

So I sit once again on the steps  
outside St. Louis Cathedral  
and wait here, quietly, for daylight.  
When it comes, I will go into the Cathedral,  
into the presence of God, or of Mystery,  
and a man who believes what he's saying  
will tell me what he knows of truth.  
Then he will lay his hand on my forehead  
and leave a tiny smudge of ashes in the center of it,  
a reminder of those truths in this life that remain unknowable,  
and I will open myself to mysteries greater than death  
and to the possibility of believing in them again.

--Elizabeth Dewberry<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dewberry, Elizabeth, *Sacrament of Lies* (New York: BlueHen Putnam, 2002), 229. Paper title from Yankev Glatshetyn's "My Brother Refugee" as quoted in Manseau, Peter, *Killing the Buddha* (Free Press, 2004).

*“It is a simple fact that classical theism can no longer pretend to be the only, or even the most adequate, formulation of a genuinely theistic position.”<sup>2</sup>*

Having contemplated the problem of God in an age of skepticism, an age of scientific advancement, of myth dissolving, of disenchantment, I have come to my own belief conclusion. I do not believe God exists. However, I also do not believe that God does not exist.

The agnostic position is not a comfortable one, but neither is it a non-answer nor a non-belief. It can be a position that considers all positions and yet holds none of them as definitive, a position that ponders the question of God and believes neither theism nor atheism has the final answer. My particular agnosticism refutes the label of “positive” or “strong” agnosticism, which claims that it is impossible to know anything about God, largely because any god must be supernatural and therefore outside of natural knowledge. This is itself a claim about the nature of God and thus is self-contradictory, and so “positive” or “strong” agnosticism dissolves as a position. Further, this paper will make its own hypothetical claims about the nature of God that will reject a supernatural deity, the “immutable, personal God that makes religion static”<sup>3</sup> as refuted at the end of the previous paper. So-called “weak” or “negative” agnosticism would seem to be the position to take, but such a position is neither weak—it is buttressed with what surely adherents would consider strong arguments for this position—nor is it negative, for unlike strictly theistic and atheistic views it is embracing multiple possibilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Ogden, Schubert M., *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (First Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), 141.

<sup>3</sup> Herczog, Mary, “The Flaws of Perfection: Arguments Against Traditional Personal Theism,” unpublished, 15.

According to Michael Scriven, who dismissed the negative agnostic as one who “has not thought the matter through or who lacks the capacity to do so,”<sup>4</sup> agnosticism, in what he also calls a wide sense, embraces skepticism and a “suspension of judgment, [making] no commitment either way; [treating] each alternative as approximately equally serious.”<sup>5</sup> Such agnosticism sounds more open than “strong” agnosticism, which is just as rejecting of differing viewpoints as committed theism and atheism and which, as demonstrated above, isn’t valid anyway, and “negative” agnosticism, with its wishy-washy inability to commit.

I will borrow from Scriven and dub my position “wide sense agnosticism,” and present it as a viable alternative to theism and atheism. Wide sense agnosticism is open to the arguments presented by both theism and atheism. It rejects the apophatic notion that there can be no positive knowledge about God, while denying that any one person or belief system can contain all the knowledge there is about God. It also tends towards skepticism, and so that same God-knowledge does not escape such scrutiny. Wide sense agnosticism is dubious that there can be a clear distinction between objective knowledge of God and subjective belief about God.

For that is the stumbling block for this particular wide sense agnostic. We have criteria for belief, not just for God, but also for all things. It is highly unlikely that I will ever have a first hand encounter with the country Afghanistan, but I believe, indeed, I know it exists. There is plenty of empirical evidence for its existence, in the form of photos and film, live and written reports by reliable journalists and other eyewitnesses, and credible people who claim to be from there. Belief in God only appears to follow the

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<sup>4</sup> Scriven, Michael, “The Presumption of Atheism,” *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. Louis P. Pojman (Wadsworth: 2003), 349.

<sup>5</sup> Scriven, 350.

same criteria. We rely on the witness of others who believe in God's existence, but many of them are relying in turn on the witness of still others, be it personal or Scriptural. Some claim to have had a personal encounter with God, but such an encounter is qualitatively different than a personal encounter with the material country of Afghanistan. It is also not available to one in the way Afghanistan is. Given time, money and the right travel documents (and security) anyone can, in theory, go to Afghanistan and have a personal encounter with it. The requirements for a divine encounter are less quantifiable, if not a mystery.

But ultimately, question a believer on their reasons for believing in God, and what often (if not always) lies at the core of it is some ineffable reaction, a *frisson* of recognition of truth, the awe of the numinous, the warmth of love itself. Absent that confirmation, and what is a seeker to conclude? There is a God and God is withholding that contact for whatever reason; there is a God and the seeker is unable to reach God; there is no God. The first two suggestions are unsatisfactory while the third completely denies the possibility of authentic divine experience, relegating it to the realm of Freud and Feuerbach. That latter is certainly possible, but the argument from universal consent is too compelling to be entirely dismissed as merely psychological wish fulfillment. Or as JK Rowling wrote in the last *Harry Potter* "Of course it is all happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"<sup>6</sup>

The absence of a personally experientially validated belief in God is a serious problem for the wide sense agnostic trying to weigh the arguments for theism. Further, the previous paper systematically analyzed the traditional theistic doctrine of God and found it wanting for a modern era of science and skepticism. Atheism, then, seems viable,

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<sup>6</sup> Rowling, J.K., *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Arthur Levine Books: 2007), 723.

and yet lacking. It does not seem to be the entire story. The next step is to look for a belief in God that could be held as a feasible one, one that addresses the issues that so condemn traditional theism, as well as issues of experience with God. This paper will present a view of God, that of process theism which, if this agnostic were to believe (could believe), would be the view to have. It begins by discussing the importance of clarifying what we are talking about when we talk about God.

*Mel said, "I was going to tell you about something. I mean, I was going to prove a point. You see, this happened a few months ago, but it's still going on right now, and it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we're talking about when we talk about love."<sup>7</sup>*

In the short story by Raymond Carver, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," two married couples drink while engaging in what becomes increasingly charged (and drunken) conversation centered on the topic of love. Each couple is on their second marriage; Mel and Terri have been together for five years, while Laura and Nick are relative newlyweds. Over the course of the story, each individual makes a declaration, both verbal and non-verbal, about the nature of love, and it quickly becomes clear that none of the characters have the same definition of the word. This struggle to define "love" via anecdotes, gestures and declarations does not produce much in the way of overt conflict. But the story's bleakly empty final lines suggest that a hitherto unexpected, or deliberately ignored, gap has developed within at least one of the couples. As a couple, there is a sense of oneness, of a team, with a presumed likeminded sensibility in all areas, and surely most particularly on this one, most significant topic. But though it is never explicitly stated, by the end of the discussion there is the sense of

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Carver, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 146.

“That is not it at all, that is not what I meant, at all.”<sup>8</sup> It arrives as casually as it does in “Prufrock” and it is every bit as devastating.

The characters, each in what initially appears to be a happy marriage, are failing to meet on what would seem to be the most common of relationship grounds. On the surface, they are talking about the same thing. In reality, they are talking about resentment, obsession, infatuation, passion and affection. They routinely use “love” in divergent ways. A similar problem occurs with God-talk. Wittgenstein states that the term “‘God’ is among the earliest terms we learn.”<sup>9</sup> “God” is taught through scripture, song and prayer and a picture results. But that does not ensure that the word is taught with the same consistency of meaning as other words, even within the same religious tradition, and that the corresponding picture is sufficiently similar. It is not the same as a child learning to associate “cow” with a black and white spotted four-legged creature with udders and the propensity to utter “moo.”

It is possible that whenever we engage in discourse about God, we do not know what the other person is saying, not because they are saying nonsense, but because we do not automatically know what they mean when they say “God.” As with the characters in the short story, there is an assumption that we are engaging in the same language-game, particularly if one is participating in the same religious or cultural tradition, and thus that the words used are used in precisely the same way. The characters learn to their sorrow that this is not so. The implication at the end of the story is that this divergence is more than just an inability to communicate, but something that will have increasing

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<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1970), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Glyn Richards, “A Wittgensteinian Approach to the Philosophy of Religion,” *American Journal of Religion* 58, no 3 JI (1978), 299.

consequences over the course of time, effects that have only barely appeared by the story's end.

The “new atheists,” such as Dawkins and Hitchens, make the mistake of assuming that whenever anyone says “God” they mean precisely the same thing; a supernatural, omnipotent, omniscient being whose goodness or reliability is in doubt because of the presence of evil in the world, and whose function is in doubt because scientific discoveries have increasingly reduced the deity-in-question's traditional roles. They are right. This particular God is, as the previous paper sought to make clear, not something in whom belief seems warranted. But that is not the limit of God.

Van Buren, quoted by Ogden, says “The empiricist in us finds the heart of the difficulty not in what is said about God, but in the very talking about God at all. We do not know `what' God is, and we cannot understand how the word ‘God’ is being used.”<sup>10</sup> Ogden rejects the usual next step; abandoning “any claim for God's reality.” What Ogden means when he talks about God informs the next section, an attempt to clarify what a wide sense atheism could mean when they talk about God.

*so it*

*is right here, where I am peering, where I am supposed to*

*discern*

*how the new gods walk behind the old gods at the suitable distance.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ogden, Schubert M, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Graham, Jorie “Prayer (‘From Behind Trees’),” *Never*, HarperCollins (New York, 2002), 51. In endnotes, she adds “In attempting to enact a realistic description of metamorphoses, “Prayer” wonders, among other things, what the “suitable” distance between subject and object, gods and humans, humans and nature, might be.”

While calling for a new kind of theism, Ogden claims that much of what is called “atheism,” not just the modern day sort, but throughout history, is and has been a rejection of some particular theistic “conceptual scheme.” Though he says it is possible to reject all available accounts of theism, he himself is not rejecting all concepts of God (just one in particular), and in fact believes that one can only explicitly manifest a belief in God through a particular idea. However, is it possible that one can deny belief in God even while demonstrating an affirmation of God through other actions?

When he talks about actions that affirm a faith in God, Ogden isn’t alluding to an “anonymous Christian.” Instead, he discusses what he calls (by way of Toulmin) “boundary situations” and the “limiting questions” that arise from the same. Ogden claims we have an underlying confidence in life, a “trust that that world is sufficiently ordered and intelligible that we may anticipate its future behavior from our experiences in the past and present.”<sup>12</sup> A “boundary situation” is a life-altering event that calls what one had known into question. The most significant, according to Ogden, are death, chance, conflict, suffering and guilt,<sup>13</sup> but they can include puberty, marriage, immense joy, any event that calls us into unknown territory. He gives a more specific example of a limiting question. When one asks why one should keep a promise, even after explanations that promises are to be kept or that it is in the larger best interests of everyone concerned that the promise be kept, one is no longer asking a moral question, but a limiting one, to wit “why should one do anything moral at all?” This question arrives at the limits of morality.

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<sup>12</sup> Ogden, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Ogden, 114.

Ogden says that these situations and resulting questions do not dispel our confidence in life—we do not ask whether there is such confidence in life, because it is *that* we have such confidence in the first place that these events are problematic for us. In other words, below that confidence in life lies a presupposition that “life as we live it is somehow of ultimate worth.”<sup>14</sup> There is something worth getting out of bed for in the morning and if that is torn away from me, then I have nothing to live for. If this presupposition were not the case, then these boundary situations, these crises, would not give rise to limiting questions. If we don’t exist, then we are not troubled by questions of our existence. But instead “all our moral choices unavoidably beg the question of basic confidence in the worth of life.”<sup>15</sup> The problem instead is to make sense of that confidence, that “our assurance that life is worthwhile may still be affirmed.”<sup>16</sup>

Ogden calls this the religious question or the question of faith. We need reassurance that life is meaningful. “Religion in its various forms is an attempt to answer these limiting questions at the level of self-conscious belief, thereby providing the needed reassurance.”<sup>17</sup> Religion is not the confidence itself. Religion is instead the representation of it, and “different historical religions, including Christianity, can be thought of only as several attempts at a more or less self-conscious understanding of this original confidence.”<sup>18</sup> We have a confidence that there is a meaning to life, which is why we can perform moral actions, because they are rooted in that fundamental notion of the worth of life. Religion is the representation and reassurance of this confidence.

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<sup>14</sup> Ogden, 116.

<sup>15</sup> Ogden, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ogden, 116.

<sup>17</sup> Ogden, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Ogden, 34.

But Ogden makes a clear distinction between religion and God. Religion is a self-conscious outward representation of something that is inner and instinctual, confidence in the worth of life. Where does this confidence come from? Put simply, God is the ground of this confidence, the “objective ground of reality itself of our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence.”<sup>19</sup> If moral actions rest on the underlying confidence in life’s worth, then in every action we are affirming the transcendent ground of such confidence. But it is not just morality but rather “our existence as such and in *all* its undertakings is a standing testimony to God’s reality...we are selves at all only because of our existential faith in him, and that, in consequence, such faith must also be affirmed self-consciously if the reflective inventory of our beliefs is to be both complete and consistent.”<sup>20</sup>

As we have seen above, Ogden wishes to counter classical theism, believing it deficient to what we know about the world and our experience in it. Instead, he proposes “The only way any conception of God can be made more than a mere idea having nothing to do with reality is to exhibit it as the most adequate reflective account we can give of certain experiences in which we all inescapably share.”<sup>21</sup> In sharp contrast to centuries of substance thinking, Ogden, along with Whitehead and process theologians, says that what is most primal is relational or social. Rather than a substance, something that needs nothing else in order to exist, the self needs others, and its own past, present and future in relation in order to exist. We exist as selves because we are in relation to our bodies, and from there we are in relation to the entire rest of the world. We know ourselves only in connection with our past and anticipated future experiences. We are social and temporal,

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<sup>19</sup> Ogden, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ogden, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Ogden, 20.

and anything related to us must be as well. This must then include God, and as such is a bold negation of *classical* thought, as summed up by Aquinas: “Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to him and not conversely, it is manifest the creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to him.”<sup>22</sup>

Ogden objects to precisely this characterization of God. “If what we do and suffer as men in the world is from God’s perspective wholly indifferent, that perspective is at most irrelevant to our actual existence.”<sup>23</sup> How can God know and love the world at the very least analogously to how we understand those words, if God is not related to the world? If God is the Unmoved Mover, how can God do more than impersonally note, as an accountant might, the fall of a sparrow? The actions of the world must have an impact on God for the phrase “God’s love” to have any sense for us at all. If God is unaffected by everything, God is “the eternal bystander whose back is turned to the woe of the world.”<sup>24</sup> Feuerbach cries “How could he find consolation and peace in God if God were an essentially different being? How can I share the peace of a being if I am not of the same nature as him? If his nature is different from mine, his peace is essentially different—it is no peace for me. How then can I become a partaker of his peace if I am not a partaker of his nature? But how can I be a partaker of his nature if I am really of a different nature?”<sup>25</sup> Process answers: We are not of a different nature than God, and we

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<sup>22</sup> Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologica* (Christian Classics, Benziger Bros, 1948), 13, 7, p. 66.

<sup>23</sup> Ogden, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Ogden, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Feuerbach, 45.

do partake in God's nature. We help create part of the divine nature, the consequent nature. We contribute not just to the divine life, but the divine nature.

By taking the self's experience as "paradigmatic for reality as such"<sup>26</sup> Ogden concludes that everything, including God, is an instance of creative becoming or "process." God, then, is not a supernatural being who breaks into the world at whim, but rather a becoming, as is everything. In sharp contrast to the simple and remote unmoved God of classical theism, God is dipolar, consisting of an eternal primordial nature and an ever-evolving consequent nature, and thus both transcendent and immanent, both unchanging and affected by the world, and in turn, affecting the world. This view is not just limited to modern day process theism. Karen Armstrong writes "Pseudo-Denys' God has two aspects; one is turned towards us and manifests himself in the world; the other is the far side of God as he is in himself, which remains entirely incomprehensible. He 'stays within himself' in his eternal mystery, at the same time as he is totally immersed in creation."<sup>27</sup> This latter is key: Griffin says "the basic God-world relationship lies in the very nature of things."<sup>28</sup> God is completely and fully temporally related to the world, experiencing everything that occurs in its total objective and subjective senses.

As discussed in the previous paper, the problem of evil results from the notion of an omnipotent and omniscient God. Process theology confronts this by first reexamining "omniscient" and then redefining "omnipotent" in the context of a dipolar God. For the former, God knows all there is to know. God's primordial nature consists of all the possibilities for the future, for every actual occasion, from quarks to human beings and all between, in this world and in any world to come. God's consequent nature consists of all

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<sup>26</sup> Ogden, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God* (Ballantine Books, 1993), 129.

<sup>28</sup> Griffin, David Ray, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism* (Cornell University Press, 2001), 137.

that has been, every actual entity that has reached satisfaction, from quarks to humans and all between, in this world and any others that may have been. What God cannot know is the future as it will be, for that is not actual. Possibilities for the future are real, and contained in the primordial nature. What is actual is what has happened, objectively immortal and forever “stubborn fact,” as Whitehead calls it. God cannot know the uncertain future, “only” all the possibilities for that future. This dissolves part of the problem of evil; God does not know that potential evil is certain, only that it is a possibility among many others. So why cannot God at least prevent that possibility? God is not omnipotent in the sense of having all the power, for that would deny free will. It is possible that free will is just an illusion, but human beings behave in ways that make it clear they do not think so. Indeed, if one believes one’s actions are controlled by another force, that person is considered deluded and often committed to a mental hospital.

Process theologians such as Ogden and Griffin agree that God is not ultimate; rather, there are three ultimates, God, creativity and some kind of world. While Ogden believes that this world was created through a kind of *creato ex nihilo*,<sup>29</sup> because where there was once nothing there is now something, Griffin believes this world was created out of chaos “rather than absolute nothingness.”<sup>30</sup> While actual entities are constituted by their relationships, most powerfully with their own past, they are in the end the result of self-creation. The entity itself has final say in its satisfaction and having reached that satisfaction then becomes the past which continues to have effect on actual entities to

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<sup>29</sup> Ogden, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Griffin, 224.

come. “The creatures’ twofold creative power of self-determination and efficient causation cannot be canceled, overridden, or completely controlled by God.”<sup>31</sup>

The problem of evil and omnipotence is thus resolved: God is no longer the sole creator of a world out of nothing, and therefore is not fully responsible for the presence of evil in that world, plus God can not have complete power over creatures’ actions. All actual entities feel other actual entities in the initial stages of concrescence, and thus God is felt, too. God is one of the relations that make up the moment of experience, a potent and beautiful one, one that is not limited to what is and what has been. God is felt through God’s initial aim, as God’s consequent nature prehends actual entities as they reach their satisfaction, and then compares what has actually occurred with the possibilities for what might occur next. God values these possibilities and selects the best one, which concrescing actual entities prehend as the initial aim. God is, according to Whitehead, constantly working towards greater variety, intensity and complexity, and leads tenderly by God’s vision of truth, beauty and goodness. While the power of the past, as causal efficacy, is powerful, God’s power is sublime. God attempts to influence us towards the best in and for every moment of experience, and that influence is always present.

But that influence is not alone, nor is the choice it is offering the only one available. The more complex the actual occasion—a human being vs. a worm, for example—the greater the choices, the freedom to choose and the capacity for goodness, but also thus the greater capacity for evil. This is not quite the Clayton-Knapp response to Wildman as rejected in the previous paper.<sup>32</sup> That position is that God chooses not to intervene for to do so interrupts the natural order and evolution of creatures, preventing

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<sup>31</sup> Griffin, 224.

<sup>32</sup> Herczog, 6.

them from developing rational thought and individual decisions. In this case, there is still the omni-God of traditional theism, but one who chooses to not supernaturally intervene in creaturely matters in order to bring about rational, moral, fully free agents. This view prompts the question: Is that trade suffering and evil for autonomy sufficient? While the earlier paper railed against the notion that we do not have free will, that was in part because the alternative seemed to be puppets who suffer. Puppets who do not suffer may, when one thinks about all that suffering and evil entail, not be an undesirable position.

Instead, the process view is that God is part of the same metaphysical order as everything else, and thus there is no supernatural intervention. But at the same time, this means God cannot intervene, as we think of it, at all. God's power is not coercive, which denies free will, but persuasive. In every moment, God is there, with God's vision of truth, beauty and goodness, the best possibility for that moment. Some object; this God is not powerful enough, is not worthy of worship. I counter; this God is love, and there is nothing greater.

The God of process thought is fully immanent in every moment, feeling all that occurs equally fully, and is affected by it. As creatures suffer, so does God. As creatures rejoice, so does God. God is changed by what we do and God's vision for the future is changed accordingly. "In God all the being of the world is included and everlastingly preserved, and to it God adds the incomparable riches of the divine vision."<sup>33</sup> A relationship that was once that of an either remote or capricious master and slave (as classical theism might lead one to conclude) is instead a deeply connected one. It is one of a God who does not need appeals of supplication to heed us tenderly, but who is in us even as we are in God.

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<sup>33</sup> Cobb, 146.

A God who is thus related to us answers some of Feuerbach's charges. "Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge. By his God thou knowest the man, and by the man his God; the two are identical." The skeptic today could take that as her credo. But that is based on the traditional God of classical theism. Karen Armstrong observes "Once 'God' is seen as a wholly other reality 'out there,' he can easily become a mere idol and a projection, which enables human beings to externalize and worship their own prejudices and desires."<sup>34</sup> Instead, there is Whitehead's deity, "the fellow sufferer who understands." In this phrase we are reassured that God is Emmanuel; God is with us. We see here how Ogden's confidence in life can be. God is here, whether we "know" it or not.

*"'God,' says Augustine, for example, 'is nearer, more related to us, and therefore more easily known by us, than sensible, corporeal things.'"*<sup>35</sup>

As someone who has had breast cancer on and off for eleven years, process theology allows me to address the difficult issue of "why"? I have never said nor even felt "why me?"—why *not* me, since after all 1 in 7 women will be diagnosed with it during their lifetimes. So the question seems better framed as "why anyone"? Past theodicy explanations are rejected. God does not send disease as a punishment, nor as a learning tool, or any other device that is part of some unknown plan in which we are to place our blind trust. Process theology allows for evil, because all creatures are free. Decisions are made even on a sub-molecular level, and so cancer cells are free to exist and multiply. Cancer is a possibility, and what's more, as life, as something existent, those cancer cells have intrinsic value, and as something relational, those cancer cells

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<sup>34</sup> Armstrong, 131.

<sup>35</sup> Feuerbach, Ludwig, *The Essence of Christianity* (Prometheus Books: 1989), 12.

have instrumental value as well. The difficulty comes in assessing my right to existence over that of the cancer cells. Upon initial reflection, there seems to be no dilemma—of course I should win!

But deeper meditation asks a tougher question: How does one justify such conclusions? Process theology, via Whitehead, says that the greater the complexity, variety and intensity, the greater the value, and so, on the surface, a human life would seem more valuable than that of a cell. Human life adds more to the world than does that of individual cells, healthy or otherwise, increasing the complexity, variety and intensity therein. Further, “evil,” for Whitehead, is destruction, not creativity, and cancer cells destroy, they do not create. Paradoxically evil contains its own end, as it destroys even that which initially nourishes it. Cancer is an example of that. If my cancer destroys me, my cancer will die, too.

The conclusion, then, would be that my triumph over cancer would have more value than if the cancer “wins.” However, this reflection ideally should not have stopped at the simple battle between cancer and me, and should instead have taken into account the variety that life entails, from protons to Presidents, and that living life means a constant battle for balance. “Life is robbery,” Whitehead tells us; all life exists at the expense of other life. Vegetarians may make the choice they do out of respect for other life, but they still rob life from plants. If we understand everything to be of the same kind, just different degrees, from quarks to God, we may lead our own life differently, with greater respect for the life beyond our own. This isn’t to say we should allow small pox to flourish, nor that I should give my body over to the cancer cells just because depriving them of existence is an evil, but rather we may take more careful consideration of the

world and its varied inhabitants. Nor is it to suggest that cancer cells are anything desirable. It is to remind us that there are many life forms that seem, from an anthropocentric perspective, useless at best, destructive and/or hideous at worse, which actually serve a function in the large eco-system.

Instead of cursing God and dying, perhaps I can answer the question “why anyone?” with the knowledge that the same freedom and self-creativity that I rejoice in is not mine exclusively, nor that of humans in general, but something enjoyed, to some extent, by all. I may conclude that I wish to engage in destruction, specifically that of cancer cells, in order to live longer. But perhaps in the process I can better understand that this is a decision I must make each and every moment of my existence. Cobb reassures us: “The relativity of values does not mean that values are not real”<sup>36</sup> while Whitehead follows his “life is robbery” remark with “the robber requires justification.” Few, if any, would begrudge me the destruction of cancer cells, but what about the lab animals that died in the testing of chemotherapy and other medical treatments? The destruction of plants and animals for food, or indirectly, for fuel, shelter, clothing and more? What about the human suffering that may be entailed to provide any of those elements I so take for granted in my survival? As Cobb says “Love is unjust. We love, and will always love, some more than others. We constantly, and rightly, must check our love in the interest of fairness.”<sup>37</sup>

If we look at cancer, or other “natural” evils, not as mysterious judgments from God, but as the consequence of decisions made by actual occasions in moments of self-creativity, and those actual occasions as having their own value, we have the opportunity

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<sup>36</sup> Cobb, John, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press: 2007), 181.

<sup>37</sup> Cobb, 75.

to better assess the impact our lives can have. Because we understand ourselves not as autonomous, or as in a one-way relationship with God, who has dictated, for whatever reason, that we suffer the ills that we do, but rather in relationship with all, we have an opportunity to make our decisions with care and concern. We approach our position not from the bottom looking up at God or from the top down on the rest of creation, but from a spot on an inter-related spectrum, carefully regarding those less complex and varied than ourselves, be that physically, mentally, or socio-economically. The result should be just as much awe at the vastness of life and our connection to it. We are fortunate that we can make decisions that have consequence for so many, and this responsibility should make us humble. To ask “why me?” about cancer from the status of a victim with no attachment to the rest of the world is to make the situation very small.

*“...the ultimate criteria for the truth of any claim can only be our common human experience and reason”<sup>38</sup>*

There remains the stumbling block for a belief in the process God; that *frisson* of experience discussed above. It is not always possible to have a conscious experience of God no matter how hard one tries, via prayer, meditation or even pleading. One has only to look at the example of Mother Theresa, who spent over forty years in a “dark night of the soul” longing for her God, but finding only absence. Can one believe in God on a purely intellectual basis? Mother Theresa would again seem to be a model. She spent those dark years continuing the work she believed was divinely ordained, without any spiritual succor. It’s possible she did not believe at all, and was merely acting “as if.” Certainly that is an option, Pascal’s Wager taken to a true saintly degree. But reading her letters to her confessor, it seems that she still believed, as she longed for the God she was

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<sup>38</sup>Ogden, Schubert, *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986). 140.

no longer certain of. God was not there for her emotionally, or even spiritually, but God's work was there for her, and the idea of God never left her. One could say she was taunted by it. It is a terrible, and brave, position: to yearn for and quest after a God who remains silent.

In process terms, God is always present, and was very much present during even the worst of Mother Theresa's dark nights of the soul. It is churlish to suggest that something was lacking in her that made it impossible for her to sense this presence, however longed-for. Cobb says "most of our experience never attains consciousness. Hence we should not suppose that the failure to experience God consciously means that we do not experience God at all, any more than the failure to experience consciously the innumerable events in our brain means that we are not, in fact, experiencing them."<sup>39</sup> Further, none of our past experiences are truly visible to us, "though," as Cobb says, "we may reenact their visual experience."<sup>40</sup> And so atheistic arguments that God is not visible, or otherwise empirical, and thus not meaningful, are weakened. Much has influence on us that is not visible. But it is possible that Mother Theresa had come to think of God-encounters as only like the ecstatic moment she had when much younger, the one that inspired her to open her charity in the first place. She may have been so addicted to that overwhelming feeling that she forgot the still small voice.

Hick suggests that God is actually bestowing something of a gift upon people by *not* forcing God's self in "logically compelling demonstration of God's existence" upon people, because to do that leaves no room for decision, for self-conclusion, for a free human response.

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<sup>39</sup> Cobb, 149.

<sup>40</sup> Cobb, 155.

There can be occasions when the causal efficacy of the moment from God exceeds in importance all others, even the typically powerful past, so much so that the rest fade into the background, perhaps are even negatively prehended. At this moment there is what Cobb calls “communion” with God, as distinct from union. At all times, the moment of occasion retains its own identity, and ability to self-create. Instead, there is, as Cobb says, “a relation of intimacy of two persons rather than of unity between them.”<sup>41</sup> There is an acknowledgement of the Thou of Buber. To the Freudian and Feuerbachian skeptics who see this as projection, as our subjective self raised to objective status, Cobb responds “Such explanations as the psychoanalytic ones force upon the report an interpretation much more remote from the spontaneous self-understanding of the experience itself.”<sup>42</sup> But he also adds that just because such things are possible does not mean they actually do ever occur. Further, it may be necessary for God to encourage (not force, however) such an awareness prior to or even regardless of any desire or effort on the entity’s part. This could account for those individuals (like this author) who have never had what they could convincingly consider an encounter with the numinous. That line of speculation, however, runs perilously close to the answered prayers justification for belief. In any event, Cobb calls these “ontic” rather than ontological questions.

Process thought thus accounts for both conscious divine encounter and the absence of same, while also providing an explanation for Ogden’s confidence in life as discussed above. It also allows for religious pluralism, since general rather than special revelation is the norm, in the form of the initial aim. No religion, however great, can have perfect access to the divine, for the initial aim is only given to individuals based on time

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<sup>41</sup> Cobb, 152.

<sup>42</sup> Cobb, 152.

and place, and even then is rarely fully prehended. Cobb says “At some point each tradition must learn to state its truth more carefully to avoid the falsehood that arises from exaggeration or from insensitivity to the fragmentariness of every human apprehension.”<sup>43</sup> But it still allows for the truth of beatific vision, and such vision is available to all humanity, and indeed, to a different extent, all things.

*“If we have a moral duty not to volit but to seek the truth impartially and passionately, then we ought not to obtain religious beliefs by willing to have them; instead we should follow the best evidence we can get.”<sup>44</sup>*

For a wide sense agnostic, the age of skepticism provides plenty of support for the atheistic position. I submit that process theology provides a tolerable, perhaps even embraceable theistic view, and that this view may be held intellectually in the absence of a spiritually committed belief.

“Strong” agnosticism states that it is impossible to know anything about God. Process theism suggests that we do know God, and God knows us. Relatedness is fundamental, and upon reflection, even obvious. Religious questions have to correspond to our experience, and relationship is the most primal among them. God’s self must be related to us in order to have meaning for our lives. Process theism seems to fulfill this demand in a way that is intellectually satisfying. Per Ogden, boundary situations are those that demonstrate an underlying confidence in life that has been shaken. That confidence is understood by process theism as delivered through the initial aim. Religious belief can result through these situations, as one seeks open and conscious affirmation of

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<sup>43</sup> Cobb, 188.

<sup>44</sup> Pojman, Louis P. “Faith, Hope and Doubt,” *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. Louis P. Pojman, (Wadsworth: 2003), 442.

that confidence in life. Through our relatedness, through the initial aim, we can know God's vision for each moment of actual occasion.

God is with us and we are with God in every moment. The absence of conscious or emotional (rather than intellectual) awareness of this need not be the impediment. Since such experiences are still left open to Freudian and Feuerbachian challenges, a purely intellectual-based belief may be not just valid, but stronger than it appears. There can be no question of divine coercion, nor of it being psychologically suspect. This is not to say that the response to the God of process thought cannot be an emotional one. It may even, indeed, be a divine connection. But it need not be recognized by the non-believer as such for it to be effective.

For this wide sense agnostic, atheism has been weighed, and found wanting. Traditional theism is rejected. Skepticism rules. Out of this muddle, process theism presents God in a way that at once passes understanding and is the sureness of one's most confident self-decision. The process God is the both/and of agnosticism: transcendent and immanent, eternal and temporal, containing all things and greater than all things, too vast to ever grasp and intimately accessible. The process God knows our hearts and is changed by them. In turn we can, and indeed we do, know God. We just don't know it.

*"I won't light a candle for my father.*

*I won't try to pray.*

*I will be still, though. I will listen to silence and know that I'm safe. And when I go, I will go in peace."*<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Dewberry, 229.