancing other agendas that finally cannot

be rendered compatible with their own. Yet they have no difficulty understanding that real wisdom may be present in religious traditions other than those they know best, for their vision of ultimate reality is not at risk from the realization that there may be many authentic ways. Narrower theologies claiming exclusive prerogatives face an insoluble problem in the face of religious pluralism, but this determinate-entity vision of ultimate reality can be made as capacious as it is perfectly fitted to human longings.

Compassionate forms of determinate-entity theism in our era tend to regard suffering in nature as an unfortunate by-product of otherwise good natural processes. An argument of this sort is common in this volume: if God wanted to create creatures capable of freely entering into loving fellowship with their creator, then God would have no choice but to allow the natural evils that come with finitude and physicality and the moral evils that freedom brings. In an earlier era these same theologians may have regarded suffering as divine punishment or testing, or otherwise sent by God to achieve morally unimpeachable divine purposes. For example, the accidental death of a child was routinely interpreted as God taking the child for special divine companionship, and this could and still can bring genuine comfort to grieving parents willing to surrender to this vision of tragedy consistent with perfect divine love.

Theological fashions aside, all of these determinate-entity views affirm that the world we inhabit is the best of all possible worlds. The crucial criterion absolutely requires this, and without it, the very point of determinate-entity theism in the form discussed here fails utterly. God must be good in a humanly recognizable way and powerful in a humanly relevant way for human longings to find their perfect answer in ultimate reality, for this creation to be a home rather than a hopeless and hostile environment for futile human writhing. Of course, the ultimate divine purpose for this world of suffering and love may remain rationally obscure, or clear only in the sense that confidence in revelation can make theological claims clear, but even then God's goodness, the creation's wondrous purpose, and the sacred meaning of every human life is assured. At root, this is the best of all possible worlds in the same sense that God is the best possible answer to human longings. The associated interpretation of suffering in nature spins itself around this central axis.

2.2 Process Theism

Our reverent competition's second candidate is process theism. Importantly, this is not a theory of ultimate reality. The process God in most of its variations is one actual entity alongside many others that constitute the fluxing process of reality, albeit one with a special role. God's role is to maximize value in the cosmic process, including by making the greatest possible use of every configuration of events, including those involving suffering. God is not creator in this view, so God is not all-powerful. Removing suffering is not a possibility now or at any future time, therefore, but making the most of every welcome occasion and each disastrous event is the perpetual divine responsibility. God does this by constituting the unfolding divine nature with the awareness of all that happens, arranged and related so as to maximize value and goodness. This leads to the first sense in which the process God is good literally by definition: the so-called conse-

quent divine nature is maximally good by construction in and through its prehension of feeling of the world process itself. The other sense in which God is good by definition derives from the process account of causation: God conveys to every moment of the world's process a vision of possibilities that functions as a lure toward beauty, goodness, and truth appropriate to each kind and level of event. The source of this lure is partly the so-called primordial nature of God, which is a wondrous vision of possibilities. God's goodness is postulated at each pole of this dipolar theism, and it is humanly recognizable goodness, at least at our level of complexity.

The goodness of God is assured by definition, therefore, but key questions about ultimate reality remain open, including what it is and whether it is good. Most versions of process theism do not seek a theory of ultimate reality in the form of a God concept. On the contrary, the God concept of process theology—whether in Whitehead's "single actual entity" form or Hartshorne's "series of actual occasions" form—is practical for human beings only to the extent that it does not repeat the mistakes of the past, premier among which is to make of God an ultimate reality. This stance does not make a theory of ultimate reality impossible, but it does entail that a process-based theory of ultimate reality, though it includes the process God, must go well beyond God to encompass the various principles to which the cosmos and God alike are subject. Whitehead's philosophical cosmology, as expressed in *Process and Reality*, is pluralistic: there are many fundamental categories. Ultimate reality is not one thing, the ontological solution to the philosopher's problem of "the one and the many"; rather, it is the pattern by which creativity perpetually produces one from many. It is that which is closest to experience and thus the least abstract and most pervasive feature of reality. In this sense it is what is ultimate about reality. But it is not God, even though, like all processes within reality, God expresses it.

The basic theological instinct of process theism is easy to recognize and deeply moving. It aims to deliver us from an unhealthy obsession with an illusory picture of God. Process theologians are the very few theologians who resist the drug of ultimacy speech in the name of usefulness; they can feel the tug but they just say no. If we surrender our attachment to a God of infinite power who creates everything, makes sense of everything, and finally gives meaning to everything, then we can open ourselves to a more modest but more concretely satisfying picture of God. The plausibility of traditional determinate-entity theism is massively strained by our ordinary experience of life. We see around us not a perfectly good world, and certainly not anything that would recommend the idea of a perfectly good omnipotent creator. Rather, our experience suggests that reality is a morally neutral environment for the interplay of a host of processes, within which we witness both beauty and goodness, on the one hand, and disintegration, and pointless suffering, on the other.

This shows us that traditional determinate-entity theism is anthropomorphism run amok; it is a stubborn assertion of human longings against the unrelenting facts of existence. Our attachment to such a picture of God is self-delusory and, in the long run, distorts our view of everything else. Process theism beckons us to move toward a divine light of a different sort, one in which God is explicitly aligned with the parts of the cosmic process that make for beauty and goodness. Stop coercing the cosmos to fit a God-

concept driven by over-expansive human longings! Exchange that rapacious God-concept for one actually fitted to human spiritual longings and moral aspirations, and the theodicy problem evaporates. The price for this invaluable benefit is merely surrendering the futile quest for a morally comprehensible ultimate reality.

The deep intuition here is that anthropomorphic instincts in theology work only when they are limited to the patterns and parts of the world process that are scaled to human longings. To project human longings and expectations beyond this limit is, unsurprisingly, intellectually disastrous and spiritually frustrating. Let the whole of reality be what it is! It is a relief to lower one's eyes and to focus on making concrete sense of our longings and aspirations in relation to the world of our actual experience. In this world many things occur that threaten to destroy us, from accidents to natural disasters, from predators to human stupidity. Instead of calling these things good, as seems to be demanded in some sense when we say they are the creations of a recognizably good deity, just stop trying to make human-friendly meaning out of them. They are threats to the integration of goodness and beauty at human and other levels, even if they are co-conditions of integration and emergence. But nothing stops us from picturing God as unambiguously on the side of maximizing values of goodness and beauty, and taking refuge in this God, we shield ourselves from the harsh light of the entire world process, which is as hostile to life as it is supportive.

For the traditional determinate-entity view, a meteor slamming into the Earth that destroys the human species is an unfortunate side effect of a process that God created and sustains for the sake of higher goods, and the (severe) problem is why God did not intervene to prevent the destruction of an entire ecosphere. On the process view this is a disaster, period, and God is left to integrate the horrible consequences of an event beyond divine control into the divine nature. Whereas we may have difficulty relating humanly to the God who creates a world with such possibilities, we have no trouble relating to a God who does not control such events but is left to pick up the pieces afterwards. This shows why anthropomorphism must be limited to the domain within which process theism operates, and also both why it works well within that domain and why it works badly beyond it.

Nothing stops us speculating on ultimate reality within the process framework, just as Whitehead did. Indeed, we could integrate the pluralistic process conception of ultimate reality into a competing idea of God. This gives us two candidates for the use of the word "God"—the process entity, God_p (P for Process), which is scaled to most human spiritual longings and moral intuitions, and creativity itself, God_c (C for Creativity), which is the source of pain and pleasure, purpose and pointlessness. On the one hand, process theologians hold that God_c is religiously useless because it is morally impenetrable, so most resolutely ignore it and advise others to do likewise. Specifically, the process view alleges that traditional determinate-entity theists deeply mischaracterize God_c when they say it is good in a humanly recognizable way, and wrongly assert that God_c is able to bring meaning to everything that happens in way that reflects a personal center of consciousness. Whatever God_c is, on the process account, it is exceedingly resistant to anthropomorphic modeling, and certainly nothing like the personal God of so many sacred texts and religious pieties. The human-like

activity and moral sense of God_p are what matters to most human beings and to the human species thought of as a civilizational, cultural, and moral project.

If God_c is what matters to some theologians, it is because they love what can neither be rationally comprehended nor morally assimilated. This is an unhealthy intellectual obsession with no concrete benefits for the world and only perplexity and despair for the ones so magnificently obsessed. Process theists would gladly liberate their theological companions caught in the conceptual chaos of overreaching anthropomorphism that arrogantly forgets its proper limits. But process theists know from hard experience that not everyone shares their instincts about what is important and useful and valuable. Some willingly enslave themselves to an impossible master, after which the delusion that the master is good and loving causes only the most exquisite agony, the agony of the slave who cannot afford the luxury of seeing things as they manifestly are, but can only survive in a world woven from illusions.

2.3 Ground-of-Being Theism

The third view in our reverent competition is ground-of-being theism. Ground-of-being theisms deny that God is a determinate entity in all or most respects. Their theological advocates are deeply wary of anthropomorphism in theology, and as the metaphor “ground of being” suggests, they tend to look toward universal features of reality rather than to exceptional features such as human beings for imaginative symbolic material. Though ground-of-being theisms are theory building efforts rather than apophatic in themselves, they are often aligned with apophatic traditions in theology because they are stations on the way to refusing theological speech in a kind of mute testimony to that which finally transcends human cognitive abilities. They have a rich heritage in Western and South-Asian theological traditions, and in more naturalistic forms within Chinese philosophy. Indeed, they are strikingly similar across these cultural boundaries, particularly in their refusal to tame ultimate realities with humanly recognizable moral categories and in their rejection of an intentional, agential divine consciousness.

Ground-of-being theists share points of agreement with their rivals. On the one hand, they concur with the process critique of the traditional forms of determinate-entity theism we have been discussing. There surely is a place for anthropomorphic modeling in theology, but ground-of-being theism and process theism alike say that determinate-entity theists slip into a world of illusions when they suppose that the creator God_c is good in a humanly recognizable way. On the other hand, ground-of-being theists share the determinate-entity theists’ instinct to bypass the process deity God_p in favor of the creativity deity God_c. These two sorts of theologians are obsessed with the ultimate reality from which the process theist turns away in the name of religious and cultural relevance; they willingly enslave themselves to the complexities and perplexities of thinking of ultimate reality as God.

Ultimate-reality-enslaved ground-of-being and determinate-entity theists do not just docilely accept the process theologians’ charge of futile attachment. They retort that process theology is precisely the wrong kind of

anthropomorphically woven tapestry of illusion. God_p, they argue, is a condensation of humanly supportive trajectories in the universe that happily skips over the rest in a kind of half-hearted and half-spoken Manichaeism. God_p is a mere invention, with the conceptual level pitched to guarantee divine goodness and ramify religious hopes and beliefs. The process refusal to link God with ultimate reality is an arbitrary constricting of the theological purview and a betrayal of the theologian's Promethean calling.

This mutual recrimination over brazen anthropomorphism and futile attachments is one of the exquisite ironies of contemporary theology. The acceptance in our time of a theological viewpoint that eschews a theology of ultimate reality—a rejection formerly unthinkable in orthodox theological circles within theistic religions, yet deeply resonant with some of the portrayals of God in sacred texts—makes this irony possible. Is ultimate reality our bane or our blessing? Should we flee the theologian's self-appointed calling in the name of moral intelligibility or embrace it no matter what the cost? These questions hint at an existentially profound difference in the instincts of contemporary theologians.

Of course, ground-of-being theologians participate in these recriminations but also claim unique theoretical virtues and are subject to distinctive criticisms. In offering a theory of ultimate reality they share the virtues of determinate-entity theism, while in refusing to say that the creativity deity God_c is good in a humanly recognizable way they share in the empirically robust realism of process theology. But the endpoint—an ultimate reality not personally good in a humanly recognizable way—can this even be called a worship-worthy God? Determinate-entity theists argue that the ground-of-being theists' refusal to see ultimate goodness in the heart of reality deals a killing blow to the human aspiration to feel at home in the universe and to believe that human lives have purpose and meaning. Process theists would not put it that way, of course, but they would echo the criticism by saying that the word "God" has to be aligned with goodness at human scales or else it loses its religious relevance. Ground-of-being theism only confirms the process theologian's suspicion that God_c is religiously useless. At least the determinate-entity theists make an effort to preserve religious relevance by insisting that God_c is good in a humanly recognizable way! Ground-of-being theists basically accept the process theist's analysis of ultimate reality as conceptually incomprehensible and morally impenetrable but then call it "God" anyway. This, say process critics, is more an abuse of terminology than their own alleged misuse of the word "God" for something other than ultimate reality.

Ground-of-being theologians seek an empirically adequate theory of ultimate reality, and this drives their refusal to allow that this ultimate can be unambiguously morally good. These views tend to regard suffering as ontologically co-primal with creativity in the divine life and in the world. Thus, they do not treat suffering as an unwanted side effect of otherwise good natural processes and good divine purposes; to do this is an exercise in futility when the unwanted side effects are not minor but rather, on average, of about the same size and importance as the good events. They do not associate God only with human-scaled and human-focused goodness; to do this would be merely to attribute to God the dubious quality of being convenient for humans. They do not affirm that this is the best of all possible worlds; claiming that all of reality is finally good is a mere clutching at

straws as the whirlwind of creativity and suffering spins us around. To what, then, does this interpretation of ultimate reality lead? And why go there?

I shall return to these questions below. For now I note the fundamental instinctive difference between ground-of-being theism and its competitors in this reverent contest. In a supermarket full of potential theological virtues, and being on a tight budget, ground-of-being theists spend their money on plausibility rather than religious appeal, making the most of the latter given what the former allows. They would mistrust some of the prominent items in the human longings aisle that promise to satiate spiritual hunger, and they would scour the top and bottom shelves for affordable nutrition. They would stubbornly refuse to be lured by colorful claims of ultimate intelligibility, ultimate meaning, ultimate purpose, and ultimate justice, and instead stalk the realism and deference aisles, looking for simple, everyday items that deliver these wonders in more modest measure. Perhaps this reflects a kind of disappointed failure of human longings; it certainly expresses a determined effort to accept ultimate and proximate reality.

If our reverent competition reduces to a mere choice among theological personality styles—and surely such considerations are relevant—then this is where we stand. The determinate-entity theists are the optimists and fight against disbelief. They prize reality as ultimately good and human life as ultimately meaningful above all. Those who do not they interpret as stubbornly, self-destructively refusing to accept the wondrous miracle that the character and purposes of ultimate reality are limned in human longings. The process theists are the activists and fight against soporific delusions. They value religious relevance, rational intelligibility, moral clarity, and transformative action above all and so refuse to speculate on ultimate reality while resolutely affirming an alliance between God and human interests. They interpret those who see things differently as in thrall to the illusory mythic sentiment that ultimate reality is a proper object of human religious and intellectual instincts. The ground-of-being theists are the mystics and fight against resentment. They treasure above all the whole of reality as it is without illusions and without limitations to human interests and longings, and they surrender themselves to it, whatever it may be, and without reserve. They interpret those who do not as unable to cope with life as it most truly is and as reserving their love for an idealized, humanized image of God.

3 The Bane of Anthropomorphism

I naturally resonate with and feel some attraction toward all three of these ways of conceiving God in relation to the challenge of suffering in nature. Yet I shall argue that the alternatives to ground-of-being theism face significant conceptual problems in mounting their response and that these problems derive chiefly from trying to make of God a moral agent unambiguously good in a humanly recognizable way.

3.1 The Argument from Neglect

Determinate-entity theism must face what I call the “argument from neglect.” This argument contends that the determinate-entity theist’s concep-

tion of God does not rise even to human standards of goodness and so certainly is not humanly recognizable as perfectly morally good in a way that befits deity. The argument turns on an analogy with human parents, as follows.

A human parent, indeed parents in many species, must constantly balance the need to protect and guide offspring with the need to allow the offspring freedom to learn. Loving parents do not hesitate to intervene in a child's life when they discern that ignorance or mischievousness or wickedness is about to cause serious trouble, and perhaps irreparable disaster. Parents rescue the child, interjecting education, punishment, or encouragement as needed. As time goes on, children need less guidance but parental interference rightly persists until the child is largely independent. Wise parental interference does not limit a child's freedom; on the contrary, it enhances it by protecting the child from freedom-destroying injuries and character defects, and by leading them patiently but surely toward freedom-enhancing independence and moral responsibility. We hold parents negligent, and sometimes criminally negligent, when they fail to intervene when necessary for the sake of their child's safety and well-being.

Human beings are like children in respect of moral and social-civilizational matters. God, on the determinate-entity theist's account, has all of these responsibilities in relation to human beings that human parents have in relation to their children. God should intervene to educate and guide, to punish and redirect. If it is claimed that this does in fact occur, then it certainly does not occur often or effectively enough for God to avoid the same charge of negligence that we would bring upon a human parent acting in similar fashion.

I think creatures besides human beings have a claim on parental protection and nurture from a determinate-entity God. This becomes an especially important point in relation to natural disasters, where the scale of injury and death in other species is frequently far larger than the human losses we most notice. Animals may not be able to raise their voice in complaint, but human beings can do so on their behalf. Together, we feel neglected, exposed to the elements, and left to comfort ourselves with illusions of ultimate love and perfect nurture that experience finally does not support. We get our love and protection, our education and wisdom, not from God's parental activity but from our own good fortune at living in a cosmic era with few meteoric collisions, from our own determination to build stable and rewarding civilizations, and from our own discoveries about the world that we pass along to our children. The idea of God as protective, solicitous parent may make a difference in our lives in the way that a wondrous story can bring comfort and solace, but that is as far as it goes.

3.2 The Argument from Incompetence

Ground-of-being theism is immune to the argument from neglect, but process theism is vulnerable to a variant of it. Process theism properly and predictably replies to the argument from neglect that God is always trying the divine hardest to educate and alleviate suffering in an ultimate reality that is partly hospitable and partly hostile to human interests. But then the well-earned counterreply is that the process God_p may not be negligent but certainly is incompetent. In other words, in what I shall call the "argument

from incompetence," God_p is not powerful enough to merit our worship and allegiance and we should go in search of God_c—the only deity that finally matters, even if its moral character is indigestible.

Of course, if a theological interpretation of suffering in nature requires a theory of ultimate reality then process theology was never a candidate anyway. If our aim is less systematic—say, theological support for a religiously relevant response to suffering in nature—then process theology may be the right sort of proposal, but it is, as I have tried to show here, inadequate. Note that the argument from incompetence does not demonstrate the incoherence of the process idea of God but merely its religious ineffectualness specifically in response to suffering, contrary to claims that its supporters typically make on its behalf. In the case of the argument from neglect, the target is the conceptual coherence of determinate-entity theism.

3.3 The Alternative: Religious Indigestion or the Breath of Life?

Ground-of-being theism is immune to the argument from neglect and the argument from incompetence. But at what price? Its rejection of a personal center of divine consciousness and activity is religiously indigestible to many people, and knocking out two of its major competitors is the very opposite of a good outcome for such folk. Ground-of-being theism simply does not meet their basic criteria for acceptability as a theological interpretation of God. So they will understandably continue the struggle on behalf of determinate-entity and process theisms, representing the interests of their religious constituencies.

Meanwhile, ground-of-being theism is the very breath of spiritual life for some other people. It has a lot to commend it, particularly in relation to the problem of suffering in nature, so long as the ruling theological criteria allow both suffering and blessing to flow from the divine nature itself. This is simply too much for many and yet simply perfect for some. Recognizing this apparently unbridgeable chasm between conflicting theological and religious intuitions, I become less eager to persuade others to become ground-of-being theists. Rather, I want to argue that ground-of-being theism, so often neglected in contemporary theology and in science-religion discussions, should be taken with great seriousness as an intellectually compelling account of ultimate reality, even if it is seen as a threat to determinate-entity and process forms of theism. Given the conceptual structure of the problem of God in relation to suffering in nature, if ground-of-being theism is seen as a threat at all, then it should be seen as a major threat rather than a negligible one.

4 The Blessing of Ground-of-Being Theism

I am arguing that ground-of-being theism should be taken seriously as a theological interpretation of ultimate reality in relation to the challenge of suffering in nature. The reasons go well beyond its immunity to the argument from neglect and the argument from incompetence. In fact, there are two types of reasons. On the one hand, ground-of-being theism possesses native strengths. Some of these are theoretical and derive from placing ultimate reality close to the world of nature as its ontological ground. Other

strengths are practical and draw on the advantages for any authenticity-based spiritual quest of accepting the world as it is without evasion or dreaming. On the other hand, ground-of-being theologies highlight the weaknesses of alternatives. Moral and theological interpretations of suffering in nature rely on a range of argumentative resources that function as vital strategies in theodicies, defenses, and the like. Determinate-entity and sometimes process theists use some of these resources to deflect criticisms of their ideas of God based on suffering in nature, including criticisms such as the argument from neglect and the argument from incompetence. In the searing light of ground-of-being theism, many of these strategic resources are not as useful as they may appear at first, and they seem to be little more than shrouded repetitions of the fundamental criteria that determine what counts as an acceptable theological approach.

In what follows, I shall consider both types of reasons, sometimes together. Each of the themes below deserves consideration at length, but I hope it is enough in this context merely to sketch each point quickly.

4.1 Historical and Economic Awareness

Most people in our time living in so-called developed nations typically have high expectations for comfortable and satisfying lives. They expect to avoid many illnesses and to recover from the illnesses they must endure. They expect children to be born healthy, mothers to survive childbirth, and children to grow up and live long lives. They expect that nutritious and tasty food will never be a problem for them and that they can live in comfort with a wide range of pleasurable activities to fill their days in a fundamentally stable society. If they get bored or sad, they expect to be able to make lifestyle decisions that mitigate the problem. They expect to be well educated, spiritually nurtured, legally defended, and militarily protected. They expect that technology will shield them and those they love from the ravages of nature in all its forms.

Such people differ on ideals of distributive justice, with some wanting to share the wealth and others insisting that the poor and afflicted figure out how to solve their own problems, "just like we did." The religious among them tend to believe that life under this description is a divine blessing even if they take it for granted. Their experience of God typically includes involvement in a religious group where most people experience life much the same way they do, ritual rites of passage with cameras flashing and video recorders preserving memories, and moments of spiritual insight involving God's gracious forgiveness and acceptance and support. Untimely death is rare and so God is seen more as the comforter in face of death than as the bringer of death. Disasters are uncommon and tend to be far off and so God is seen more in the generous and caring responses than in the disasters themselves.

Everyone with any historical sense and any cross-cultural experience understands that this lifestyle and the expectations it creates are exceptional, not typical. It is more difficult to grasp the exceptional nature of the view of God that most people living this way hold. Theistically minded people in other places and eras tended and still tend to see God behind all life events, both the satisfying and the tragic, both the comforting and the discomfiting, both the welcome and the terrifying. They have few expectations

that God will make their life circumstances safe and happy, understanding from their own experience even in childhood that they will have to accept unwelcome life events very often in their many fewer than three-score-and-ten-year lifespan. They tend to see everything that happens as part of the manifestation of divine glory, as a result, and expect that happiness will have to come from an internal spiritual connection to God rather than from cultural and economic conditions.

This case really requires comparative survey data for its synchronic, economic wing and historical analysis of theological opinions among ordinary people for its diachronic wing. I can present neither here, but such data do exist both in the form of international surveys and historical studies of sermons at times of tragedy or popular religious opinions as reflected in the press—see, for example, the extensive literature on the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. Saying “God sent this disaster for inscrutable reasons” used to work better than it does now as a comforting, realistic response to unexpected tragedy. In many places today this response causes outrage, tainting the picture of God’s perfect “wouldn’t hurt a flea” goodness. I am arguing that the ideal of humanly recognizable and humanly relevant goodness is a cultural construction and that it can deeply influence what we are prepared to accept as a plausible theological interpretation of God in relation to suffering.

Perhaps some determinate-entity theists will say that our comparatively magnificent cultural circumstances have allowed us both to realize that God truly is good in just this way and to throw off the comforting but heavy cloak of God standing behind every event, no matter how painful for human and other sentient beings. Perhaps some process theists **point out** that their theological view has become a mainstream option for the first time in an era and within cultures where human control over suffering is such that surrendering the omnipotence of God can seem sensible rather than ridiculous, thus disclosing the way things really are. Seeing this cultural and historical variability in ideas of divine goodness, the ground-of-being theist will continue to praise the divine glory rather than **the vaunt** divine goodness. They will feel a great sense of solidarity with less comfortable life companions past and present. And they will feel that, in one respect at least, their theological interpretation of God in relation to suffering in nature is not a slave to cultural fashions and economic circumstances.

4.2 Theological Significance of the Ground of Being

Speaking of God as the ground of being removes the possibility of proposing a divine character that is profoundly different from the character of the world. This is its chief theological difference from its competitors. Determinate-entity theism requires a divine goodness that our best scientific vision of the cosmos does not easily support and so positively requires some ontological distance between God and the world and a layer of theological explanation for why the world is the way it appears to be despite the purported impeccability of God’s moral character. Process theism associates God’s moral character with some but not all aspects of worldly events, thereby framing God as supportive and similar to the good aspects of natural events but resisting and unlike the bad. Ground-of-being theism needs neither to explain a discrepancy nor to distinguish among events to articu-

late the divine nature. The ground of being is the fecund source of all events, regardless of whether human standards in play at a particular time and place would classify them as good, bad, or indifferent.

But does this not merely sanctify the world as it is?! Indeed, it does, in the particular sense that all structures and possibilities of reality express the divine character. But those expressions include causal patterns and necessities, which also manifest the determinateness of the divine character. Some of these patterns make for life and meaning and some for pointless annihilation, and both possibilities are grounded in the divine nature. The moral conundrum for human beings is not the process theist's bracing Manichaeian or Zoroastrian challenge to join the divine side against the chaos of anarchic freedom, but rather the challenge to decide which part of the divine nature we truly wish to engage. Can we choose purposelessness, violence, and cruelty? Yes, and God awaits us along that path as self-destruction and nihilism. Should we choose to create meaning, nurture children, and spread justice? If we do, the possibility itself is a divinely grounded one. Does God care which way we choose? God is not in the caring business, on this view. The divine particularity is expressed in the structured possibilities and interconnections of worldly existence; wanting and choosing is the human role.

Determinate-entity theists and process theists alike will feel deeply worried about this refusal to align God with a particular moral path. But this merely repeats the quick (but I hope well-earned) caricatures of the former as the optimists and the latter as the activists. By contrast, ground-of-being theists are the mystics who see divine depth in the way things are. This places ground-of-being theism simultaneously close to some forms of religious naturalism, to some forms of apophatic mysticism, to some forms of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, to some forms of Chinese philosophy, and to some forms of atheism. The distinctions among these views are only crisp when God is a determinate entity; otherwise they merge in a way that is profoundly satisfying to the ground-of-being theist. This merging of apparently different views is one of the powerful theoretical virtues of ground-of-being theism.

4.3 Spiritual Significance of the Ground of Being

There is a spiritual corollary of the theological decision to place God close to the world as the ground of its being: existentially authentic acceptance of the world's fundamental character is equivalent to love of and submission to God. Despite the mention of God here, the underlying concept is such that there are obvious resonances with the South Asian spiritual instinct that "samsara is nirvana," including in its atheistic Buddhist form. Does this spiritual posture entail that one does nothing about the world as one finds it? No, and here the resonances are more with Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche declared the death of God in much the way that ground-of-being theism rejects determinate-entity theisms.

What this means morally and spiritually, for individuals and entire civilizations alike, is that human beings must accept not only the world with its structured possibilities but also their capacity to choose; indeed, choice is one of those structured possibilities. On this view, the fulcrum for human moral action lies where it always has, despite all theological obfus-

cations: with human decision. God does not advocate or resist the decisions we make because God ontologically supports all decisions. Improving the world and making it more just is one of the choices before us. This is an invigorating challenge but also terrifying, as Nietzsche pointed out. He praised the spiritual vivaciousness of the one who can take full responsibility for choosing, without any hint of evasion and without any pretense that God favors one choice or another. This is spiritual maturity in the ground-of-being framework.

4.4 Is This the Best of All Possible Worlds?

We can love an optimally good world even if it causes us suffering and even if we feel wide-hearted compassion for other suffering creatures. We may forget our love in a moment of pain, but the habits of trust and acceptance formed in those times when we feel that the world is optimally good bring courage and resolve when we need it most, under the burden of suffering. Some may think that cultivating love for a suffering-filled world is a conceptual trick whose essential purpose, regardless of how we rationalize it, is to cope. Indeed, Buddhist phenomenological and psychotherapeutic analyses of responses to suffering disclose a maze of deflections and projections, attachments and distortions that loom over our noble arguments about the world's optimal goodness and press hard the question of sincerity. But in this vale of tears there are many valuable paths, and some take us into the perpetually uneasy realm of conceptual reasoning and moral judgments about the optimal goodness of the world. We can go there, warily perhaps, but not in total despair.

Is this world optimally good? More precisely, let "suffering landscape" refer to the forms and extent and intensity of suffering relative to the potential for emergent complexity, all within a particular ecosphere. Is the suffering landscape of Earth's natural history and present ecosystem the best of all possible worlds? I think it is possible to argue that the possibility of alternative cosmic, geophysical, biological, and nutritional arrangements with varying suffering landscapes is difficult to block from a scientific point of view. In fact, there is significant scientific evidence that these alternatives should be possible, particularly alternative geologies (e.g., fewer tectonic plates) and alternative biologies (e.g., ecologies with different nutrition profiles). We cannot show this decisively, because it turns on historical accidents or requires different physical or cosmic contexts. But we can know with some confidence that we are not entitled to assume that Earth's suffering landscape is the best of all possible worlds.

This is an important negative conclusion. It strongly suggests that speaking theologically of "the best of all possible worlds" drives against empirical data for the sake of defending a particular conception of divine goodness. But determinate-entity theists might attempt to rehabilitate the "best of all possible worlds" claim by making it empirically more robust. They can enlarge the scope of this claim to include not only the Earth's suffering landscape, past and present and future, but also the suffering landscapes in every physically (not logically!) possible world. Indeed, if we take the multiverse possibility as a physical reality, then we need to include even suffering landscapes in other universes, relatively few of which would seem hospitable to life and suffering. In that case, the multiverse, of which

there is only one, may indeed be the best of all possible worlds. We have rid ourselves of invidious comparisons to other real scenarios because there can only be one multiverse.

Unfortunately, this may not help us to love the world we are in. In the traditional form of the “best of all possible worlds” claim, all beings suffer to greater and lesser degrees. We feel sympathy for those who suffer greatly and perhaps begrudge the luck of those who barely taste the bile of misery, but these variations are part of accepting that this is the best of all possible worlds. A principle of plenitude embraces the Earth’s ecosphere: every kind of suffering and elation will come to light in this strange place, and this necessity for fullness means that there can be no complaint against the Earth and its Great Mother if you happen to dwell in the dark lands of suffering; it is all still good. There is an analogy here with the rehabilitated “best of all possible worlds” claim: there may be one multiverse, but there are many suffering landscapes, and a principle of plenitude governs the whole. Earth may happen to have a middling suffering landscape, a high-suffering one, or a low-suffering one. Regardless of our good fortune or cursed bad luck, this is still the best of all possible multiverses—so we tell ourselves. Yet, just as a poverty-stricken family suffering from needless disease and brutal government suppression and raging tsunamis might long to exchange places with a more fortunate family, so we might long to exchange our entire planet’s suffering landscape for that of a more fortunate locale, where the lyrical theme of emergence is less flawed by the discordant accompaniment of intense and pervasive suffering. Just as the family finds it hard to love its context, so we might understandably find it difficult to love the inferior world in which we find ourselves. And just as it is no comfort to the family to point out that “this is the way the Earth works; it is all good,” so it is no comfort to us when we hear ourselves saying, with tremulous voice, that this is the way the multiverse works—the fact that things are less than optimal here is merely the price paid for the other fact that somewhere (but not here!) there exists a blessedness that makes this the best of all possible multiverses. And it is all good; Mother Multiverse is beyond reproach.

I think determinate-entity theism is in desperate difficulty in relation to this empirically realistic version of the “best of all possible worlds” claim. It involves allowing that a compassionate, personally interested and active divine being tolerates entire worlds with unfortunate suffering landscapes while also beholding worlds with optimal conditions. That is tough to digest. Despite its starkness, however, perhaps this difficulty is not much more severe than that of the traditional form of the “best of all possible worlds” claim, in which the hands of broken-hearted God are tied when it comes to individual moments of suffering—restraint for the sake of the greater systemic good—and yet we still affirm humanly recognizable divine goodness. These considerations show how poor the “best of all possible worlds” claim is as a strategy for articulating an interpretation of suffering in nature relative to determinate-entity theism. In my view, determinate-entity theists may be wisest to postulate that, despite the suggestions of contemporary science, there is no variability in suffering landscapes, perhaps because there is no other life-supporting place in the multiverse, so that the landscape of this and every world is and would be the same, and that this universal suffering landscape is also the best possible suffering

landscape. The anthropocentrism of this view is bitter medicine, but this is what is required to leave the “best of all possible worlds” claim in tolerable health.

Of course, neither process theism nor ground-of-being theism needs to resort to such artifices. Both can take the world just as it is in all its variations and disagree only on how to picture God’s relation to it all.

4.5 Is Suffering an Inevitable By-product of Good Divine Intentions?

A related strategy is to argue that suffering is the necessary by-product of one or another overridingly valuable state of affairs, such as self-consciousness, moral freedom, spirituality, creativity, relationality, love, the capacity for a relationship with God, the incarnation of Christ, the realization of bodhisattvas, or the ability to attain enlightenment. I think it is incontestable that some degree of suffering is indeed an inevitable by-product of such virtues. The connection between desired outcome and suffering is indissoluble and rooted in the evolutionary realities of emergent complexity.

Neither process theists nor ground-of-being theists have to worry about the puzzles this fact may pose for a view of God, but determinate-entity theists have a lot at stake. Determinate-entity theism needs to establish the “best of all possible worlds” claim for the sake of its vision of divine goodness, and the “inevitable by-product” argument is only meaningful if it serves that end. With that in mind, more is required if the “suffering as inevitable by-product” strategy is to be theologically useful for determinate-entity theists. It is not enough that desirable virtues entail *some* degree of suffering. We need to have reason to believe that they entail the *particular* suffering landscape of Earth, or of the cosmos, or of the multiverse. Might not the same virtues emerge in a slightly different biological or geophysical setting with less actual suffering than we see here? Thus, this “suffering as inevitable by-product” strategy does not appreciably assist the determinate-entity theist in establishing that this is the best of all possible worlds.

4.6 Is Suffering Fundamental?

Rather than trying to interpret suffering as one component in a complex emergent world, appearing only with the emergence of life, it is possible to broaden the ordinary meaning of the world and make suffering fundamental to the whole of reality. Buddhist philosophical cosmology routinely makes this move, particularly in its South Asian rather than its traditional Chinese forms. The *pratītya samutpāda* account of reality specifically denies that objects and entities have “own being” or essential individuation. Rather, all realities are bundles of relations that emerge from the web of interdependent connectedness. By the traditional standards of Western philosophy, this Buddhist approach to philosophical cosmology seems out of balance, overstressing relationality and failing to register the intrinsic elements of the entities that, admittedly, always stand in relation to one another. But Buddhists take great heart from the fact that advancing science, especially in the quantum world of the very small, is making it increasingly difficult to say what a substance is independently of its relations. They regard this as confirming their contention that everything arises in dependent correlation with everything else, and even their particularly intense

form of this affirmation that denies independent subsistence to entities of all kinds.

Buddhists are especially interested in human life, as are most religions, but this philosophical cosmology has significance for suffering in nature, also. Thinking through the lens of the First Noble Truth, which asserts that all is suffering, Buddhist philosophers came to view *dukkha*, or suffering, as the immediate and inevitable consequence of *pratītya samutpāda*. There is nothing without suffering because suffering is rooted in relationality and change (*viparināma-dukkha*) and simply in being-conditioned (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*). In its particularly complex forms, as in human life, suffering can be analyzed as attachment to the apparently-but-not-actually real, a problem that can be solved through following the Noble Eightfold Path toward *moksha* or liberation. But suffering already arises in nonhuman settings as a correlate of change and being-conditioned. Suffering is universal. Buddhists fight over what liberation means, not least because certain understandings of it, such as suffering-free compassionate presence, suggest a greater distinction between *pratītya samutpāda* and *dukkha* than the philosophical cosmology allows. This is why the doctrine of emptiness, or *sūnyāta*, is so important to Buddhist philosophy. As difficult as it is to speak about the liberated state as *sūnyāta*, this is the deep entailment of any philosophical cosmology that places *pratītya samutpāda* and *dukkha* in such tight connection.

I see no intrinsic problems with this broad and general usage of suffering and the metaphysical visions it sponsors. Importantly, it is easily compatible with a ground-of-being theism, while being more of a stretch for process theology, which has a different account of what is fundamental at much the same level as a *pratītya samutpāda* cosmology. But we need more. A philosophical cosmology boasting an ontologically fundamental concept of suffering needs also to explain suffering in complex emergent forms, such as physical injury, conscious pain, emotional distress, and existential anxiety. So I prefer to use terms such as “change” and “being-conditioned” for the inanimate realm, to reserve the word “suffering” for the biological realm, and to demand a satisfying theory of emergence situated in a philosophical cosmology that links one to the other. This adjustment to suffering-is-fundamental schemes works well with ground-of-being theologies and suits process theology much better.

4.7 Is Suffering Illusory?

The suffering-is-fundamental strategies, at least in their Buddhist and Hindu forms, paradoxically also affirm that suffering is illusion. This is obvious in the case of human life: suffering is caused by attachment, which is rooted in misperception and misunderstanding of the world, a state of affairs correctable through enlightenment. It is not as evident in the philosophical cosmology of *pratītya samutpāda* and *dukkha*, where suffering seems to be as real as the processes of emergent complexity. But the overall goal of *moksha* reframes *pratītya samutpāda* and *dukkha* alike as a kind of deceptive conjuring that finally is unreal.

The main Western version of the suffering-is-illusory strategy goes by the name of privation theory and is famously associated with Saint Augustine. The really bad part of suffering is the evil that causes it, ac-

ording to Augustine, but evil is merely a privation of good, a distortion with no reality of its own. Privation theory solves a problem in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, which was just firming up in Augustine's time, because it appears to place the explanation for evil on some other doorstep than God's. Finally, of course, shifting responsibility for evil cannot avoid tainting the moral character of God, so Augustine, and more elaborately Gregory of Nyssa, were forced to propose a philosophy of history to bring a dynamic temporal dimension to the story of evil. Evil may seem real now, according to this story, but it is in fact nonbeing and will be shown to be nonbeing, in the sense of sheer nothing, with the unfolding of God's will in history and nature. Thinking of the ontological-historical destiny of evil as nothingness is the basis for our calling it a privation of good in our presently conflicted and suffering-filled circumstances. Interpreting privation theory in connection with philosophy of history helps to deflect the great weakness of illusionist theories of suffering, namely, their failure to take with due seriousness the practical reality of suffering.

Privation theory is theologically quite useful. It has cross-cultural resonances and an important historical-eschatological dimension, and it is a serious attempt to understand reality as good despite the prevalence and intensity of suffering within it. Yet its implications for the doctrine of God as creator remain as problematic in our time as they were in Augustine's. Relative to an eternal and omnipotent divine entity, the historical texture of the flowering and ontological obliteration of evil does nothing to shield the divine reality from the reality of evil. If evil and suffering ever were experienced, then an eternal and omnipotent God must bear the marks of this possibility within the divine being itself. This is why the privation view actually suits ground-of-being more than determinate-entity accounts of ultimate reality (process theism is, of course, not affected by any of this). This is also why the deepest articulation of privation theory within the determinate-entity framework has to be fundamentally incarnational as well as eschatological. But the incarnation does not produce a picture of God as a decisively good and powerful entity. Rather it suggests either that God is to be identified with the moral ambiguity of nature and history, surrendering the divine goodness to divine power as in ground-of-being theism; or else it invites the opposite response, the surrender of power to goodness in the manner of contemporary process theology. This is merely to replay the traditional tri-lemma argument of theodicy—God cannot be all-good and all-powerful if evil is real—with the added observation that not even privation theory can effectively secure the nonreality of evil.

It is impossible not to admire Augustine's and Gregory of Nyssa's intricate attempts to preserve the goodness and power of God in the face of the apparent reality of evil, but I suspect theirs is a vain struggle on the terms in which they framed the problem. In the ground-of-being framework, by contrast, the motivation for a privation theory disappears, but its fruit—divine incarnation and participation in the world's moral ambiguity—have a welcome place.

4.8 Is Suffering Our Fate?

Another strategy for interpreting suffering is to emphasize its inescapability. In one ancient version of this view, it is human fate, and the fate of

all plants and animals, to suffer at the whim of the gods. The ancient Near Eastern Epic of Gilgamesh ends when the bizarre hero, having won the secret of everlasting life through a monumental effort of self-assertion against all odds, has the life-giving plant stolen by a serpent while he is momentarily distracted. The story's point is unmistakable: there is no evading the will of the gods, no matter how strong and creative we are. We will suffer and die because it pleases the gods.

This picture of suffering as the fated lot of human beings has more and less personal versions. In Gilgamesh things are intensely personal: the gods witness Gilgamesh's agonies and deliberately thwart his attempt to escape them. In the course of Stoic philosophy's development, fate gradually became less a matter of the imposition of divine will and more a matter of causal determinism. Fate was a recapitulation in the life of every individual being of the simple fact that everything in nature is rigidly determined, not so much by divine whim as by the very nature of the world, which became more and more the same thing. In twentieth-century existentialism, there were representatives of both views. But on all sides the moral benefits of understanding suffering as the result of determinism or fate are supposed to be courage to face the world as it is, free of self-deceptive illusions and artificial comforts. Bear up! Face misery and death with dignity!

It has long been understood that, despite appearances, doctrines of determinism do not interfere as much as one might think with practical action aimed at improving the circumstances of life. After all, according to determinism, we necessarily do whatever we do, whether it is sitting around paralyzed by despair or actively transforming social conditions and alleviating suffering. So I do not urge that clichéd criticism as a genuine practical problem with the "suffering as fate" strategy for interpreting suffering in nature. Moreover, Western philosophical compatibilism offers ways of affirming nature's freedom and human moral responsibility in the presence of divine and physical determinism, just as Chinese philosophy offers ways of understanding human action as free within the highly structured flow of power within nature. Potential contradictions of this sort do not amount to much of a problem either.

Process theism cannot support this picture of suffering as fate. In the context of determinate-entity theism, the most obvious theological difficulty with the "suffering as fate" idea is that it requires us to picture God personally inflicting suffering on creatures. As I suggested earlier, awareness of our historical and economic location will help us see that there have been times and there are still places where such a picture of divine power is reassuring—a God who can afflict us surely has the power to save us from our enemies! But it is an unfashionable view when technology and political economy combine to make life conditions for human beings mostly comfortable and safe, thereby reducing moments of suffering, at least in the sense of injury and pain, to the level of inconvenient interruptions from which we are entitled to expect rapid deliverance through medicine or the justice system. In such blessed cultural havens, to think of God as wielder of weal *and* woe serves merely to insult the socially accepted view of the perfectly good divine character.

Process theology surrenders divine power to guarantee divine goodness, in response, so the process deity (God_p) inflicts no suffering even if ul-

imate reality (God_c) does. Most determinate-entity theists affirm the humanly recognizable goodness of God by rejecting divine infliction of suffering while maintaining divine omnipotence. Ground-of-being theism offers more flexibility in relation to the suffering-as-fate interpretation, and can take it or leave it depending on other factors. In general, I think the idea of God as source of worldly fate is the most under-explored strategy in our time for theologically articulating the meaning of suffering in nature. There is more potential in this idea, even for the less anthropomorphic versions of determinate-entity theism, than is usually assumed in comfortable Western cultural contexts. The best example may be Islam, which continues to preserve the idea of a personal God of unlimited power, merciful and compassionate yet decisive in action, and beyond human moral judgment absolutely.

4.9 Kenosis Strategies

This takes us directly to kenosis strategies. These explicitly theological proposals are supposed to explain why God does not intervene to deliver us and the rest of nature from needless suffering. God enters into a covenant with nature in which divine power is self-limited to enable complexity to emerge in nature, whereby moral and spiritual life can flower. I think that such kenosis strategies reflect the cultural and economic conditioning I have described; in fact, kenosis can be quite indigestible as an explanation of suffering in other cultural settings because it defangs a deity whose fierce intervention is desperately needed. Moreover, I do not think that the biblical concept of kenosis (Phil 2:1–11, especially v. 7) has anything to do with this kind of covenantal divine self-limitation; biblical kenosis is explicitly and solely Christological in character, and Paul's aim in introducing it is to inspire humility among arrogant and fighting church factions. Yet we can liberate recent kenosis proposals from their mistaken claim to biblical authorization based on this Philippians passage, and we can also set aside cultural conditioning factors as genuine but not determinative of the truth of the matter. Then we must consider the theological import of the kenosis strategy on its own terms.

The more humanly recognizable we want our model of God's goodness to be, the more we need some explanation of the apparent absence of effective divine intervention to alleviate needless suffering, and thus the more important it is that we make the kenosis strategy stick. Theologies that regard humanly recognizable goodness in God as a mistaken or dangerous criterion for theological adequacy, such as ground-of-being theism and some forms of determinate-entity theism, can take or leave kenosis. But kenosis is vital to determinate-entity theisms affirming God as a caring personal being. Thus, it is in relation to such variants of determinate-entity theism that we must consider the effectiveness of the kenosis strategy. In this context, however, kenotic interpretations of God's personal goodness in relation to suffering face a severe conceptual problem, as follows.

Either the kenotic God retains omnipotence or not. In the first case, kenosis seems artificial and unconvincing because it is merely a reversible divine decision rather than a fundamental and inescapable feature of divine creation. That is, if God deliberately embraces self-limitation for the

sake of allowing moral and spiritual life to flower, then there ought to be nothing to prevent God from making exceptions as needed. Kenosis in this sense does nothing to protect the humanly recognizable goodness of God. The second case requires a reflexive and automatic kind of kenosis. God must be determined in some primordial creative event as already and eternally self-limited, so that no decision to be any other way in any subsequent context is possible for God. Process theology illustrates this, in one sense: a process theogony could have ultimate reality (God_c) creating the world in such a way that God can be present to the world always and only as the process deity God_p. (This is only a fantasy, of course: the process God is an actual entity that plays the hand it is dealt just as every actual entity does, and no theologically relevant theory of ultimate reality is possible. But it is worth noting that such a view is possible in the theological metaphysics of Robert Cummings Neville, though in practice he does not exploit the possibility.)

So it appears that kenosis is most convincing as a part-explanation of suffering in nature when it is ontologically forced, but then it is not exactly embraced willingly and thus is not truly kenosis. If kenosis is a matter of deliberate divine self-limitation through which omnipotence perseveres, then it is no longer truly binding and thus unconvincing as an explanation of divine silence in response to needless suffering in nature. The upshot is that kenosis does much less than its proponents claim to preserve the humanly recognizable goodness of God. It is merely a hidden repetition of the fundamental (and otherwise understandable) criterion of theological adequacy active for determinate-entity theists and, despite appearances, offers no materially new conceptual resources.

4.10 Will Everything Be All Right in the End?

We saw earlier that privation theory is at its best when it incorporates a historical dimension whereby the essential nonbeing of evil, though not evident now, will become evident at some point in the future. Unsurprisingly, determinate-entity theists typically deploy an eschatological vision in which the ontological destiny of suffering is *nihil*, nothing. Suffering will fall away when the consummation of all things comes, finally confirming God's personal moral perfection and power. The most interesting aspect of this to me is that eschatological deployments from the camp of determinate-entity theism show an awareness of the empirical difficulties that this view must manage.

Ground-of-being theists can also deploy eschatological visions of suffering, but in slightly different terms and to a very different end. In one such vision, suffering will plunge back into the abysmal creative surge from which it sprang, along with life and spirit, leaving nothing at all or else only the glorious fruits of the vast cosmic-historic process to that point. This cosmological vision can take or leave the hypothesis of an overall direction to the cosmic process; this is always and only an empirical question about the way the divine character expresses itself determinately in the structured possibilities of reality. Interestingly, one of the best-known ground-of-being theists, Paul Tillich, uses many pages in the third volume of his *Systematic Theology* to say that there is no overall direction of progress in the universe as a whole even though there is abundant meaning.

At this point he shows his affinity for the view of cosmic history in Schelling rather than Hegel, two other ground-of-being theists. But perhaps the question really ought to be settled empirically rather than speculatively.

The samsaric version of this view is particularly impressive but deeply perplexing. *Karma*, a kind of universal moral law of cause and effect that lies beneath the experience of suffering, gives birth to life and spirit, goodness and bliss, and delivers souls through a tortuous path into the arms of Brahman via enlightenment and *moksha*. Though the Vedas do speak of cosmic epochs and Siva's resetting of all of creation, there appears to be no post-samsaric recreation of reality in this vision but only deliverance from it. This is a one-by-one personal eschatology rather than an eschatology of nature and all of creation; suffering is the means of liberation to something else, but is not in itself defeated. The "*samsāra is nirvāna*" option in this context is akin to realized eschatology within Christian theology: liberation **not in some other world** but here and now in the midst of suffering. The samsaric vision **is the probably** the most positive of all interpretations of suffering in nature because it renders suffering *in itself* as productive and nurturing, the path along which all beings trudge on their way to a blessed goal. This seems quite different from regarding suffering as a necessary but unfortunate side effect of an otherwise valuable process. We can appreciate all this, but we must also note that there is no solution to the raw challenge of suffering in nature here. There is reframing, akin to reframing suffering as privation or illusion, but there is no easing, no overcoming. But perhaps there should not be any overcoming of suffering or of the samsaric reality that structures existence.

It falls to more history-minded religions and philosophies to articulate the possibility of an eschaton that transforms nature itself, not merely individuals within it. Keeping in mind the argumentative stakes—the determinate-entity theist deploys eschatology to give evidence of God's personal goodness in relation to suffering in nature—let us trace the argument about the possibility of such an eschaton.

Beginning from the scientific point of view, can there be an alternative embodiment of life and spirit that is free of the travails of nature that we know and see about us? I have hinted that it is possible to imagine alternative biological and ecological circumstances that might be freer of suffering than our Earth is. But in all of those biology-based scenarios, we cannot get along without glucose, or some substitute biological fuel, among other things, and thus suffering in nature might be reduced relative to Earth's suffering landscape but it cannot be eliminated. Thus, even if Isaiah's vision of the lion eating straw like the ox were to come true, we would still have suffering in nature, especially in the form of plant injury and accidents. What about leaving biology behind altogether and imagining a form of life that uses light as the sole energy source? If feasible, this would eliminate predation altogether, but it would still leave accident and injury and possibly disease to worry about. So there is no science-supported basis for picturing a new heaven and a new earth that is free of suffering. Well, perhaps that is to be expected. A new heaven and a new earth without suffering would be so spectacular a transformation that it would have to be supernatural in character, so we should probably assume that our scientific knowledge should be ignored as irrelevant.

But this is too hasty. Consider the matter from the angle of eschatological lifestyle. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, eschatological visions of a new heaven and new earth typically involve moral and spiritual beings living in relation to one another, worshipping God, able to recognize loved ones and to remember life, able to grow and learn and change, but all this without any trace of suffering either in these blessed beings or in their natural environment. But I doubt that we can picture embodiment, change, and growth without the use of natural resources, even if light is our food. Moreover, if the “suffering as inevitable by-product” arguments have any credibility, then they apply to these pictures of the new heaven and the new earth just as much as they apply to the world we know. I freely admit to feeling the allure of idealized pictures of a suffering-free afterlife, and I have no difficulty admiring the boldness with which the history-minded religions artfully wield their supernatural eschatological resources to justify their affirmation of God’s perfect personal goodness—in fact, within this framework, nothing less would take suffering as seriously as it ought to be taken. Yet I cannot see how the proposals are coherent, no matter how badly they are needed.

Furthermore, I suspect that the fruit of theoretical success in articulating a coherent eschatology would only be theological disaster for determinate-entity theism. It would only reinforce skeptical questions about God’s humanly recognizable moral goodness by introducing an embodiment scheme that boasts growth and change and relationality yet no suffering. In other words, *that* world and *not this* world would be the best of all possible worlds. Such a God would be flagrantly morally inconsistent.

5 Conclusion

This has been a typologically driven argument rather than one rooted in specific theological positions, so many complexities and subtleties have been neglected. Yet typologically driven arguments can still produce robust conclusions. My conclusion is that there is no adequate reply to the argument from neglect, as it is directed against the coherence of determinate-entity theism. Neither is there any satisfying answer to the associated argument from divine incompetence, as it is directed against the much trumpeted efficacy of process theism in supporting a religious response to suffering.

It is good, some say, to be in the middle of theoretical disputes, participating in the virtues of all sides. When the middle proves to be unstable due to underlying incoherence, however, there is real cause to look around for some other place to stand, there to reconfigure alternatives so as to understand oneself, once again, as standing in a new middle, but now upon firmer ground amidst more fruitful theoretical disputes. Determinate-entity theism of many kinds requires God to be a compassionate entity with personal knowledge of suffering, the power to act in history and nature, and all the while to be perfectly good in ways that human beings can grasp. This places determinate-entity theism in the middle of a host of daunting theoretical difficulties. There has been no shortage of attempts to defend it but the resources for the main defense efforts face serious difficulties, as I have tried to show. The problem, in a nutshell, is that this idea of God is an admirable but finally ineffective attempt to deal with the empirical gap be-

tween life as we experience it and the goodness we long to affirm in God as ultimate reality. Nothing shows this more clearly than the problem of suffering in nature, as leveraged by the argument from neglect.

Yet there are other central places to stand, theologically, and other ways to configure the surrounding theoretical landscape. I urge battle-weary determinate-entity theists to look over at the intellectuals gathered around the ancient idea of God as ground of being, the power and creativity of the structured flows of nature, the ontological spring of matter and value. This God is not good in a humanly recognizable way, nor personal in character, yet when we assert God's goodness despite its incongruity with our anthropocentric ways of thinking, our minds are led higher to larger patterns and wider virtues in which suffering is no longer merely an unwanted side effect of otherwise wondrous physical processes but a creative source in its own right. This God is beautiful from a distance in the way that a rain forest is beautiful, but just as it is unpleasant for humans to live unprotected in a rain forest, so it is perilous to be in the direct presence of divine glory. We suffer there as well as surrender in bliss. The truth about this God is deeply disconcerting, not easily assimilated into our humanly configured cultural worlds and religious habits of thinking. Yet this is the truth that sears our souls, that awakens us again and again from our anthropomorphic theological slumbering, and that drives us to love that which destroys even as it creates.

This image of God is a less-perplexing concept in many types of Hinduism, or even in most forms of Islam, past and present. It is built into the heart of Chinese religious cosmology and is amply present in most tribal religions. It was less difficult in ancient and medieval Judaism and Christianity than it has become in modern times and in first-world cultures. The paucity of contemporary Christian imagery and symbolism corresponding to dancing destroyer-creator Siva shows just how difficult this idea might be in the context of the Christian religious and theological imagination—and this despite unmistakable biblical imagery of this type in Job and in apocalyptic literature, especially the book of Revelation. The destroyer-creator ground-of-being insight survives most clearly in the Western epic tradition, thanks to Blake and Dante and others, and in medieval art depicting hell as punishment. But the incarnational-sacrificial Christological rubric utterly reframes this insight in the terrifying narratives and imagery of suffering saints and martyrs. Christianity has always had an idiosyncratic approach to suffering because of its Christological lens. But for precisely this reason, Christian theologians might take a more positive view of suffering in nature than they have typically taken. Despite my appreciation for the Greek metaphysical tradition, at this point the early Christian theologians seem to have underestimated the philosophical resources of their primary narrative, rashly subjecting it to Greek intuitions about suffering as incompatible with fully realized being. The result is an insoluble conundrum in which suffering in nature has to be framed as a foreseen but unintended side effect of a creation that is good because of its other virtues, and this creation is the gift of an omnipotent, wise, compassionate, and agential God who does not intervene as often as moral obligations demand because it would ruin the beauty and moral independence of the creation. This is a theological conundrum, if ever there was one.

Suffering in nature is neither evil nor a by-product of the good. It is part of the wellspring of divine creativity in nature, flowing up and out of the abysmal divine depths like molten rock from the yawning mouth of a volcano, searing and burning—maybe with ecological benefits, maybe with no discernable redemptive elements whatsoever. Luminescent creativity and abysmal suffering are co-primal in the divine nature as they are in our experience. To acknowledge the ground of our being in these terms is to accept suffering as our fate and the fate of all creatures, and also to do what we will with these circumstances, whether that means sitting idly by or launching into the world with banners waving and guns blazing. All things testify to the divine glory. All things without exception.