

# Naturalism—as Religion, within Religions, without Religion

with Willem B. Drees, “Naturalism and Religion: Hunting Two Snarks?”; Ursula W. Goodenough and Jeremy E. Sherman, “The Emergence of Selves and Purpose”; Matthew D. MacKenzie, “Spiritual Animals: Sense-Making, Self-Transcendence, and Liberal Naturalism”; Curtis M. Craig, “The Potential Contribution of Awe and Nature Appreciation to Positive Moral Values”; Mark E. Hoelter, “Mysterium Tremendum in a New Key”; Charles W. Fowler, “The Convergence of Science and Religion”; Todd Macalister, “Naturalistic Religious Practices: What Naturalists Have Been Discussing and Doing”; Paul H. Carr, “Theologies Completing Naturalism’s Limitations”; James Sharp, “Theistic Evolution in Three Traditions”; Alessandro Mantini, “Religious Naturalism and Creation: A Cosmological and Theological Reading on the Origin/Beginning of the Universe”; and Willem B. Drees, “When to Be What? Why Science-Inspired Naturalism Need Not Imply Religious Naturalism.”

## THEOLOGIES COMPLETING NATURALISM’S LIMITATIONS

by Paul H. Carr

*Abstract.* Scientific Naturalism has no eternal life and purpose. Tillich’s existential and Whitehead’s process theologies overcome the limitations of scientific “naturalism without religion.” Tillich, Wildman, Whitehead, and Bracken update the Bible’s promise of eternal life as well as the meaning and goal of history. Paul Tillich’s metaphor of religion as the Dimension of Depth is similar to Ursula Goodenough’s *Sacred Depths of Nature*. She considers Tillich to be a religious naturalist. For Whitehead, the goal of the Universe is the production of beauty. “The thirst for beauty that permeates our lives is an opening to transcendence,” according to theologian Philip Hefner.

*Keywords:* beauty; Ursula Goodenough; Philip Hefner; naturalism; Paul Tillich; process theology; religious naturalism; Alfred North Whitehead

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## INTRODUCTION

As a Methodist minister's son, the beauty of religious music and literature shapes my worldviews. Naturalistic science has deepened my appreciation of the physical world's beautiful order and enabled me to make verifiable predictions. Because scientific naturalism does not satisfy my yearning for the meaning and purpose of life and death, I have turned to theologians like Tillich and Whitehead, who interpret God and the Bible to complete the limitations of "naturalism without religion." Scientific Naturalism believes in natural laws and causes, but rejects supernatural explanations and angelic beings. Scientific naturalism is not enough for me because of such limitations as:

- (1) Scientific Naturalism has no religious promise of the "life after death" of our brain's neurons, whose electrical excitations gives a naturalistic explanation of the emergence of human consciousness.
- (2) Scientific Naturalism has no purpose or goal other than the reproduction of the species. Biologists like Richard Dawkins (2015) believe that evolution is without design. It is blind meaningless chance.

Religions believe that death is more than the abyss of nothingness. When a burial site contains objects that the deceased might use in an afterlife, anthropologists identify it as a human grave. Belief in some form of afterlife characterizes us as humans. The Egyptian civilization amplified this yearning for eternal life by constructing massive pyramids for deceased Pharaohs, whose bodies were preserved as mummies. I believe in resurrection. A Hebrew Bible belief was that resurrection would occur on the last day. On Easter Sunday, I celebrate Jesus resurrection from his death on the cross.

## PAUL TILlich'S EXISTENTIAL THEOLOGY

Let us now consider Paul Tillich's existential theology of eternal life and life's purpose. For Tillich, God is not a finite being, but the *Ground of All Being*. Being includes all existence. The first biblical human being was Adam, a name derived from the Hebrew word meaning ground. God created Adam from the dust/elements of the earth, which were recently discovered to have been fused together in stars. We Human Beings are made of stardust!

When God spoke to Moses from a burning bush, Moses then asked God for his name. God answered, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14).

We can pray to God's Son, personified in Jesus, the bearer of the New Being, the new state of things leading to the Kingdom of God as the goal and end of history.

For Tillich, the Eternal is not endless time but a dimension beyond space and time that enables us to perceive events as happening in temporal sequence.

According to Ecclesiastes 3:11. There is “A time to be born and a time to die... God has put Eternity in their hearts.”

Tillich expresses this as “Our lives are limited in time but fulfilled by Eternity. We come from the eternal ground of time and return to the eternal ground of time and have received a limited span of time which is our time” (Tillich 1963a). “God is not only the beginning from which we came. He/She is also the end to which we go” (Tillich 1963b). St. Francis said, “In dying we are born to eternal life.” Similarly, Thoreau believed that a pen was soon destroyed but the poem lived on.

Tillich interpreted history as a quest toward the goal (end) of establishing the Kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven” (Lord’s Prayer). The divine memory “judges” history, evaluating the negative as negative and the positive as positive. At the eschatological end of history, all will return to God, its source, and ground. God is manifest in the world (pantheism). Tillich also believed that the world is also in God (pan-en-theism).

Tillich described religion as our Ultimate Concern, also the metaphorical Dimension of Depth that asks the following questions. What is the meaning of life? Where do we come from and where do we go to? Ursula Goodenough uses a similar term in her *Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998). For her, the metaphor Sacred Depths is a scientific understanding of nature that elicits religious emotions of wonder and awe, religious naturalism. She considers Tillich to be a religious naturalist.

Theologian Wesley Wildman (2019) believes in Tillich’s God beyond the God of anthropomorphism and nationalism. Instead of saying “God is on our side,” God above God believers ask, “Are we on God’s side?”

#### WHITEHEAD AND HARTSHORNE’S PROCESS THEOLOGY

Whitehead and Hartshorne’s process theology has a pan-en-theistic, dipolar God, primordial and consequent:

- (1) The primordial-transcendent pole is God’s orderly creation of everything, including potential events.
- (2) God’s consequent-immanent pole comprehends, experiences, and interacts with the world, including humans, and incorporates them into God’s own process. This is described by John Albright and Carol Albright who together with Mladen Turk (2017) coauthored and edited the book *Interactive World, Interactive God: The Basic Reality of Creative Interaction*.

We have eternal life by participating in and interacting with the consequent, immortal memory of God. Saint Paul expressed this in his Letter to I Corinthians.13:12, "Now I know in part, then shall I know just as I also am known." Eternal life for human beings comes through progressive incorporation into the communitarian consequent nature of God (Bracken).

For Alfred North Whitehead, our life events or occasions, as he called them, are the result of three factors:

- (1) Our cultural inheritance and genetic programing (from child, to adolescent, to adult).
- (2) Our actions, creativity, and free decisions.
- (3) God's lure toward the goal of greater beauty (God lures, and guides rather than controls). God's aim gives initial direction and empowers us to become ourselves by our self-constituting decisions (Bracken).

God does not control but grants freedom. Air molecules are free to form natural hurricanes and humans commit murder, as when Cain killed Abel. Nevertheless, God's creative aim lures the universe toward the ultimate goal of greater beauty.

Whitehead believed that philosophy-theology was a rewrite of Plato's vision that beauty is our way of experiencing the spiritual. As Thomas Mann (1971) said, "Beauty alone is...the only form of the spiritual which we can receive through the senses." Philip Hefner (2006) wrote, "The thirst for beauty that permeates our lives is an opening to transcendence."

#### BEAUTY AS PURPOSE AND GOAL

In our present existence, our experience of beauty, like truth and justice, is an imperfect and fragmentary experience of the beauty's perfect essence. Yet our existence in community can, over time, be a better approximation to the ideal of beauty within us, just as the mystical beauty of the ancients has matured through the mathematical beauty of modern science (Carr 2006).

Life on earth is a story of increasing complexity, specialization, and beauty emerging from simple beginnings. It is a story of increasingly interdependent communities and ultimately humans, who are conscious of beauty, have amoral conscience, and are creative. Spirituality inspired the moral laws, meaning, and purpose that enabled tribes to live together in solidarity. This coupled with scientific and technical advances led to the emergence of the great civilizations of Egypt, Greece, Rome, Islam, and modern democracies (Carr 2006).

It is amazing that nature's spontaneity and human freedom result in a universe that can have such beauty and harmony. This self-creating universe with both randomness and law can be a manifestation of divine

creativity. Our rapture at seeing, for example, a beautiful butterfly, we can attribute to a design. The evolutionary interplay between chance and law, however, is not design from a predetermined human blueprint. Evolution is design to, not design from (Ruse 2003). Evolution is a beautiful vision for the future, not a detailed plan. Beauty comes from the harmonious balance between chance and necessity.

Whitehead's process thought asserts that the universe is not static but an evolving and continuing creation, whose intricacies result in continuing scientific discoveries. "The universe is not a place where evolution happens. It is evolution happening" (Rue 2000). Let us hope for the wisdom to use the power of scientific knowledge as responsible co-creators and not as destroyers of our earth through the unintended consequences of our technology. As created and creating creatures, we can profit from religious wisdom. In it, there is hope in the continuing creation, expressed by Whitehead (1933):

"The teleology (goal) of the Universe is the production of beauty."

The following poem summarizes Whitehead's process thought. It was printed on the back cover of the "Creative Transformation" Summer 2000 pamphlet published by the Center for Process Studies, Claremont School of Theology. They were unable to identify the author.

*The Process Vision*

Because everything is related;  
Because the decision of each event matters for all events;  
Because freedom is a reality;

The greatest power is not coercive force,  
But patient, creative, persuading, redeeming, gracious love.  
This is God's power,

Which continually works to lure the whole creation:  
To bring enriching diversity and intensity out of struggle;  
To overcome destructive conflict with greater harmonies;  
To redeem the evil wrought in death and  
Disaster with new life.

In conclusion, philosophical theologians like Tillich and Whitehead have interpreted God and updated our biblical understanding to complete the limitations of scientific "naturalism without religion."

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