Religion and the Mystery of Existence*

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1. Secularism, science, and the limits of explanation

Against all expectation, and in defiance of the naturalist orthodoxy that rules over much professional academic philosophy, religion is firmly back on the agenda in our contemporary intellectual culture. Despite the vehemence of today's militant atheists, indeed partly perhaps as a result of that very vehemence, many thinking people have begun to ask if the relentless secularism of the last few years may not have overreached itself. To be sure, it can be readily conceded to the militant critics that much institutionalised religion has been, and often still is, sectarian, intolerant, dogmatic (in the bad sense), corrupt, exploitative, and worse; but the sense remains among many thinking people that something precious remains beneath all the dross. What exactly is that precious something?

One way of answering this is by reference to the notion of the "spiritual". This term is often used in contemporary culture to refer to aspirations and sensibilities of an especially powerful and profound kind, that take us beyond our ordinary routine existence and afford a glimpse into something more rich and meaningful.[1] So a deep appreciation of the wonders of nature or the transforming qualities of great art may be described as bringing a "spiritual" element into our lives. The "depth" that is in question here is not easy to specify precisely, but it seems to have something to do with our human aspiration to "transcend ourselves"— to seek for something beyond the gratifications and dissatisfactions of everyday living and locate our lives within a more enduring framework of meaning. Those who favour the term "spiritual" perhaps intend to signal their commitment to some of these aspirations, while distancing themselves from the doctrinal assumptions or institutional structures of organized religion (this seems to be the point of the T-shirt reportedly seen on some campuses bearing the slogan "I'm not religious but I'm spiritual"). But however it is labelled, the religious or "spiritual" impulse cannot be entirely eradicated, for it seems to spring from yearnings deep within our nature that we cannot ignore— yearnings that cannot be satisfied by the brave new world of secularism, or by the onward march of scientific and technological progress.

It is not a question of turning the clock back to pre-enlightenment times: we all have reason to be deeply grateful to the clear light of scientific reason for freeing us from superstition and ignorance, as well as for contributing immeasurably to the quality of our lives (one only has to think the debt so many of us or our loved ones owe to the

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* The definitive version of this draft is published in the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4/3 (October 2012), pp. 15-31. The paper takes further some of the themes in a presentation I gave in June 2011 at a one-day workshop at the University of Durham devoted to the work of David Cooper and myself, on the theme "Mystery, Humility and Religious Practice". I am most grateful to Guy Bennett-Hunter and Ian Kidd for their initiative in planning and organizing that event, and for their own contributions to the discussion on that occasion, from which I have learned much, as I have from perceptive questions and comments of the other participants in the workshop, not least David Cooper himself.

[1] For more on this, see John Cottingham, "Theism and Spirituality", forthcoming in V. Harrison, S. Goetz, and C. Taliaferro (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Theism.*

advances of modern medicine and surgery). And indeed, not just in its practical benefits, but in the grandeur of its aspirations and the hard-won precision and rigour of its methods, science surely ranks among the very greatest achievements of the human spirit. But there is also something in the human spirit that reaches beyond what science can deliver. Even were science and technology to secure optimal conditions for a healthy and secure human existence, even were it to formulate covering laws that fully described the operation of the macro and micro worlds, and even were it to unify these laws with supreme simplicity and elegance into the elusive "TOE", the grand "Theory of Everything", it would still not be in our nature as human beings to draw a line and say "So that wraps it all up, then!" As Blaise Pascal observed in the seventeenth century, *"l'homme passe l'homme"*— "man goes beyond himself", or "humanity transcends itself".[2] To be human is to see that we are somehow incomplete beings, advancing to a horizon that always recedes from view. And this is not a scientific, but a metaphysical or a religious truth about us. In the words of T. S. Eliot, writing in the depths of the Second World War, centuries away from the cultural milieu of Pascal yet sharing something of the restlessness of his religious vision: "We shall not cease from exploration".[3]

If you agree with me, or rather with Eliot and Pascal, that this kind of restlessness is at the heart of the religious impulse,[4] then it may seem somewhat surprising that many leading approaches in contemporary philosophy of religion tend to discuss religious belief in a way that bypasses it altogether. So far from conceiving the religious adherent as a restless pilgrim, reaching towards something mysterious that transcends the boundaries of human comprehension, many philosophers apparently see the believer as calmly and dispassionately accepting a precisely formulated hypothesis which does in principle the same kind of explanatory work as that found in science, except at a more general and abstract level. To be a theist, on this view, is to subscribe to "the God hypothesis" (as its fierce detractor Richard Dawkins terms it),[5] namely the hypothesis that the universe came into being as a result of being willed to exist by an immortal, immaterial spirit with certain specified properties, including maximal power and knowledge. Given the nature of the universe as we find it, positing such a God is, according to the eminent philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne, the "most probable explanation" of its existence.[6]

It is, I suppose, theoretically conceivable that further rational discussion will eventually settle the dispute between the opposing sides of the argument represented by the two thinkers just mentioned, Dawkins and Swinburne; but it has to be said that the present state of play appears to be a deadlock (in a sense, perhaps, the two sides are perfect foils for each other). One side maintains that modern science is the only valid

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[2] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [c. 1660], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962), no 131.
[3] T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" [1942], in *Four Quartets* [1945] (London: Faber, 1959), line 239.
[4] The thought is perhaps as old as humanity, and in any case goes back way before Pascal; compare St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* [*Confessiones*, *c*. 398], Book I, Ch. 1.
[5] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Books, 2006), Ch. 2.
[6] "[T]he most probable explanation of the existence of the universe and its most general features is that they are caused by God. These most general features include the universal operation of simple laws of nature … those laws and the initial (or boundary) conditions of the universe being such as to bring about the existence of human bodies, and humans being conscious beings , open to a finite amount of suffering and having some ability to bear it or alleviate it." Richard Swinburne, "God as the Simplest Explanation of the Universe", in Anthony O'Hear (ed.), *Philosophy and Religion*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 68 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 3-24, at p. 11.

method of investigating the nature and origins of the cosmos, and appears to look with genuine incomprehension and exasperation upon the interference of theologians and philosophers who presume to muddy the waters with their theistic speculations. The other side presumably feels baffled that their rigorous and meticulously deployed arguments for a personal creator fail to convince opponents that (as Swinburne puts it) "the hypothesis of theism satisfies the criteria of correct explanation [simplicity, and ability to account for the relevant data] better than does any rival explanation."[7]

It is no part of my purpose to denigrate this latter approach; anyone who reads Swinburne's work must acknowledge its philosophical integrity and the luminous clarity of the arguments offered. But I cannot help feeling, nonetheless, that the 'explanatory hypothesis' approach to God has little connection with the religious impulse as it typically operates in human life. I do not deny that some potential believers may be encouraged by the thought that certain features of the universe might seem to make God's existence more probable; but the restless 'transcendent' impulses of the kind I was discussing a moment ago in connection with Pascal and Eliot are not, it seems to me, of the kind to be satisfied by probabilistic calculations; they belong in an entirely different arena.

Speaking for my own part, I am inclined to agree with the Dominican writer Herbert McCabe, that "to say that God created the world is in no way to eliminate the intellectual vertigo we feel when we try to think of the beginning of things." "Recognition of God's action", McCabe goes on, "does not remove any mystery from the world."[8] Or as he puts it elsewhere: "When we speak of God we do not clear up a puzzle, we draw attention to a mystery."[9] It seems to me best to follow McCabe, and to start by accepting our helplessness in the face of the stupendous enigma that is the existing cosmos. The primal human existential response—of vertigo, of terror, of wonder, of awe— this (as I see it) is the well-spring of spirituality, the basis of the religious impulse. Or, if I may revert to "Little Gidding", since no one I think has put it better than T. S. Eliot:

> You are not here to verify,
> Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity,
> Or to carry report. You are here to kneel …[10]

Yet of course when we are operating in the mode of scientific inquiry, we are precisely here in order to verify and instruct ourselves. And the drive to understand, and to satisfy our human curiosity, is a wholly legitimate one: the pursuit of truth by means of the "natural light" of reason, as René Descartes put it, is part of what we are here for. (Descartes himself followed a long tradition in regarding rationality and the thirst for knowledge as divinely bestowed endowments.) But Descartes (again following a long tradition) was *also* quite clear that the ultimate divine reality underlying the

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[7] Swinburne, "God as the Simplest Explanation", p. 11.
[8] Herbert McCabe, *God and Evil in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* [1957] (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 102. Compare, in a rather different vein, the argument of William Charlton that there is no proper scope for the idea of a causal explanation of the universe itself. Charlton goes on to suggest that God's responsibility for the cosmos is more akin to moral than to causal responsibility. See W. Charlton, 'The Doctrine of Creation', *Heythrop Journal,* Vol. 49 No. 4 (July 2008) pp. 620-31.
[9] McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 128.
[10] Eliot, "Little Gidding", lines 43-45.

natural world is beyond human comprehension. God, for Descartes, is like a mountain which we can approach, and somehow touch in our thought, but which we can never encompass, can never put our arms round.[11] And it is this essential, and authentically religious, acknowledgement of the ultimate mysteriousness of reality that should, it seems to me, be our guide here.

For how much, after all, is really *explained* by supposing that the cosmos was created by a powerful and all-knowing immaterial spirit? Calling God "immaterial", to begin with, solves nothing: our bafflement at how a divine being could exercise unlimited power throughout the cosmos, unconstrained by the limitations of time and space and place, shows, no doubt, that the deity cannot be conceived on the model of any physical object we can imagine; but to think that our understanding is somehow assuaged by pronouncing that the Deity is "incorporeal"— a Cartesian-style ghost— is surely to delude oneself. Nicolas Malebranche seems to have been nearer the mark in his *Recherche de la Vérité* when he stressed how far the deity must wholly transcend any human conceptions. Just as we should not imagine God to be corporeal, Malebranche observed, so we should not really describe him as a Mind or Spirit, since that invites comparison with a human mind. Rather, Malebranche suggested, we should think that "just as He contains within himself the perfections of matter without being material … so He also comprehends the perfections of created spirits without being a mind, in the way we conceive of minds."[12]

But the reasons why I think "the God hypothesis" fails to count as an informative explanation run deeper. None of the features that puzzle us about reality— the mere fact of there being something rather than nothing, the baffling intricacy and organization of the cosmos, its mysterious ability to bring forth life, and eventually intelligence— none of this actually turns out to be less mysterious in virtue of positing God as its source. All that the theist is doing here is taking the baffling features— existence itself rather than non-existence, order rather than disorder, vivifying power and consciousness rather than their opposites— and inscribing them within a (divine) reality that is taken already to have those properties from eternity. It is not that there is anything intrinsically absurd in making such an assertion; on the contrary, if theism is true, that is indeed how reality is. But we should not mistake such a metaphysical declaration for a hypothesis with genuine explanatory power. If I am puzzled by the phenomenon of heat, or the fact of there being hot things at all, the puzzle will hardly be solved if someone triumphantly invokes an eternal primordial reality that is itself hot. Or consider this analogy from Platonic metaphysics: if we say that ants exist because they are patterned after the eternal Form of Anthood, or that ants owe their antlike properties to participation in the Form of Ant which itself eternally possesses the antlike properties in perfect and paradigmatic fashion, such a pronouncement,

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[11] René Descartes, letter to Mersenne of 27 May 1630, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. III, The Correspondence, transl. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l991), p. 25 : Just as we can "touch a mountain but not put our arms around it", so "we can know that God is infinite and all-powerful, even though our soul, being finite, cannot comprehend or conceive him." The typical understanding of Descartes's approach to God as being based entirely on transparent rational reasoning is in my view something of a distortion; see further J. Cottingham, 'Sceptical Detachment or Loving Submission to the Good: Reason, Faith and the Passions in Descartes.' *Faith and Philosophy,* 28:1 *(*January 2011), pp. 44-53.

[12] Nicolas Malebranche, *Recherche de la Vérité* [1674], Bk. 3, Ch. 9, final paragraph; transl. T. Lennon and P. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 251.

whatever its metaphysical merits (if any), cannot, on pain of circularity, discharge any explanatory burden in accounting for the reality of ants.[13]

But more important than this, the very attempt to close the book on the mystery of being seems somehow presumptuous. Indeed, the French philosopher and theologian Jean-Luc Marion makes an interesting case for the view that it amounts to idolatry:

> God cannot be seen, not only because nothing finite can bear his glory without perishing, but above all because a God that could be conceptually comprehended would no longer bear the title "God"… God remains *God* only on condition that [our] ignorance be established and admitted definitively, Every thing in the world gains by being known— but God who is not of the world, gains by *not* being known conceptually. The idolatry of the concept is the same as that of the gaze, imagining oneself to have attained God and to be capable of maintaining him under our gaze, like a thing of the world. And the Revelation of God consists first of all in cleaning the slate of this illusion and its blasphemy.' [14]

Marion's thought seems to be somewhat as follows. How convenient it would be for our sense of security and self-esteem if we really could "wrap it all up": looking out at the night sky, at the silence of those infinite spaces that terrified Pascal,[15] we could calmly say: "No problem about any of that: it's the work of an intelligent designer, a person, rather like us only much greater, but invisible and immaterial, who initiated the Big Bang, and structured the muons and neutrinos and all the rest so that in due course of time conscious beings like us would emerge." Of course this is just how many theists would express their belief in God, and I'm not at all concerned to subvert that belief— far from it. What I am claiming, rather, is that it is a fundamental mistake to construe the adoption of such a religious framework as part of the same kind of explanatory or puzzle-solving enterprise as science— or anything remotely like it.[16] The molecular biologist Ursula Goodenough, in her remarkable book *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, strikes me as putting her finger on what is amiss about this way of construing belief in God, when she observes that "the concept of a human-like creator of muons and neutrinos" has, for her, no meaning; it fails to resonate with anything that looks remotely like a piece of explanatory science. But secondly (and closer to what I had in mind about presumption), she remarks that such a construal of belief in God spoils her

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[13] Compare the "third man" argument against Plato's theory of Forms: Plato, *Parmenides* [*c.* 360 BC], 132 a-b. (The example in this passage actually concerns the form of largeness; Aristotle's reference this type of argument as "the third man" occurs in his *Metaphysics* [*c.* 325 BC], 990b17.)

[14] Jean-Luc Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoiding Speaking of 'Negative Theology' ", in J. D. Caputo and M. J. Scanlon (eds), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 34, emphasis supplied. Marion's point has a long ancestry: compare St. Augustine's *Si comprehendis, non est Deus*, ("If you grasp him, he is not God"), *Sermones* [392-430], 52, vi, 16 and 117, iii, 5.

[15] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 206.

[16] By "anything remotely like it", I include metaphysics of the kind that purports to offer (not mere conceptual classification or clarification but) a general description or explanation of the most fundamental aspects of reality. Compare Jonathan Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): the "central concern" of metaphysics is with the "fundamental structure of reality as a whole" (p. 3).

"covenant with mystery". For Goodenough, "to assign attributes to Mystery is to disenchant it, to take away its luminance."[17]

There seems to be something undeniably right about this. We find ourselves in a profoundly mysterious world, a world of strangeness and awesome power and luminescent beauty. That is our human lot. To be religious is to acknowledge this with a mixture of fear and exaltation and gratitude, not to wish it away, or vainly attempt to box it up or trim it down to something we can grasp and control and explain. If William James was right that "the whole concern of religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe,"[18] then I would say that the distinctively religious mode of acceptance is that of humility and awe before the tremendous mystery of being.

2. Intimations of the transcendent

Those familiar with the work of David Cooper will readily perceive from the foregoing that there are several key points of contact in our respective outlooks. In many of his writings, including the paper in the present symposium,[19] Cooper underlines the importance of coming to terms with the mystery of existence, "living with mystery", as he puts it. Only a "doctrine of mystery", he argues, will avoid the twin and opposed pitfalls of "humanism" and "absolutism". Humanism, succumbing to the fallacy of Protagoras ("Man is the measure of all things"),[20] takes it that there can be no reality beyond what is describable in human terms, and so falls into the "hubristic posturing" which supposes we are not answerable to any values except those derived from human ordinance or convention. Absolutism, by contrast, falls into the arrogance of thinking we have the capacity to attain to an objective conception of reality that somehow transcends the human perspective— that we have some kind of hot-line to the Truth "as it really is". Avoiding these two extremes enables us to preserve our sense of mystery, thus giving "shape to a life in which virtues like humility have their place".[21]

Starting from this common ground, it is clearly possible to move in very different directions. In my own case, I find the stance of humility towards the "mystery of being" fully compatible with mainstream Judaeo-Christian theism; while Cooper, in common with several interesting recent writers,[22] turns his back on this heritage and adopts a worldview informed by insights from Daoism and Buddhism. In the remainder of this paper, I should like to explore some of the problems that arise on each of these diverging paths, not in any spirit of polemicism (for anything like point-scoring would

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[17] Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 12.

[18] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [1902], Ch. 2 (London: Fontana, 1962), p.58.

[19] David E. Cooper, "Living with Mystery", in G. A. Bennett-Hunter (ed.) *Mystery, Humility and Religious Practice,* in the *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, Autumn 2012, pp. 1-13.

[20] The reference to Protagoras is mine, not Cooper's, but I think he would readily acknowledge the Protagorean view as typifying the pretensions of what he dubs "humanism". Protagoras's famous dictum is quoted in Plato, *Protagoras* [*c.* 390 BC] 80b1.

[21] Cooper, "Living with Mystery", p.00.

[22] Other examples are Michael McGhee, *Transformations of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); André Comte-Sponville *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* [*L'esprit de l'athéisme*, 2006] (London: Bantam, 2008); and Mark Johnston, *Saving God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). It would be an interesting study in the sociology of religion to explore the reasons or causes behind the rejection by these latter three philosophers, all brought up as Catholics, of the faith tradition they in which they grew up, and their seeking solace elsewhere.

be highly distasteful in an area that touches people's deepest emotions and allegiances), but in order to try to get clearer on what is involved espousing these divergent religious outlooks.

The first problem is one for the theist. To insist on the mysteriousness of ultimate reality, to underline our inability to comprehend it or describe it in human discourse, seems to risk sliding into mere agnosticism or scepticism. Something like this point was put with devastating force by David Hume, in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, where he has Cleanthes asking "How do you mystics, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from sceptics or atheists, who assert that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible"?[23] Cleanthes goes on to say that such mystics "are, in a word, *atheists without knowing it*."[24] The use of the term "atheist" here seems misleading, at least if transferred to a modern context, since we now take the typical atheist to be one who firmly denies the possible or actual existence of any divine reality "behind" or "beyond" the natural world, whereas the stance under discussion, that of awe and humility before the mystery of being, simply asserts that the ultimate reality is not comprehensible in human terms. But the main point of Hume's challenge remains: can the stance of uncomprehending awe coherently claim to have any genuine theistic content?

I think we can begin to see our way out of this conundrum if we take seriously Ursula Goodenough's observation that the role of religion is to provide a kind of integration of cosmology and morality.[25] Each of the great world religions appears to address two fundamental concerns: firstly how the universe came to be, and secondly what is our place within it and how we should live our lives. I have argued elsewhere that in a proper understanding of religion the second of these questions has priority over the first— in other words that we need to accept "primacy of praxis" over theory when it comes to understanding what it is to be religious.[26] To put the matter more explicitly: religious allegiance, I would suggest, is not primarily a matter of intellectual assent to certain explanatory hypotheses about the nature or origins of the cosmos, or the acceptance of certain metaphysical claims about ultimate reality, but involves above all (to borrow some much misunderstood notions of Wittgenstein) a "passionate commitment", which is inextricably bound up with a certain "form of life".[27] The collective evidence of Scripture, which is a rich source for our grasp of what is involved in religious allegiance, is pretty clear on this point: the divine call is chiefly heard as a moral and practical as opposed to a theoretical or purely cognitive one. The reality which the patriarchs and prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the key protagonists of the

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[23] David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* [*c*. 1755; first published posthumously, 1779], Part IV, §1; ed. H. D. Aiken (New York: Haffner, 1948), p. 31.
[24] Hume, *Dialogues*, Part IV, §3. (ed. Aitken, p. 32).
[25] Goodenough, *Sacred Depths of Nature*, p. xiv.
[26] See John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 4.
[27] For a conspectus of the many passages where Wittgenstein discusses the importance of activity and 'forms of life', see H-J. Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 124-9. For the notion of 'passionate commitment', see L. Wittgenstein, MS 136 [1947], in *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 73. For some of the misunderstandings of these texts, in particular the tendency to interpret Wittgenstein's view of religion as entirely non-cognitivist, see J. Cottingham, "The Lessons of Life: Wittgenstein, Religion and Analytic Philosophy," in H.-J. Glock and J. Hyman and (eds), *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P.M.S. Hacker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 203-227.

New Testament are made aware of is one that calls them to change their lives, to follow a certain path of righteousness, to hear the cry of the oppressed, to love one another, to forgive those who have wronged them, and so on through a long catalogue of luminous moral insights that form the living core of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.[28]

The upshot of this in theological terms is that however great the mystery of the divine nature may be, however much God is "invisible", unable to be seen— or even named[29]— by humankind, this much (in the Abrahamic tradition) is clear and central: God requires of us righteousness and mercy. To this extent God is, to use David Cooper's term, "discursable"— that is, there has to be something that can validly be said of God (and Cooper is quite correct in supposing that this is indeed my view).[30] But how can the ineffable divine reality that transcends the human and natural worlds be, at least in its moral aspect, discursable? For those who subscribe to the three great Abrahamic faiths, the gap between the ineffable and the discursable is bridged by revelation; and indeed for the Christian, that discursability is offered in specifically human terms, through the Incarnation. To sceptical critics this may seem to be a fideistic retreat that puts the whole matter beyond rational philosophical discussion; but before close by tackling this worry, I want to turn briefly to a different but in some ways parallel problem that besets the alternative worldview espoused by Cooper.

The idea, canvassed a moment ago, that religion characteristically integrates the cosmological and the moral domains, raises the following question about impersonalist outlooks such as Buddhism and Daoism: if reality is simply a ceaseless flow of conditions that arise and pass away, and if individual selves have no real existence, but are merely an illusion arising from temporary configurations within that never-ending flow, then why should any particular moral response be demanded of us? It is of course true that the Buddha and other eastern sages enjoined compassion; but they also pointed to the need to escape from the suffering that is inseparable from the endless cycle of coming to be and perishing. So is not entirely clear on this view why an active life of helping others, for example, or a determination to fight for justice, should be incumbent upon us any more than, for example, simply cultivating a trance-like state of detachment.

In a sensitive passage in which he takes up something like this worry, Cooper suggests that the Daoist sage will lead a life that somehow "emulates the ineffable". In other words, he will bring his own life into line with an ultimate reality that resists all confining and classification:

> As the wellspring of everything it [*dao*] cannot be bound by anything outside itself, and is therefore without any obstacles to overcome, and devoid of partiality and aggressive purpose. *Dao*, therefore, invites figurative description as 'gentle', 'spontaneous' and 'non-contending' … The sage adopts the way of *wu wei*, literally 'non-action', but in effect a spontaneous, responsive style of living that eschews the rules and goals that constrain most people's behaviour and encourage them to be aggressive and contentious[31]

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[28] This paragraph is from my paper "Conversion, Self-Discovery and Moral Change", forthcoming in I. Dalferth (ed.), *Conversion,* Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2012).

[29] Compare the famous passage in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 3:14), when God refuses to name himself to Moses, saying only *Ehyeh asher ehyeh,* "I am that I am".

[30] Cooper, "Living with Mystery", p. 00.

[31] Cooper, "Living with Mystery", p. 00.

Cooper readily acknowledges that this does not amount to a demonstrative argument that a certain kind of life is mandatory for the Daoist; but he suggests that one who is attuned to the nature of reality disclosed by the Daoist worldview will naturally and spontaneously tend to respond with this kind of gentle comportment towards the world and towards one's fellows.

By their fruits shall ye know them. It would be absurd, as well as distasteful, to try to disparage such a vision on philosophical grounds; the worth of a religion must be tested, in large part, by looking at the lives of its practitioners. And in any case, the appeal of the respective types of worldview, theistic versus impersonalist, cannot in my view be properly evaluated in an academic discussion, any more than one could evaluate the merits of marriage versus priestly celibacy from the outside, by clinically inspecting the theoretical assumptions of each form of life. To appreciate a form of life and its associated worldview one has to understand how it is shaped from the inside— how the multiple, mutually reinforcing strands of practice and thought and emotion and interpersonal interaction combine to condition, slowly and gradually, one's passage through life. But what can perhaps be said, looking at the Buddhist and Daoist pictures from within the alterative presuppositions of the theistic outlook, is that it is fearfully hard to how morality can retain its normative resonance and power if it is severed from the idea of *personal response* that is so central to traditional (Judaeo-Christian) theism: the face-to-face encounter that reveals us to each other not as mere temporary eddies in a ceaseless flow of changing conditions, but as unique beings, loved into existence, and bearing ultimate responsibility for every single act or failure to act that marks out our short time here.

Let me come finally to the problem of the transition, on the theistic picture, from ineffable ultimate reality to the idea of the divine as discursable— discursable, that is, in so far as it is taken to be wholly good and just and merciful, and to require a corresponding moral response from each of us. Can that transition be made only by reliance on revelation, which in turn involves a long jump beyond reason into the domain of pure faith? This of course is far too vast a topic to be explored properly at this closing stage of the argument (though I have started to tackle it in other work).[32] Let me just say this: that the theistic picture is often, I think, unfairly lumbered with a false dichotomy: *either* we have to rely on the impartially assessable arguments of natural theology which ought, if they are worth their salt, to give us transparent truths about God that command the assent of any rational inquirer; *or* we have to depend on miraculous supernatural revelation, the evidence for which is by its nature likely to be questionable, or unlikely to convince the detached scientific assessor, and which therefore has to be accepted on faith.

The way out of this dilemma, I suggest, is to see that there many aspects of our human experience that function, if you will, as a kind of *bridge* between two types of evidence: the neutral, scientifically evaluable data that is available via the use of our ordinary natural faculties, and the more controversial disclosures that seem to depend on divine intervention or the gracious bestowal of something extraordinary and special. As examples of this kind of intermediate or "bridging" evidence, consider the "transcendent" moments that very many people will from time to time have experienced— the times when the drab, mundane pattern of our ordinary routines

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[32] See the final section of John Cottingham, "The Source of Goodness", in Harriet Harris (ed.), *God, Goodness and Philosophy* (London: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 49-62.

gives way to something vivid and radiant, and we seem to glimpse something of the beauty and significance of the world we inhabit. Wordsworth expressed it as follows, in a famous passage in *The Prelude*:

> There are in our existence spots of time,
> That with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A renovating virtue, whence – depressed
> By false opinion and contentious thought,
> Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
> In trivial occupations, and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse – our minds
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
> A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
> That penetrates, enables us to mount,
> When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.[33]

What "lifts us up" is the sense that our lives are not just a disorganized concatenation of contingent episodes, but that they are capable of fitting into a pattern of meaning, where responses of joy and thankfulness[34] and compassion and love for our fellow creatures are intertwined; and where they make sense because they reflect a splendour and a richness that is not of our own making. Notice that this kind of "transfiguration" is not a "religious experience", if that latter term is understood in the rather narrow way that has become common in our culture, when philosophers speak, for example, of the "argument from religious experience". What is often meant under this latter heading is some kind of revelation which is taken to be evidence for, or to validate, the supposed truths of some particular creed or cult— a vision of the Virgin Mary, for example, or the sense, reported by William James, of "the close presence of a sort of mighty person.".[35] This kind of notion is I think uppermost in many people's minds when they insist that they have never had a 'religious experience'. By contrast, the kinds of "transcendent" experience described by Wordsworth and many other writers involve not so much a revelation of supernatural entities, but rather a heightening, an intensification, that transforms the way in which we experience the world. The term "transcendent" seems appropriate not in the sense of that there is necessarily an explicit invocation of metaphysical objects that transcend ordinary experience, but rather because the categories of our mundane life undergo a radical shift: there is a sudden irradiation that discloses a beauty and goodness, a meaning, that was before occluded. [36]

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[33] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 12, 208-218 [1805 edition].

[34] Interestingly, David Cooper has written of the need to allow ourselves to experience natural beauty as a gift: "allowing things to be experienced as the 'gifts' they are". This seems to imply a thankfulness not entirely in place for those espousing a neutral and impersonalist world view— unless the inverted commas around "gift" signal merely that as the world is to be experienced *as if* it were a gift. See David E. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2006), p. 160.

[35] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* Ch. 3, p. 75 (reporting the experience of one of his correspondents).

[36] This paragraph is taken from my "Confronting the Cosmos: Scientific Rationality and Human Understanding", forthcoming in *Proceedings of the ACPA* (Philosophy Documentation Center),

Many other examples could be given, including the "sacred" dimension in works of great music, of which Roger Scruton has eloquently spoken;[37] another important case is the sense of awe which Immanuel Kant and many others have felt before the majesty of the moral law, which seems to demand our allegiance irrespective of our personal inclinations or desires.[38] In these and many other cases, we experience what I would call *natural intimations of the transcendent*. They are, if you like, natural glimpses of the divine, which shine through from the ineffable source of our being to the human world we inhabit.[39]

Nothing, of course, compels us to interpret them that way. The philosophy of the past two or three hundred years has seen an increasing determination to try to "desacralize" such experiences, to deny that they give us access to an eternal and objective source of meaning and value, and to reduce them instead to mere endogenous disturbances, subjective by-products of biological or evolutionary processes, or projections stemming from merely human convention or conditioning. Such reductive strategies are often deployed with fearsome philosophical ingenuity, but it is doubtful if they can survive the "test of integrity" outside the seminar room. For when we open ourselves to these experiences with the right degree of attentiveness and receptivity, we seem overwhelmingly to be carried towards something beyond ourselves, to be "lifted up" by a splendour and beauty and richness more enduring than anything merely mundane and contingent. For the religious believer, the natural way of expressing all this will be in the kind of language deployed by John Paul II:

> In the midst of these wonders we discover the voice of the Creator, transmitted by heaven and earth, day and night: a language "without words whose sound is heard", capable of crossing all frontiers.[40]

The reference to the sound going forth throughout the world, crossing all frontiers, picks up on an ancient theme from the Psalms about the universal wordless language of the Creator heard in nature: "the heavens declare the glory of the Lord." And the crucial philosophical point here is we do not have to rely on special revelations, or the particular claims of any given faith tradition, since our natural human experiences of overwhelming beauty in the natural world (and the same can be said about the commanding authority of the moral law) [41]— these ordinary human modes of response give us access to evidence that we cannot in integrity ignore.

August 2012. For further development of these notions, see my *Why Believe?* (London: Continuum, 2009), *passim.*

[37] Describing the experience of a great work of music, Scruton speaks of "sacred" moments, moments "outside time, in which the deep loneliness and anxiety of the human condition is overcome", and "the human world is suddenly irradiated from a point beyond it." Roger Scruton "The Sacred and the Human" [2010] *http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/gifford/2010/the-sacred-and-the-human/* accessed 30 March 2010.

[38] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* [*Kritik der Practischen Vernunft*, 1788], transl. T. K. Abbott (London: Longmans, 1873, 6th edn 1909), antepenultimate paragraph.

[39] See further John Cottingham, "Human Nature and the Transcendent", in C. Sandis and M. Cain (eds), *Human Nature.* Royal Institute of Philosophy supplement (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[40] John Paul II, "Ecological Conversion", (General audience address, 17 January 2001).

[41] It is significant that Psalm 19 [18] *Caeli enarrant* ("The heavens declare the glory of the Lord") moves seamlessly from awestruck wonder at the beauties of the natural world to equal wonder

One cannot of course expect this appeal to the character and the phenomenology of our human experience to cause a mass conversion from Daoism to theism, let alone to cut any ice with the militant secularist, who is worlds away from either. But coercive arguments, whether demonstrative or probabilistic, are very rarely found in the philosophy of religion (and in my view they occur far less frequently in the rest of philosophy than is generally supposed).[42] Yet to forego any claim to coercive arguments in this area emphatically does not entail that we have abandoned rationality or retreated to a narrow fideism. The experiences are there to be had, if we have the openness and integrity to acknowledge them; and they are not the prerogative of any cosy club of insiders or the "saved", but a natural part of our ordinary human birthright. So if, as human beings, we cannot hope to encompass or explain the fearful mystery of existence, perhaps we can at least glimpse something of its enduring beauty and goodness.

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at the awesomeness of the moral law— a transition that undoubtedly inspired Kant's famous linkage of the "starry heavens" and the "moral law" as both filling the mind with awe (*Achtung*); Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason,* antepenultimate paragraph.

[42] See John Cottingham, "What is Humane Philosophy and Why is it At Risk?", *Philosophy*, Supplement 65 (2009), pp. 1-23; and A. O'Hear (ed.), *Conceptions of Philosophy*, Royal Institute of Philosophy series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).