

A Question of Religious Depth

Thoughts on Some Recent Reading:

A number of items I have read in the last few months have raised seemingly related questions. They all have to do with a perceived lack in liberal religion. That lack can be identified in different ways, but it seems to be a question of religious depth or seriousness. Gary Dorrien¹ says that liberal theology has tended to be too esoteric and thus not to speak well to a broad public. He also says that liberal theology presents a challenge to the status quo which will never allow it to become popular. All of these criticisms seem to find a lack of power in the message which liberal religion brings to the public.

William Dean in that same issue of AJTP says that he and other liberal theologians have tended to become too focused on method and justification and too thin on content. I think that criticism fits my case quite well. I have written much on how to justify doing liberal theology in the light of criticism from either post-modernist on one hand or science based positivism on the other. I have not then done enough to take that justification in hand and talked about what I think is religiously believable and defensible. Perhaps more important, I have not always talked about what is religiously significant in our everyday living.

Jay Abernathy an unpublished draft paper argues that a focus on morality has sapped significant religious strength from Unitarian thinking. If morality, social justice, and friendly coffee hours are all there is to UU religion it is hard to say why we call it a religion. This follows in some ways the line of thought in Charles Taylor's new book² which suggests that secular humanism came to the forefront in western culture once we had made moral order the primary religious message.

Paul Razor criticized our UU religion for a kind of thinness when it comes to questions of evil and or sin³. We seem to have an overly rosy outlook, and it is not clear that we offer serious resources for coping with the negative aspects of life. I recall much the same tone of criticism in Kim Beach's summary of some the thinking he has drawn from studying the work of James Luther Adams.

I just re-read Bernard Loomer's "The Size of God"⁴ and find there something

¹ Dorrien, Gary; "The Crisis and Necessity of Liberal Theology", American Journal of Theology and Philosophy, Vol.30 No.1; January, 2009.

² Taylor, Charles; A SECULAR AGE; Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2007.

³ Razor, Paul; FAITH WITHOUT CERTAINTY: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century; Skinner House Books, Boston MA, 2005.

⁴ Loomer, Bernard; "The Size of God"; published in THE SIZE OF GOD: The Theology of Bernard Loomer in Context; edited by William Dean and Larry E. Axel; Mercer University Press, Macon GA, 1987.

which parallels that sort of concern. He says that the usual notion of God in mainstream protestant religion has become focused on the philosophically perfect and totally good. The notions of perfection and absolute goodness he says are abstractions which keep us from any possible idea of a concrete actual God. He argues that the concrete is necessarily ambiguous. The metaphysical God offered by Kant or Hegel is an example of misplaced concreteness. This ‘abstract’ notion of God seems to reflect another kind of lack of depth (or perhaps the same kind looked at from a different angle).

At the same time, Kurt Godel⁵ and Patrick Grim⁶ have shown us that the abstract notions of perfection and/or absolute truth and by analogy absolute goodness are not even coherent. The very idea of an absolute and complete system of ideas is impossible dream. There can be no such thing as a system of all truth.

Thandeka, in AJTP v30 n1 has argued that we might find a basis upon which to build liberal theology by attending to the neural and biological foundation of affect in our human experience⁷. She makes the point that there is a felt quality of being alive and present to a world at the core of our biological sense of self-being. (This ties to her interpretation of Schliermacher in “The Embodied Self⁸”) This is parallel to Damasio’s idea of a core proto-self underlying the later developments of consciousness and self consciousness. As I have argued previously⁹, these ideas are also strongly parallel to what Heidegger was pointing to in some of his phenomenological analysis of self-being. Both Damasio and Heidegger give emphasis to the felt qualities of being present in and to a world.

This is not a new dilemma. In reading Gary Dorrien’s three volume history of liberal theology¹⁰ I note that there are a number of references to a certain thinness of liberal religious content. There is also a repeated reference to individuals who felt conflicted. They wanted a religion that met needs which they felt strongly, and they wanted to hold to strict boundaries of intellectual rigor, which ruled out many of the older answers to those needs. In particular I was struck by the discussion of Wm. James’ thought¹¹ (esp. pg. 223). James saw modern science as presenting an impersonal world ruled by chance and yet a very human need for something that could sustain our personal sense of freedom and our need for value and meaning. On the intellectual side he felt compelled to hold to the picture of the world being drawn by the sciences. On the human

⁵ Godel, Kurt; “On Formally Undecidable Propositions of the Principia Mathematica and Related Systems” The Undecidable, edited by Martin Davis, Raven Press, Hewlett NY, 1965.

⁶ Grim, Patrick; The Incomplete Universe: Totality, Knowledge, and Truth; MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1991.

⁷ Thandeka; “Future Designs for American Liberal Theology”, American Journal of Theology and Philosophy, Vol. 30 No. 1, January 2009.

⁸ Thandeka; The Embodied Self: Friedrich Schleiermacher’s Solution to Kant’s Problem of the Empirical Self; SUNY Press, Albany NY, 1995.

⁹ Tarbell, David; “Who We Are: Reflections on Human Self Being”; Journal of Liberal Religion, Vol. 3 No. 1.

¹⁰ Dorrien, Gary; The Making of American Liberal Theology; Westminster Knox Press, Louisville, 2001, 2003, & 2006.

¹¹ Ibid;

feeling side he felt compelled to find a way to include the need for value and meaning.

We are still faced with much that same problem.

So, where do we go from here?

I cannot follow the suggestion of Dean and some others that we turn back to the tradition of liberal Christianity for our source of content. That path has been long lost to me, much as it may work for some.

I would rather follow the trail blazed by Jerome Stone in his “A Minimalist Vision of Transcendence”¹² in pointing to things that we encounter in experience as having a feeling of transcendence and calling for a religious response. However, for me Stone stops too soon in focusing on those ideals which beckon us to strive, and those elements of experience that we encounter as sustaining from outside of any expectation.

Briefly put, the minimal model of transcendence can be formulated as follows: the transcendent is the collection of all situationally transcendent resources and continually challenging ideals we experience. The situationally superior resources can be called the real aspect, the challenging ideals the ideal aspect of the transcendent. This definition of transcendence is an attempt to state in the theoretical language of inquiry the meaning of what in the language of devotion we call “God”¹³

In using the word ‘resources’, Stone was specifically pointing to those aspects of experience which we find supportive and helpful. By ‘situationally transcendent’ he intended to focus on those supportive and helpful experiences that came to us as if from outside the realm of our situation as we understood that situation. Such as when a loved one recovers from life threatening illness without any obvious medical intervention, or when we find strength we did not know we could muster to deal with a threatening situation.

I think Loomer was on the right track in looking at the Size of God as needing to encompass more than just those positive aspects of what might be transcendent. However, I cannot follow Loomer in his faith in Whitehead’s metaphysics. This is also an example of the kind of esoteric theorizing that fails to speak to most people. I need something more directly connected with our lived experience.

That moves me back toward Thandeka’s ideas and some of my earlier writing on “Who We Are”. A key notion as was expressed by Heidegger and Damasio is that central to our being is the felt reality of being in the world with a particular mood or background emotional state as a readiness to react (see my earlier notion of ‘readiness-to-respond’). Thandeka points out that this background affect is prior to any specific cognitive content. It is a kind of being that we share with other living creatures (as best we can judge based on common neuro-biology and parallels in behavior). However, as Heidegger has said, and as I have found in my own studies, our background affect is also affected by our cognitive states of interpretation. These later developments feedback into the biological stuff of our basic felt living state. As Aaron Gurwitsch pointed out, once interpretation

¹² Stone, Jerome A; A MINIMALIST VISION OF TRANSCENDENCE: A Naturalist Philosophy of Religion; SUNY Press, Albany NY, 1992.

¹³ Stone, Jerome ... Stone acknowledges a need for some expansion of this idea in recent writings.

enters the scene it is mixed with experience all the way down¹⁴.

Spirituality:

Some claim that what is needed in UU religion is greater spirituality. Then the question is, what do we mean by 'spirituality'?

The traditional definition of 'spirit' is the incorporeal aspect of humans. It is sometimes an alternative designation for 'soul'. This would seem to point us toward an alternative to things material. Do we then mean to point to something 'immaterial'?

For the most part I do not think that those who ask for more spirituality in UU religion have in mind a return to something supernatural. By and large, UU's are committed to a view of the world which denies a dualistic split between the material and the immaterial. However, there has been a tendency among some to interpret naturalism as a commitment to things that can be explained by physics with a denial that anything else can be real. I think the quest for spirituality has at least something to do with trying to reach beyond the sort of dry almost mechanical explanation of things that tends to come from this approach to modern science.

The question of whether the theories of physics are true and complete is not a question that falls within the boundaries of physics (as current theories of physics are defined). Nor do any questions of value, or what we might call meaning or purpose. Jerome Stone, following Bernard Meland, has pointed us towards the notion of a 'generous empiricism'. This is a version of what has been called 'radical empiricism'. Stone says that included within our experience are things that are not well covered by traditional scientific empiricism. Some of these things are best described by use of poetic and literary structures of expression. The measurement based sciences do not do justice to the full panoply of experience.

Bernard Meland's concept of appreciative awareness is a major source for Stone. By appreciative awareness Meland had in mind apprehending a fuller dimension of the world than is usually present in our thinking. Meland felt that conscious thought was limited by comparison to the full range of lived experience. There is always a penumbra of complexity and concreteness that eludes the sharp categories of thought. It involves our emotions and bodily felt experience. We may have to use poetry, imagery, and myth to express such things. Meland also felt that this appreciative awareness could be trained and that it involved objective reality. Just as we can learn to broaden and sharpen our appreciation of art so can we learn a more appreciative awareness of our world. Meland also felt that this appreciative awareness involved sensitivity to past evaluations within one's culture. Clearly there are cultural components to the full depth of our experience, and there is reason to believe that ideas that have survived in the development of culture over history must have some merit, even if modern thinking calls upon us to reinterpret what culture offers.

¹⁴ Gurwitch, Aaron; unpublished notes from classes at The New School for Social Research.

Some, turning to Thandeka's notion that these kinds of experience are founded in the neuro-biological responses of our bodies, would insist that they can be reduced to events caused and explained by the physical sciences. While acknowledging the continuity of our nature with the physical, I would argue that there are aspects of experience that reach beyond such explanations. The emergence of living things from the background of the purely physical world has involved an emergence of sensitivities and responses that go beyond the purely physical in the sense addressed by current scientific theory. Our senses of sight and sound are sensitive to structures in the world as well as to the piece-meal events of the transmission of light and physical vibration. Our biological-emotional structure appears to be similarly sensitive to complex structural relations within the enviroing world and its interaction with our bodies. Among recent neurological discoveries we find what are called 'mirror neurons' that function in ways allowing us to recognize and respond to signs of emotional life within others around us, especially through recognition of facial expressions. There is, in this sense, a purely natural physical basis for empathy, our capacity to recognize and share the feelings of others, but this capacity is not explained when the phenomena are reduced to the events recognized by physics. The structural quality of events plays a critical role here. The turn towards reductive explanation tends to miss emergent structural qualities and it is there that we find our sense of value, meaning, and purpose.

The function of our cognitive natures is to form interpretations of the content of our neuro-biological experience. The test of our interpretations of experience lies in how well they work for us in making sense of our experience, and helping us to live more fully within the enviroing world. In this sense, sensitive discernment and interpretation of the felt quality of our experience is central to our life experience. It is here that I think we find the grounds of a theology of the spiritual dimension of life. Our experience of felt quality is dependent on and emergent from the piece part physical elements of which we are constructed, but it cannot be fully explained at that reductive piece part level. The structured elements of who we are and of our responses to the world we encounter involve more than what can be described at the level of the piece parts themselves.

That brings me back to Jerry Stone's starting place and my sense that, for me at least, the scope of what I term transcendent needs to be enlarged from his position.¹⁵

A Fuller Transcendence:

As I said above, I like the start that Jerry Stone made in his "Minimal Vision of Transcendence", but I think he left out some aspects of what strikes me as transcendent. First, what do I mean by the use of the term, 'transcendence'?

As Stone pointed out in his work, the term has it roots in the notion of an other realm of existence from which some influence or action might impinge on this ordinary

¹⁵ Stone recognizes some of the factors that I will raise here, but he does not place them in the category of experiences that directly point towards the transcendent. My differences with his position are not sharp, and probably have more to do with matters of emphasis and questions of definitions. Stone makes a self-conscious decision to limit his sense of the transcendent to those factors that have a positive relation to human well being, but he fully recognizes that for some this seems an arbitrary limitation.

realm. For naturalists such as Stone and myself there is no truly *other* realm involved, but there are those aspects of the ordinary which have a felt quality of coming from or reaching to something un-ordinary. The scientific somewhat mechanical account of our world has come to dominate much of everyday reality within our western culture. Things that might call for additional modes of explanation and description thus become un-ordinary without any necessity for thinking that they are not natural. These are thoughts that broaden and deepen our sense of nature.

Stone identifies two types of things that strike him in this way. On the one hand there are those elements of this ordinary world which bring an emotional sense of sustenance out of proportion to anything in their known causal effects on our lives. As I write this paragraph I am sitting in my second home in the eastern range of the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts. I look out on a snow covered landscape of hills, rocks, and trees which has little specialness about it. Yet this location and view have for me a feeling quality that brings me into strong connection with the natural world that sustains us all. That's why my wife and I had this house built in this location. I can almost feel how the life world grows out of the geological, and the human world out of the natural wildscape. When I am here I am more at peace with myself and my world than when elsewhere. There is a felt quality of the connectedness of the whole which breaks through here for me in a special way. It is as if I can feel the 'interconnected web of existence'. I know that for others there are similar reactions to other places and circumstances. What is key here is that for most of us humans there are times and places where that sort of feeling comes through in a special way. How we interpret that is part of our more general sense of how the world is, but that kind of experience is one of the things calling for interpretation in our world view or theology.

The other aspect that Stone points to is the sense of challenge and demand that can impinge on us in the form of ideals that call us to action. I read in the newspaper (on line edition these days) about the hunger experienced by so many of the people of Zimbabwe (December 2008) and I am struck by the sense of wrong. Something needs to be done here. People shouldn't have to live that way. I am not at all sure that I can do anything directly effective in this situation. It is a complex situation that has evolved as part of the aftermath of colonial rule in that part of the world. But I cannot escape the feeling that I should look for ways to make a difference.

In a similar but less tragic sense, I read about the level of debt that most recent college graduates in this country are carrying, debt they incurred to pay for their education. It strikes me that we as a society ought to care more for our children. We ought to do more to help them get started in their society, and we ought to do more for the strength of our own social system to encourage the kind of education that is needed in this increasingly complex world.

I have similar feelings about a myriad of other situations. Some of them social and political, some of them more directly personal, but all cases where I feel that the world as it is ought to be changed because something is not right. I am called by a sense of what could be, and so are we all in various different ways. These feelings of right and justice do not reflect what is, but our sense of what could and ought to be. The power of these demands seems to be beyond the ordinary. They call us to reach toward ideals even when those ideals are beyond full reach.

But there are a number of other areas in which I encounter a sense of something about this natural world which is beyond the ordinary, which have for me a feeling of transcendence, of going beyond and calling me to look beyond the ordinary explanation and understanding. These are aspects of the world that stir feelings of awe and wonder, and not all of these involve either a sense of sustenance or of ideal demand. They all seem to have to do with structural aspects of our world and our sensitivity to that structure. These are things that cannot be explained by a reductive analysis to physical structure. Among these are:

- The immensity of the cosmos, and our small place therein;
- The surprising fact that we can understand much about this immense cosmos;
- The humbling sense that we can never understand it all;
- The disturbing fact that our most basic rationality is fundamentally limited (Godel, et al);
- The experience that our best efforts at social justice are always flawed;
- The disturbing sense that we can never draw absolute lines between good and evil.
- The thought that the cosmos may be mortal, as are we humans;
- My own suspicion that this list can never be completed.
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Cosmic Immensity:

When I step outside on a clear moonless night and look up into the sky I am in awe of the visual sense of immensity. There seems a depth to that dark star studded sky which is beyond fathoming.

When I reflect on what we humans have been able to understand about that star studded sky my sense of awe increases. We first discovered that our earth was not the center of things, but rotated around the sun along with other planets. Then it became clear that the sun and planets must occupy a relatively limited space within a larger cosmos. The true stars were so much further away that without careful measurement we could not even sense the shift in position brought about by the rotation of the earth around the sun. Our vision then gradually broadened, first to the galaxy of stars of which our sun is a part, then to the discovery that our galaxy was but one of many, and not a very big one, and then further to clusters of galaxies.

The modern theories of cosmology show us a universe whose limits are beyond what we can imagine in any ordinary sense. Our place within this immensity is so small it is less than a speck of dust in a huge Saharan dust storm. The idea that creation is somehow all focused on us seems ludicrous. We have been in existence such a small

fraction of the probable age of the universe that again we are as nothing in such immensity of time. Our sun is due to collapse in a time immense compared to our human age, yet tiny compared to the age of the cosmos. We are but a tiny spec in both space and time.

It is hard to grasp the immensity of the whole and the tinyness of our place.

To the degree that we can understand this at all, it is truly awe inspiring, and leaves me with a sense of being in the presence of something that reaches beyond whatever I can know, and yet I have a feeling of being connected to this larger whole.

Cosmic Intelligibility:

As Einstein once said, it is amazing that the world is so constructed that we who are such a small part can understand so much of it. When Galileo introduced the method of using mathematics as the key to describing physical behavior the results were remarkable. Newton pushed the idea much further with his system of mechanics. For awhile we in the west thought we had found the key to total understanding.

Now we have broad ranges of physical reality described through mathematical formulations. The use of mathematical theories has allowed humans to project descriptions of the cosmos that seem to correspond quite well with what we can observe through mathematical measurement. We have theories that give us at least a sense of the nature of our cosmos from the supposed 'big bang' to the projections of perpetual cosmic expansion, or a possible future reversal and collapse.

There is something profound in the thought that this vast universe is pervaded by a kind of structure that we can grasp in at least some limited way.

One unfortunate consequence has been that some people have concluded that the world is inherently a purely mathematical structure. That is probably an example of misplaced concreteness, and it ignores the many unexplained aspects of this world we have uncovered with all of this. Those limitations however still leave us with a surprising ability to grasp many aspects of this immense universe.

There is another dimension here which we may usually take for granted, but which is in many ways remarkable. That is the fact that we encounter such a thing as logical coherence and necessity. When we look at the fact that we can create differing systems of logic and mathematics it seems clear that such systems are human creations. However, when we deal with any such systems we find ourselves compelled to assent to certain propositions. We sometimes say that these are 'analytic' propositions, and that they simply show us the content of what we have already assumed. But why should we be able to bind ourselves that way, and what is more, why should it be that we find ourselves bound whether we like it or not? The very fact that such systems of thought exist and that we encounter them as having power over our choices is powerful and remarkable. In fact, when we look carefully at this aspect of things, it is awe inspiring.

This was at least one of the things that appear to have influenced Descartes in his

postulate of a dualism in nature. He thought that most of nature appeared to be explicable in mechanistic terms, but rational thought seemed to fall into a different category, along with phenomenological experience. In our scientific understanding of the world today there is still no way to account for rational thought and logical necessity. These are assumed in the very creation of scientific theory and in all of our philosophic musings.

The reality of rational thought, and the fact that it affects us all, is amazing. So also is the fact that it allows us to grasp a great deal about our surrounding world. There must be some affinity between our capacity for rational thought and the structure that this thought allows us to discover in the universe.

But it has limits.

Limits to Understanding:

There are limits to our understanding, and limits of more than one kind.

On one hand, the post-modern philosophers have made it clear that all of our attempts at understanding stem from within the boundaries of particular cultural patterns. We can try to grasp what another such pattern has to say about the world, but we cannot get outside of the influence of all such patterns. Our understanding is always from some one or more points of view, and is never a pure, 'God's Eye' understanding. Nor could it be. Every experience is an experience of the encounter of ourselves with some aspect of the world. There is no experience that does not include our own nature and perspective. And our own perspective is always in part a function of what we have taken up to then as an understanding of our world.

And in still another way we are limited. Kurt Godel and Patrick Grim among others, have shown us that our abstract systems of understanding involve basic internal limitations regardless of what area of understanding we may try to apply them to.

Godel proved that any system of logic or mathematics complex enough to describe ordinary arithmetic must be either incomplete or inconsistent.¹⁶

Grimm has shown that there can be no such thing as the set of all true statements.¹⁷ Systems of abstract thought such as Hegel and others have tried to create are not possible in principle, whether or not they would be fit descriptions of the world of our experience.

Those two things, and some of their corollaries make many of the notions of abstract systems rather doubtful. As a minimum it makes the notion that the world is at its base a mathematical structure seem rather odd and improbable. Does that imply that the world is either incomplete or inconsistent? I don't think we can even grasp what such statements would mean. It seems more likely that while we can use the abstractions of mathematics and logic to help us to understand aspects of this world, the world itself is not of the same nature as such abstractions.

¹⁶ Godel; *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Grimm; *op. cit.*

In a long term sense I get the feeling that our systems of understanding are like discrete networks that we try to fit over a world which is a concrete continuum. No matter how fine we develop the fit, there is always a further level of fineness which our description doesn't capture. And, our descriptions are limited even within their own structures.

This is one more area where we humans need to rein in our expectations. We should be amazed and gladdened by how much we can understand, and not surprised that our understanding is neither absolute nor complete.

Ambiguity of Justice:

We humans are social creatures and as such we live in various kinds of communities. As a part of this style of living we create various forms of communal structures or institutions. One of the moral demands that we find affecting us is the demand that we seek justice in our social structures. However, as a practical matter justice seems quite elusive.

The history of human cultures might be looked on as a pattern of attempts at achieving a just society, but none have yet achieved that goal. It seems that when we make changes aimed at eliminating one set of problems we almost always create situations with new problems.

I am inclined to think that the realm of social institutions may be subject to the same sort of limitations that Godel uncovered in abstract systems. It may not be possible to achieve a completely just solution. That in no way implies that we cannot make improvements over any given real situation. It says that utopia may be perpetually beyond our reach and that whatever we may do in this realm we need to remember that we will probably accomplish less than we would wish, and there will be imperfections in even our most proud achievements. A degree of humility is something we can never forget.

Evil and Good:

I have previously argued that positive value is associated with degree of complex structure¹⁸. In that sense all living things are things of value in view of their complex structural nature. Social systems that enhance the growth of human individuals are similarly of value.

Anything that tends to degrade or destroy structure is in that regard bad.

A designation of 'evil' would tend to be restricted to things or patterns of events that systematically achieve large scales of destruction of positive structure.

This leads to a curious situation.

¹⁸ Tarbell, David W; Values in Experience: Thoughts on Radical Empiricism: Reflections on Frankenberry and Stone; Journal of Liberal Religion, Vol. 5 No. 1.

To achieve 'systematic' as opposed to random destruction, a system or event must be itself highly structured, and such structure is generally the hallmark of positive value.

Thus, to look at a very simple example, living things are all, by virtue of their structural nature, of some positive value. This then includes such living things as the bacteria that cause various diseases. Yet such bacteria are in numerous cases the cause of systematic destruction of other things of value.

In human terms, the same sort of thing applies.

A social system such as that created by Hitler's National Socialist party in Germany of the 1930's and early 40's created wide spread destruction and could by virtue of that fact be deemed evil. Yet that system could not have accomplished so much evil had it not been internally highly structured and looked at purely of itself, to a degree an example of good. It is not hard in hindsight especially to see that in the larger context of other social systems in the world, the Nazi party apparatus and its influence on the German state was something evil. It may have been less obvious to those caught up in that system.

In many ways the system that developed in the communist Soviet Union was similarly evil, but the fact that it developed with a background theory that proposed to create a better life based on Marxist principles made it harder to see just how negative a system it was. That positive aspect of the structure also made it potentially more dangerous. I suspect that once some of the initial emotionalism generated by Hitler's nationalist theatrics wore off there would have been few who retained any faith in the long term positive value of his system. The communist systems had the potential to generate a stronger following for a longer period by virtue of the claim to be rationally structured in a way that would better the condition of the average person.

However the problems generated by systems such as these also offer lessons to us all in the complexity of judging human systems. In the midst of the chaos unleashed by the Nazi system the USA, Great Britain, and Russia became involved in the systematic destruction of systems of social organization within Germany. Those acts of destruction, taken in themselves, were evil. It may well be argued that those acts of destruction were taken up in the pursuit of a larger good, and in order to prevent greater evil. But, when we are in the midst of various human struggles, can we always make such judgments with clarity? In hindsight it seems rather clear that the fire bombing of Dresden and Hamburg did little to bring an end to the war or to the Nazi regime, while doing much to bring pain, death, and destruction on a large population. In a similar way, actions aimed at competing with the Soviet Union during the cold war were in many cases actions that caused serious harm of themselves. This country supported dictators and repressive regimes in number of places solely because they were opposed to supposedly communist alternatives. Some of those actions may have served long term goods, but I am sure many of them did not.

I think that the only honest answer here is that we can never be sure about such judgments. During the administration of President Bush and subsequent to the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the USA decided to engage in acts of military violence first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. At the present time I would say that the first of these was justified in the sense of being an act of destruction aimed at the prevention of other possibly greater acts of destruction. The second of these seems to

have not been justified on those grounds, but the people involved in making that decision generally felt that they were so justified. The arguments on the two sides are not of the kind that permit of absolute judgments. Nor are the issues involved in decisions to use violent force ever of that kind.

A second aspect which is of great importance is that once the decision to use violence is made there is a great risk that the momentum of events will carry one into patterns of action that were not contemplated at the outset, and which are not well justified. It is difficult not to become embedded in the concern for the success of the acts rather than for the success of the original primary purpose. I fear at present that this nation's actions in Afghanistan have become too heavily military and focused on military success, without enough focus on the original purpose of that action and without enough reflection on the situation being created by our actions.

There seem to be real situations in which acts of violence and destruction can be justified as leading to better outcomes that might be the case if no action were taken. It is not at all clear that to completely refrain from acts of violence is always the more moral course of action. Camus, in 'The Rebel', makes the argument that we are all involved either directly or indirectly in acts of violence and even acts of homicide. Thus we cannot stand aside and claim there is no justification for violence. We must rather decide what sort of violent acts we are willing to accept responsibility for. Yet it is never the case that the justification of such acts is absolutely clear. And it is always the case that purposeful acts of violence are potentially more evil than inaction.

Actions in the real world always involve balances of power, and there are no systems or structures that are without negative aspects. Political and social action is never a choice between good and evil, it is rather always an attempt to discern and support the better against the worse. There are no black and white choices, only shades of grey. What is more, everything is in constant change and the choices that we make at one time may not be the best at a later time. Whatever we do will have repercussions over time, many of which could never be predicted. Thus the situation is always changing and so are the relative values involved. We must be forever attentive to the changing patterns. Whenever we make the assumption that a structure in political or social terms can be counted on to always be the best choice, we are setting ourselves up for a fall.

There is, of course, more to the issue of human evil than errors in judgment. There are many occasions on which people act for reasons which are far from morally right and not even remotely justifiable. Sometimes jealousy leads us into acts which are evil, sometimes fear pushes us to ignore the rights of others, sometimes we feel that we have been dealt with badly and we seek revenge. Sometimes it can be pure greed. All of these factors, and more, can either be the direct motivation for evil actions or can cloud our judgment when mixed with the many other motivational factors affecting our choices. We need always, all of us, to maintain a skeptical eye on our own motivations and judgments.

This seems to be one more situation in which we are faced with perpetual ambiguity.

The necessity to act in the face of such ambiguity is one of the transcendent aspects of human living and one of those things, which when we recognize it must give

us pause and make us wonder (and hopefully give us a certain degree of humility regarding all of our judgments).

Cosmic Mortality:

One of the amazing things to come out of recent scientific studies in cosmology is the notion that the universe, at least in the form that we encounter it, seems to be mortal.

We have the idea of the 'Big Bang' which kicks off the ongoing expansion of this universe. At present we can get no real handle on anything that would precede that 'Big Bang' event. Some physicists even propose that time, as we know it, starts there. On the other side it appears that either this universe is destined to go on expanding forever or else the expansion should end with a reversal into a big collapse. If the expansion goes on forever then there will come a point where the stuff of this universe is spread out so widely that all energy dependent process will all come to an end. If a star such as our sun reaches the end of its life span and explodes, the material expelled will not ever be close enough to other stellar material lead to the formation of new stars. Thus all the stars of the universe will eventually go out leaving nothing of that kind remaining.

If, on the other hand, expansion ends and leads to an overall collapse, then energy levels will grow back to the levels of the initial Big Bang and all of the structures that we find in this universe (stars, heavy elements, etc.) will be torn apart in the massive flow of energy.

Either way, the structures that we find in this present universe will not continue forever but will come to an end in a situation that cannot support anything like life as we know it.

Thus we find ourselves mortal beings in a universe which is also mortal.

The Experience of Transcendence:

What sort of experience gives evidence of what I am calling transcendence?

What I call evidence of transcendence is in all cases a feeling of something more than I can fully grasp. In the examples used by Jerry Stone I find this same quality. He refers to the sense of demand that comes from ideals of right, or of justice, or of simple morality as the 'ideal' aspect of the transcendent. Then he refers to those things which seem to sustain or support us in ways that reach beyond any ordinary expectation as the real aspect of the transcendent.

I find it difficult to categorize these elements that I have been describing in terms of real or ideal. In most cases they seem to partake of both real and ideal aspects. Part of the power of these things in my experience arises from there seeming to be absolutely real parts of this world which have qualities that are ideal in nature. And then there is this notion of reaching beyond the ordinary. What do we mean by 'ordinary' and 'reaching beyond'?

This brings me back to Meland's notion of sensitive discernment and Stone's idea

of a 'generous empiricism'. There are aspects of this world which seem to be accessible only through a kind of aesthetic recognition. Analysis and reduction can lead us to certain kinds of understanding, but they cannot lead to anything like complete understanding. There are aspects of this world that are always best addressed through poetic language, metaphor, and artistic imagery.

I would venture to say that there is a sense in which the connection between thought, speech, and felt experience is always of this kind. A rational structure of language may refer to the world, but it does not do so in an unequivocal manner. As W. V. Quine has pointed out, every attempt to define the meaning of words by pointing to the aspects of the world which they supposedly name is open to multiple interpretations. If we try to define the word 'rabbit' by pointing to one of those little animals we might be defining 'rodent' or 'rabbit parts' with the same gesture. When we encounter a new way of thinking about the world our initial reaction may be one of bafflement.

When a high school student walks into a geometry class and hears the teacher describing the Euclidian concept of a straight line, it may seem initially confusing. Such a straight line has only length and no breadth or depth and thus takes up no space. Yet there can only be one straight line between any two points. When I first heard that I thought 'nonsense, if it takes up no space there could be any number of them there'. It takes a little exposure to the way the term is being used to grasp the intent.

The same sort of thing happens in college science classrooms. Beginning students frequently have a bit of difficulty with the notion that steel is more elastic than rubber. It is not the same use of words as they had been accustomed to.

But how do we learn any words at all?

We have to start by discovering the match between what we encounter in the world and what we hear people saying around us. If there was only one way of encountering the world that might be easier, but most of us have discovered that there are no exact translations between languages, which can only mean that there are multiple ways of grasping what is out there in the world. The world may offer us a common reference, but the way that common reference is to be packaged is not self-evident. We humans do that in various ways, and within cultures the way we package the world to connect with language changes over time.

The idea that we ever understand the world fully and without ambiguity is simply wrong. Within our cultural space we have a certain take on the world. There are things that are commonly agreed upon within our culture to such a degree that we find ourselves almost never at a loss to understand what someone else means. But that is always a limited space in a number of ways. First, if we move outside of our local culture we may encounter variations in understanding which will not be at all clear at first, second, if we look at aspects of our experience that are not usually subjects of attention we will encounter the same lack of clarity, and further if we press dialog with others far enough, there will almost always be boundaries to clear agreement and understanding.

Sensitive discernment is always at work in our understanding of language, and it has more to do when we move away from the commonplace in either cultural or experiential dimensions.

When I draw attention to the kinds of experience that I have been identifying as aspects of 'transcendence', I am trying to move our attention into areas that are not commonly the focus of attention, yet they are in almost every case aspects of experience that would not have been accessible at all without the foundation of interpretation provided by our cultural understanding.

Prior to any study of physics, astronomy, and cosmology we humans may have an awareness that the world is bigger than what we understand. However, the insights into the structure of our universe that have been provided by modern science expose us to a level of mystery that was not obvious before. We can focus on what the sciences make clear and feel a degree of comfort in all that we seem to know. But once we look at the boundaries of that knowing we cannot help but be aware that we have opened up a realm that is far bigger than what we yet grasp.

In a similar way, we may have been aware early on that our faculty of rational thought was something rather special in the realm of our experience, but deeper study of that realm in mathematics and logic also shows us an even deeper mystery as to how it all goes together. And perhaps a deeper mystery yet in how it is self limiting. If we give serious attention to both what we can and what we cannot know, we cannot help but be awed by the complexity and depth of it all.

We, in our modern western secular culture have developed a way of understanding which is focused around the scientific paradigm. Gradually, since the scientific revolution introduced by Bacon, Galileo, and others we have developed scientific explanations for vast areas of our everyday experience. We have come to expect that such explanations can be found for just about anything. To some degree it has become an article of faith that experience can be explained in scientific terms.

I have heard people say that empirical evidence proves that the miracles recounted in the Bible could not have occurred. In reality that is simply wrong. The fundamental idea of scientific proof by means of experiment is based on repeated trials. We run the experiment a number of times and average the results. There is no way to do that relative to a claimed miracle which only happened once. We may have strong reasons to think that other explanations for these stories are more likely to be true, but we cannot prove them false through empirical trial. That is just a misunderstanding of the way such proof works.

What happens, rather, is that we develop enough confidence in the regularity of natural law that we would need extraordinary evidence to convince us that a natural law breaking miracle, had occurred. The fact that we have developed that sort of confidence in scientific explanation has made our ordinary sense of the world something different than what it was four or more centuries ago.

In pre-enlightenment Europe, and in most of the rest of the world, the idea of divine intervention changing the course of events was quite plausible, in a way that is no longer the case.

Yet in our modern world there are many aspects of our experience that are not so well explained by scientific reduction. First, and most obvious on reflection, the fact that scientific theories work at all is a mystery. Then there is the curious fact that our highly

structured scientific accounts lead us into realms where the firm prediction is that we cannot make firm predictions. Within all of this, there are aspects of our everyday human experience that are not touched by existing scientific theory. The fact that the complex human nervous system yields a largely unified subjective realm of experience is still a complete mystery. The fact that there are aspects of our everyday experience in the real of value and meaning is also not touched by any present scientific theory.

It seems that we have a realm of experience that is generally well explained by means of natural law theory. That realm exists within a larger structure of this world and the boundaries of explanation fade off into mystery surrounding them. Starting with the mystery of why such laws work at all. We may succeed in expanding the boundaries of explanation, but we have no idea what that will lead to as to the form of understanding, and there is no reason to think that the boundaries will not still be there.

There is a spiritual component to our everyday experience. Being open to that dimension of experience stems from allowing it into our structure of understanding. The scientific paradigm does not account for everything and trying to claim that it must, because there is nothing else, is an example of prejudging the content of experience, much like the fundamentalist position.

When I try to apply the faculty of sensitive discernment to the overall picture I have been sketching here I am led to two ideas. First, there seems to be a degree of aesthetic structure underlying this world that we are a part of, and our own faculty of sensitive discernment is a form of sensitivity to such structure. Second, our ability to understand structure is always both limited and ambiguous. Along with this, the world that we live in is in process of change.

This world seems to be flowing from a situation of extreme order and no freedom, towards one of extreme chaos and no order. In the process of this change, while between these rather empty limiting conditions, this world is capable of producing various forms of complex structure. We, as living beings, are examples of that sort of living structure.

We have the potential to create further aesthetic structure within the occasions of our lives. Doing so is of positive value, where value has to do with the occasions of coming to be of aesthetic structure. The nature of this changing world is such that nothing is permanent and we are all mortal along with our creations. However, without this process of change there would be no occasions of aesthetic order and thus no value.

We live in a window of potential value. The biosphere of which we are a part is a product of this process. It is the nature of all processes of value that they are vulnerable to harm, and are ultimately mortal. We need to realize that value lies in the living process, not in some distant absolute. Risk lies in that same process, but that is the price of value.

We strive to achieve value as best we can grasp how that might be done, but there are never any guarantees of success. Everything we attempt is in some degree ambiguous, as that freedom and openness is a condition of the potential of value.

We need try to appreciate all that we can, and not despair that we cannot do more. As Pogo famously put it, "we are lucky to be here at all". In being here we need to remain humble regarding our capacities and our judgment, but not regarding our aims and ideals. There are no absolutes, least of all in human reach; yet there are no absolute limits

either.

There is a transcendent thrust toward value in the flow of this mortal and imperfect world, but values are events in this changing world and no event or experience is static.