

## *Affliction, Free Will, and Theodicy*

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the first half of this essay I describe the nature of affliction through a novel by Russell Banks entitled *Affliction*. I do not spend time doing precise analysis of the story but instead abstract elements of affliction- the “illness”- for the purpose of comprehending the nature of a certain sort of evil (nihilistic evil). I try to show that this evil that forms the center of affliction destroys agency and so leaves the theist without the resource of free-will or teleology in order to form a theodicy.

In the second half of the essay I argue that agency is a creation of the human community and not an inherent property of the individual. I argue further that this is a better world than a world where freedom is individual. I fold this discussion into what I call “the most serious world” which is the world with the potential to be the most meaningful world. In the most meaningful world our actions are always relevant to the creation or destruction of agency: we have, in other words, the potential to recklessly destroy our own possibility as agents or to create normative human relations, well-being and agency (and there is considerable space between these extremes). I thereby endeavor to create a path for the theist through the ruin of affliction.

### **INTRODUCTION -AFFLICTION, FREE-WILL AND THEODICY**

The problem of evil is essentially the details of evil: not simply how much evil but the nature of the evil under investigation. The purpose of this essay is to carefully focus on a kind of evil, a type of affliction that seems, by its very nature, to preclude its own cure. In theistic terms, the solution that presents itself most readily is a free-will defense, but affliction of the sort I discuss and detail destroys human agency from within its own components. That individual human beings somehow bring this self-destruction to themselves through their own free-will is also cancelled out by the nature of the affliction. What is then needed is a possible path for a theist, and I will provide one in the latter sections of this essay, that uses the nature of affliction to produce a communal notion of human freedom.

The affliction discussed is self-perpetuating; the phenomenon breaks down the distinction between the causal source of the affliction and the immediate reality of the affliction as experienced by the individual. The internal and external aspects of the phenomenon are symmetrically broken down, thus flummoxing one of the standard ways in which we discuss autonomy. A simplified version of these ideas is easily grasped: comprehending the nature of affliction requires, necessarily, that we extend our explanations way beyond the individual. In other words, “internal” and “external” cannot be epistemically or ontologically split without

explanatory incoherence. Affliction gets into the blood of individuals only as it is deeply embedded in their life-world. I will highlight and smooth out these rough assertions through what I call “ecological explanation,” an epistemic practice found in narrative art.

### AFFLICTION AND CATEGORICAL EMOTION

For reasons that I will briefly clarify, many recent endeavors to understand and analyze evil have been made from literary art. In what follows, I lift philosophical ideas out of a contemporary American novel by Russell Banks entitled, appropriately enough, *Affliction*.<sup>1</sup> The point here is not just to take ideas but to allow the art to help us fully express them. Literary art embeds explanations of human behavior into an aesthetic totality and so accurately represents basic features of human reality: this is what I had in mind by “ecological explanation.” Literary art embeds characters into a world and makes them an inseparable whole: this is the a priori condition of realism and tragedy.

That characters have to be embedded into a life-world for realism in literary art finds its philosophical expression in Wittgenstein’s private language argument. Meaning, the very basis of human community and interaction, cannot be generated from a single consciousness in isolation from the full reality of other persons. Likewise, and expressed more positively, as we endeavor to comprehend characters, as we seek the fullest explanation and meaning of their acts and circumstances, we have to enlist a human ecology. The nature of the human ecology is itself determined by the nature of human relations within a specific sort of made environment (material circumstances).

The antithesis of ecological explanation is, as Dewey once said, the endeavor to comprehend any living thing as an “isolated finality.”<sup>2</sup> Such a practice, if it can even be a practice, destroys the possibility of explanation and narration. By analogy, we cannot explain why a non-human animal has the properties it has without reaching into its world and its relations to other things (living and non-living) in that world. Why the owl has hollow bones can be “explained” at one level by detailing its genetics, but we all know that there are many more “why questions” that will follow for a full explanation. “A human being is abusive because he is a drunk” is an analogous sort of case: such explanations are only little shreds of the person’s

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Banks, *Affliction* (New York: Harpers, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, “Human Nature and Value” in *The Moral Writings of John Dewey*, ed. James Gouinlock (New York: Hafner Press, 1976), 97.

story. Human beings are, of course, a special sort of case because intentionality is ever present but the point is that intentionality is never fully singular. Every human intention has its meaning and content within a web of relations and human beings do not develop *patterns of intentionality* in the space of contingently related isolated minds.

Wade Whitehouse, a blue collar forty year old white man, is the main character in the novel. He is psychically haunted and stalked by his vicious alcoholic and insanely angry father Glenn Whitehouse. Glenn's wife Sally and the four other children are also victims of violent abuse and gross neglect. Behaviors and interactions within the family are created, structured and managed by emotional and physical violence. In short, Wade's life-world is one of generational poverty, abuse, disregard and neglect. The wider world of the novel is a small town culture that encourages abuse and disregard for self and others. Lawford, New Hampshire (the small town in question) flatly denies and then violates the conditions for normative human relations and so the proper development of intersubjectivity. As Banks surveys the ecology, multiple distill reasons and causes for people like Glenn immediately surface. Lawford is brimming with shame, anger and fear as the contemporary American culture, the one that provides what we call "economic and social opportunity" passes it by in a brutal and accelerated fashion. Other characters, tainted by angry and nihilistic male competition and antagonism, emerge from an ecology drained of resources and with a past that no longer provides substance for an ongoing identity. Violence, alcoholism, and casual cruelty are all given ecological explanation. Characters in the novel are saved from caricature by being deeply embedded in a life-world. As the explanations for the violence and abuse keep moving out from individuals and into the nature of their world and then back again, characters are made human and so comprehensible: this is the nature of ecological explanation and it creates the further possibility for the comprehension of the whole and this finally creates the possibility of empathy.

Wade's particular affliction begins with shame, fear and anger as a child and then these emotive states, along with complimentary doxastic states, form a self-destructive unity that we can call "categorical." By this I mean that shame, for example, loses its normative episodic place and becomes the manner in which Wade comprehends the inseparable trio of himself, others and the world. By analogy with Kant's categories of the understanding, the shame-fear-anger cluster are what give shape and meaning to his experience. A more technical analysis of categorical emotion is the following. For Wade "to be conscious of circumstance x" is for

“circumstance x to inherently contain elements of shame, fear and anger.” “Inherently contain” means that the categorical cluster is what creates circumstance x as circumstance x in which shame, fear and anger are constitutive of x. The affliction is, in other words, constantly creating itself in the world by being instilled into the nature of consciousness. These categorical states shape experience in the above ways even as circumstances do not seem to intelligibly relate to shame, fear, or anger: nothing in the object of experience seems adequate to provoke those feelings or the closely related behavior. But this is entirely in line with ecological explanation; we must look to the deeper and wider circumstance, the full circumstance or totality, the life-world of Wade and all the other characters within the environment, to see how the consciousness of an individual is intelligible or appropriate to that life-world. The dense and sometimes opaque symmetry between individual and ecology is what creates the possibility of explanation within the narrative. If we remain within strictly individual explanations, the result is a thin description of a mental illness.

These categorical emotions wipe out a transparent self-understanding and create a problem for free-will and responsibility. Wade is haphazardly on his way to violent criminal acts but it is abundantly clear that he has little or no understanding of what is moving him forward. His fully articulated and best intentions turn self-destructive and so harmful to others. Wade cannot grasp his own motives for the relatively simple reason that what constitute his motives (shame, fear and anger) are what form his unintentional or unreflective interpretation of reality. The move from inner to outer, which is the way we trust ourselves in speaking and thinking about the free-will of the individual are here conflated: ecological explanation reveals that agency is stuck between “what I effect” and “what has effected me.” Human freedom will then hinge on how well any member of the community can grasp the ecology and the various weights and burdens within the relationships that come with that ecology. Wade is losing the battle, as we should expect, because whatever resources he might have had for such meta-awareness were put in jeopardy before they could be cultivated.

A more precise statement of the manner in which freedom is eroded or diminished concerns how the categorical emotions work within experience. Wade cannot identify when the cognitive process is underway and the categorical emotions in question are most excitedly at work exactly when they are most disabling. For instance, it is when Wade needs to talk reasonably and intelligently with his attorney that shame and fear go to work: when he needs to

be competent and sturdy in the presence of a clearly successful man, as these are the contexts where the sense of our own worth are prompted and judged. He does not see this overtly as the categorical emotions filter the circumstance as appropriate for shame and fear and so he experiences shame and fear as if from nothing, as if in complete isolation: they “overtake” him as they are inexplicable. Wade’s circumstance is here terribly ironic, as the totality of his person and the totality of his circumstance are clearly sufficient for the causality of shame, fear and anger. But the causality, overwhelming as it is, has built the emotions into his actual cognition. Only a few times does Wade fully notice these emotions as they work and then he is incapable of understanding how they are possible in combination. Wade ultimately *sees himself* as nearly impossible. These facts grind down into the causal roots of the categorical emotions and the reality of his on-going abusive life-world.

There is no deductive proof here that Wade Whitehouse lacks a “free-will.” But there are serious reasons for thinking that his autonomy and agency have been grossly depleted, eroded, or simply destroyed. Inductively, we have little reason for thinking or believing that he really understands what he is doing. We have additional reasons for thinking that his violent and criminal acts are precisely what this ecology is leading him towards and then it becomes mysterious to claim confidently that he should or could have done otherwise. In short, our certitude regarding freedom and responsibility *in any sort of conventional sense is ruined*.

The categorical emotions that have been forced inward, while all the time being plainly visible in the ecology, become psychically and physically convulsive: Wade finally lashes out in desperate violence. He kills his father, with some shreds of “self-defense” and then murders a younger colleague. I cannot here offer a precise interpretation of these events in relation to the rest of the novel as this is far beyond the scope of the present essay. Suffice it to say that it becomes clear that the affliction has not exhausted itself in Wade’s radical self-destruction and violence: the affliction finds re-newel and further possibility within its own mayhem.

Banks’ narrative is nearing aesthetic totality as Wade and some of the townspeople describe his acts. He is uniformly blamed as a single, autonomous individual: those in the ecology have no truthful awareness of the nature of the ecology and they lack the resources for denial. The process of denial is relatively sophisticated in relation to this mentality as it assumes the awareness of a reality that can be denied. But we must remember that the townspeople are

also a part of this life-world where relationships are only partially formed or are grossly unformed: human beings are related to one another in all the wrong ways and in ways that seem to consistently aggravate the brutality of their circumstance. The novel ends with the newspaper account by now so familiar to Americans: the lone gunman, isolated in his own rage, turns to meaningless and cowardly homicide. Meanwhile, the astonishing fragmentation of the town, of what I have been calling the human ecology, simply goes unnoticed or is dismissed as anything that could contain explanations for individual acts.

Affliction, as described above, matches our intuitive sense of the concept. Unlike pain or suffering, affliction seems to be something that is embedded in the nature of a being or in the nature of a world. It may cause pain and suffering, which it certainly does in the novel, but more importantly it is a grotesque torment. In endeavoring to address it, Wade makes it progressively worse, as it hides the pieces of itself deeply in consciousness while reproducing itself over and over again within the world and within consciousness. We come face to face with an evil that systematically destroys the self but cannot be adequately addressed by the self. What is required is something far deeper: meta-awareness of the ecology and then the creative will on the part of many to alter the circumstance. The cure, in direct relation to the affliction, must be given through and by a community in order to integrate human reality.

### **AFFLICTION AND NIHILISTIC EVIL**

Here, with the nature of this affliction analyzed, we come face to face with more distressing questions and realities. First, it is not clear how or where the cause of the affliction is to be distinguished from the affliction. One could certainly claim that “child abuse” is the root cause of Wade’s affliction but under ecological explanation it is clear that the abuse is itself a manifestation of affliction: the cycle or self-perpetuating nature of the problem is epistemically and ontologically challenging to the precision of origin. Categorical emotion and the embedded nature of affliction, which falls out of the nature of ecological ontology, is more than just hazardous for accounts of individual moral responsibility.

Another, and perhaps more distressing element, appears from the most general or abstract articulation of affliction that can be given: one that I mentioned earlier in the essay. Affliction manifests itself, its reality is most fully present, in *the apparently pointless destruction of human beings*. Wade’s categorical emotions eradicate his agency and, we might ask, what for? Why

are we doing these things? We quickly notice that asking for the purpose or point of affliction is a category mistake and this brings out aspects of ecological explanation that disregard individual intent. *It is an evil without any purpose and without any self-interest attached.* It certainly is not for corporate gains, capitalism or the benefit of a few grossly self-interested persons. Human beings are systematically destroyed as they create more and more torment for themselves and others. The evil is nihilistic in its *sheer absence of utility*. It might even be a great relief if some utility were to show up and with it a recognizable villain.

Arendt, in her discussion of the banality of evil, clearly asserts the thesis that the Nazi evil was unprecedented in its nihilism: it seemed to aim at destroying the possibility of humanity and so everything that might have utility. The central point being that the mass murder serves no purpose beyond mass murder as it grossly interferes with “the war effort.” A second, and related point, is that Eichmann’s acts and the genocidal program, destroys the murderer and the murdered. In cancelling out the humanity of others, Eichmann and other Nazis were denying and destroying human intersubjectivity and so any and all human possibility. In denying human beings as “political beings” Eichmann actually lost his capacity for any adequate moral reflection: he ceases to be a moral agent.<sup>3</sup>

I am using “intersubjectivity” here as it is found in Wittgenstein, especially in the private language argument and related arguments concerning the connection between the community and the genesis of language and meaning. In this context, there is not much of a distance from Wittgenstein’s idea: agency and moral reflection are dependent on the communal nature of human beings. Value, as it is so closely related to meaning, and so to the genesis of morality, is *grounded in shared human efforts and tasks, which includes actual recognition of others as the basis for our agency*. Hence, the point is not just that value and morality come into existence from communal activity (as meaning does), the point is that full human development and so agency is only possible *under the actual recognition of our mutual dependency*. This is also, in my view, a maturity in thought that is frequently brought down, diminished or ridiculed in politics, law and other public contexts. The individual need not vanish from the scene: what vanishes from the scene is the idea that each individual is somehow responsible (a kind of miracle it seems) for her own agency and so fully responsible for her own *moral and normative*

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, “Hannah Arendt’s Challenge to Adolf Eichmann,” *The Guardian* 2011



*circumstance in the world.* There is no real split between individualism and communitarianism at the ontological or epistemic level: they require each other for the explanatory coherence of human action.

By analogy with Eichmann's failed capacities, in Banks' story Wade and the town of Lawford seem incapable of generating moral reflection and so self-correction (which connects with the above points concerning the causal origins of affliction). They seem bent on destroying themselves by destroying their normative connections as human beings. While it may be hazardous to compare the ragged and torn world of Wade Whitehouse with the annihilation of genocide, it does seem that the denial of intersubjectivity as the denial of the very possibility of humanity, simply conflates with "nihilistic evil." When the awareness of our intersubjectivity and mutual dependence wanes the context for nihilism becomes exponentially more expansive. The only solution that seems available for nihilistic evil is the complete change of the ecology and this requires *an adequate account of communal responsibility over and above individual responsibility.* But, of course, the failed account of communal responsibility is precisely what allows for the affliction in the first place. We then seem to have a dead end for self-correction from the pattern of self-destruction: this is the sort of self-destruction that is what it is just because it blocks the possibility of self-correction. In other words it cancels our creativity and necessarily ends in the destruction of human agency

### **THEODICY, CREATIVITY AND AGENCY**

I am skeptically engaged with theodicy for Kantian type reasons, but I am going to try and articulate a theodicy for affliction that directly takes up the challenge of nihilistic evil and affliction. Even if such a theodicy fails at some traditional joints of a full solution, it may help us actually deal with some of our existential problems. Theodicy may have moral and ontological value in that it can assist us in dealing with the crippling self-destruction described in the previous sections.

Suppose we accept that one of God's essential properties is "creativity." We can, if we like, argue that the property is analytic to some omni-property or we can ground the essential property in the literal belief that God created the world: the teleological argument already contains the idea of God's creativity, a feature of cognition that quickly and definitively outstrips any sense of "knowing the truth." God is actually creating the conditions for what can be true or what can or should be the case. In teleological type reasoning, premises that articulate "order"



in the world are really about relations built inside of relations from within the micro and macro levels and then between the two until the human mind is stunned into silence. God's creativity is necessarily normative from within the object of creation; parts do not just fit together for order, they fit together for the well-being of the thing created and that well-being is constituted by being put together correctly. And then the created individual fits into the normative nature of other individuals that form a whole which creates a normative nature for all things in an *active unison*. God's creation is the *ground* of the never ending connections found in natural reality, connections that form the basis of integrity and further growth.

That pieces of things fit together and are so related to one another seems to contain "in the right way." Relations, which make up natural reality, are still taken up in a pseudo-teleology that follows the above normative path. Ecologists and environmentalists denounce ruined relations in nature caused by human activity because, at bottom, this is the ruin of ecological integrity, which is the ruin of ecological well-being. Ecological thinking requires considerable imagination as relations exist within relations that mirror a whole or totality that contains all those relations. The wholeness of the system, its integrity, is its well-being. The disruption of relations, mechanistically or intentionally, disrupts well-being: the creation of any object or organization always presupposes its possible disintegration and possible re-newel. This fact is simply a matter of defining what is "natural" and so it is entirely consistent with God's creative act as we long as we assume that God had God-like reasons for creating this natural world. Unfortunately this is a hazardous and perhaps often question-begging assumption as the enemies of theodicy want to argue that God seems to have created the wrong world for God to create. I will address this problem in due course.

God, if God exists and created the world, seems to have created a world that contains infinite room for more creation. Banks' own act, the narrative act of the novel is God-like. In its creation it expands out into a totality, which I have already mentioned as an ever-widening explanatory picture of human acts and behavior grounded in the reality of ecology. The relations and integrity within the art give us the right ways for comprehending affliction, which in turn brings us the possibility and power of the problematic empathetic disposition. Human emotions are created from our own creativity: we bring them into existence collectively and one of these emotions or dispositional states is "empathy." When I say that empathy is "problematic" I mean that it is creatively disruptive. To tell someone's story, even in an untutored way, is to

immediately step into the totality of that person's condition and this is to further remind us of the totality of the human condition most generally seen as the inseparability of agent from world and other agents. These ideas lead to a correction of the unfortunate banality of how empathy is often construed. To remind us of the totality of the human condition is not to walk a mile in Wade's shoes, it is to comprehend our circumstance and his own as joint creations, always and necessarily intertwined at a deep level of reality. Telling the story honestly and without flinching, which Banks has done, is creatively disruptive just as the collective is endeavoring to reject or dismiss the whole aesthetic process and reduce it and our creations down to legalistic fabrications that treat the individual as an "isolated finality": a dark and seductive magic which robs us of the resources for empathy. This is precisely what occurs in the communal account of Wade Whitehouse as the town washes its hands of their joint creation and counts all acts as strictly individual.

To see the connections, to be made vividly aware of the human relations within the human ecology, is the first element in the creation of human agency. The leading idea here is that a theodicy for affliction (nihilistic evil), and a theodicy in general, can be developed around the notion that the creation of agency from our own creative activity is greater than a gift of agency. And given the nature of human ecology or just ecology in general, it is perhaps impossible for agency to be a gift. Human relations, to be relations at all, have to be established by our nature as intentional beings: this seems analytic to "human relations." In the obvious sense, human relations and the human ecology are distinct from mechanistic ecology even though there is another sense in which mechanistic relations have to be "established" (through natural laws and time).

There is no intentionally created relation that does not risk failure due to the nature of intentionality in combination with a world full of contingency and a world full of contingency is an additional condition for grounded human competence (successful intentionality). In a world where our intentions were all good and could not help but to be realized we would eliminate competence and creativity. The initial conclusion for inquiry might be: a world where agency must be created from components, along with the possibility of a failure to create, is a better world than the one where we are simply given agency. We are always born into an ecology with pre-existing relations but agency depends on achieving a bare minimum of normative

relations and human history has shown us that this does not always take place.

And now, of course, we are heading into powerful and dreadful objections. Such objections are dreadful because they re-open the wounds of affliction and nihilistic evil and so ask us: can this really be from a world that God created? These questions and precisely formed objections provoke our deepest efforts and remind us that the aesthetic consciousness of narrative art confronts us with moral and philosophical duty. On a direct existential level, we should not read the novel *Affliction* and simply “enjoy it.” To overturn the affliction that destroyed Wade Whitehouse presupposes the ability to comprehend his condition and here this possibility is given to us by the artist through ecological explanation.

Within this awareness of Wade’s condition, if it really is awareness, is the comprehension of systematically broken and distorted relations. And the people who have to recognize this are just the people who are living within and from those broken relations, thus diminishing the possibility of overturning affliction. What is needed specifically is a call for repairing or restoring, perhaps the greatest of all creative activities, given that human beings do not create ex-nihilo. Restoring is to bring something back, to spare it, save it and re-order it when it has been broken by our own collective failures and this is then “collective redemption.” So a path for theodicy, through the ruin of affliction, might be “restorative creativity,” which means always and necessarily in relation to others and so pointing to a new form of agency. If this is possible then God created a world in which we can redeem ourselves from our own failures by comprehending our failures in ways that do not simply repair what is broken but makes something new and less likely to break.

If we can accept or assume that God would create imperfect rational beings, that this is consistent with God’s omnibenevolence, then we might come to see how redemption is a great good. Yes, we fail and yes, we go wrong, but redemption includes for its very possibility an awareness of the nature of the failures and the capacity to address those failures *from within the very nature of those failures*. Insofar as the failures that matter most are ecological, we then must engage others in the pursuit of redemption: it is within these sorts of endeavors that more and more relations can be found, articulated and lived out for our well-being. It is also in this pursuit where human beings can create deeper and more expansive agency by creating ecologies that consistently open possibilities for redemption and restoration and the constant awareness of

how redemption and restoration came into being from the workings of our own failures. This is not merely the creation of more options, it is the creation of a much richer cognitive resource. We may, in fact, create new meanings that sustain empathy as a feature of the ecology and not simply as idiosyncratic awareness. But, at the same time, given my reasoning, some ecology may need help from outside of itself. The awareness of distortion must come from some other source and this expands the possibility of creativity through a different form of redemption. The farther we have to reach for the necessary awareness, the wider and deeper the human connections become.

The last point can be taken up in the following manner. We have not reached the freedom or agency that is constitutive of responsibility because we have not really taken in or assimilated the nature of our joint creations. Of course, some agency is required for the things we have created but we don't comprehend those things: we don't comprehend "the criminal justice system" any better than we comprehend the full nature and implications of technology. When and if we do comprehend the totality of the system it will very probably cease to exist, as being ignorant of it is part of its nature. What takes its place, on the basis of comprehension, will further create new ideas concerning punishment, guilt or innocence. But comprehension of the criminal justice system (for example) will inevitably reach out to other social systems: we will acquire more conditions for creativity. Within the possibility of creativity lies the possibility of redemption and restoration.

It then seems obvious that the problems within the theodicy offered center on the apparent limitations of human awareness and so creativity. These problems can more sharply articulated for theistic discussion. For instance, why did God fail to make human beings just somewhat better so that they do not flatly deny their intersubjectivity? Why do we have the ability to deny our own essence and so progress to radical self-destruction? Clearly God could have made us just a bit better, or so it seems, and we thereby would arrive at creativity and the joint development of agency without constant nihilistic evil. This very difficult question is easily transformed into a deductive argument against any theodicy I have initially offered. Secondly, and closely related to the first question, comes the interventionist query: at the point of radical

self-destruction God ought to intervene.<sup>4</sup> But it seems clear that God has not intervened as human beings have reached this point and realized nihilistic evil in all kinds of cases. And if God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent, there ought to be a way in which human beings can creatively bring agency into existence without going off the rails and into nihilistic evil. In short, given my own description of affliction, God created us with the possibility of creating agency and the possibility of pointlessly annihilating our humanity. Surely the first is possible without the second.

### THE MOST SERIOUS WORLD

When we engage in theodicy, we sometimes forget the details of “goodness” or “the good” and so just as we pile evil into a heap, we pile the good into a heap. Why God did not make us capable to creatively produce agency without the possibility of nihilistic evil might contain assumptions about the good that are, in a sense, non-moral. At the very least, God (or a creative being) brings humanity into a world freighted with the deep possibility of meaning. A world where everything hangs in the balance according to our creative acts is a more serious world than one where these possibilities are diminished or eliminated. A world where we can destroy ourselves as creative beings seems, without question, to be the most serious world. By “serious” I mean where our acts, our collective endeavors (that allow for agency), have *the highest stakes*.

Where human action has the highest stakes, it also has the greatest meaning possible. A world in which many human acts, in many contexts, stand in some possible relation to the worst case scenario or the best case scenario is the most meaningful world. This is the world *where everything matters insofar as it is or could be related to the worst (nihilistic evil and our own destruction) or the best (the full realization of intersubjectivity and agency)*. The claim that this is, in fact, our world is difficult to determine for any number of reasons. But we do know that human beings have brought about instances of the worst case scenario and we know that we have also moved in the other direction. We also know that apparently trivial acts (given the context) can increase in meaning and importance over time (as the full context of the apparently trivial act was not *fully comprehended* ). The most serious world presupposes ecological explanation as already described. If my self-destructive acts are isolated to myself then my self-

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Professor James Sterba, University of Notre Dame, for bringing up this question at the University of Oxford Symposium on Religious Studies, December 10, 2014, Oxford England.

destructive acts are not as serious or as meaningful as they could be.

Now, I realize that the above arguments need considerable defense but before we go down that path we should remind ourselves of redemption. In the most meaningful world, the world with the highest stakes (the ever-present possibility of nihilistic evil), there is also the possibility for the most meaningful forms of redemption.<sup>5</sup> The most meaningful forms of redemption entail “restoring” and, as I have already noted, restoring is a deeply creative act as it does not just mean returning a thing to its previous condition. It means, as a creative act, to make the thing restored better than and more resistant to its previous condition and for this it needs to turn the evil over to the good: the redemptive act can only do this as the good is accomplished from the comprehension of the evil. For example, it would mean an ecological change against child abuse and abuse in general as “tolerable” or “deniable.” The ecology becomes resilient to the abuse only as it comprehends the prior state and works resilience from that prior state.

Clearly redemption only works as it is relevant to those who did the abusing and to those who were abused (collectively). Hence, redemption seems no longer possible for Wade Whitehouse or for those who abused him. All the acts leading up to his self-destruction are weighed down by the gravity of distorted human experience and by the failed communal obligation and responsibility that we sense right beneath the surface. The art is the stark reality of the seriousness of the world represented in a totality. Art, in other words, captures the ecological explanation of Wade. The fact that Wade is, as an individual, beyond our help does not force the conclusion that there is no redemption that is *relevant* to Wade. Elimination of child abuse is only really possible in recognition of those who have been within the abuse: it is only really possible in the ability of memory and consciousness to keep the ecology of abuse present. And that recognition goes well beyond static or dynamic measures of abuse: it means that we become aware of how the process of self-destruction is a process that destroys the entire ecology. What really separates Wade out from someone else in the ecology is what we might call “ecological luck,” although we can look at those who “survive” and always be reminded of

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<sup>5</sup> Borrowing from Wittgenstein, I make up a game that I play by myself. The game involves hitting rocks with a stick. One day, I play miserably and fail to hit the rock when “it matters most.” I come back the next day and “redeem myself” by hitting the rock in the exact same circumstance as the day before. But I can’t be redeemed because even as this captures elements of redemption there is nothing at stake. I might change my mind and retroactively change the rules of the game so that I get a “do-over.”

the communal failure. We can always be reminded of something more serious than “what happened to Wade.” The most serious thing, and so the most meaningful thing, is our reality as relational beings. It is this reality that grounds our possibilities as individuals. Stories, by their very nature, return us to this grounding through ecological explanation.

The interventionist objection is problematic for the same reasons. Suppose that instead of making us so we never realize worst possible scenarios, God intervenes when we are moving in that direction. Hence, we get the same result: empirically and inductively, human beings would correctly reason (barring Humean skepticism) ‘x, the worst case scenario, cannot happen and as a matter of course such things do not happen.’ Whatever we would have to build or create to ward off the worst possible scenario becomes unnecessary and irrelevant: no one will think of it or bring it into a cognitive schema. The worst case scenario is human beings destroying their own possibility. As we ratchet up the level of worst case scenario we also ratchet up the seriousness of the world and the seriousness of the world is what provides the conditions for human intersubjectivity. If we don’t need each other for our own creation as agents, then we don’t need each other at all. Intersubjectivity serves as the condition for the seriousness of the world and the seriousness of the world serves as the condition for intersubjectivity. A causal arrow going both ways is the deepest condition for redemption.

It may seem incoherent or incomprehensible to say that “if we don’t need each other for the creation of our own agency then we don’t need each other at all.” But all we need to do is pry beneath the surface. *Agency is the basis for every relation and normative state of affairs that we consider paradigmatically human.* That we would be jointly responsible for agency also means that we are responsible for our own responsibility. For God to bring about this state of affairs is to stop a move back to God as being responsible for our responsibility: on one side of the coin this idea places us within a world where we are entirely responsible for ourselves-*the most mature and serious world-* and on the other side of the coin, the idea removes the superficial complaint from atheists that God brings evil into the world. From here, as we follow up on the maturity of the Kantian view of complete responsibility, modified according to intersubjectivity (and not individual responsibility), we arrive at the possibility of communal redemption. Anything that counts as individual redemption will be given the necessary context from steps toward a communal redemption. The irony contained in the position is the same irony found in Banks’ novel: “individual responsibility” taken as fully individual turns the explanation



of human action into a shallowness that causes incoherence.

Wittgenstein's private language argument can now return as a spiritual and moral grounding. We can presuppose, for the sake of argument, that language is the crucial property for human agency. Without being able to articulate ourselves to ourselves and others, agency cannot begin in any definite sense. But the meaning of those articulations is necessarily dependent on a community of speakers. Meaning is intersubjective: we can only have meaning from within a community. Hence our survival as agents depends on a condition of interdependence insofar as our creation and survival as agents depends on meaning. What Wittgenstein had to do in order to make his case was reverse the intuitive force of a purely private meaning. The dominant view of the isolation of minds and meaning is precisely the ontology and related epistemology that supports nihilistic evil. Wittgenstein was showing us that "forms of life" or the human ecology (in its many and varied types) is what supports the possibility of meaning and then the possibility of meaning generates the space and ground for agency.

But now the lingering and ignored problem comes back: why did God create us with the possibility of going right, with the possibility of recognizing and achieving our intersubjectivity and so shaping the world correctly *along with the possibility of going drastically wrong, with the possibility of denying intersubjectivity in thought and practice?* We might say that the difference is between being given our essence and accomplishing our essence.

I see no other answer besides a variation on the one already given: the most serious, mature and meaningful world is the one where we must be completely responsible for ourselves according to the worst possibilities. If our responsibilities and obligations retreat away from the most serious world they may very well retreat into triviality. By making us better, God would make us shallow. But we have to avoid a slippery slope fallacy here and ground the idea and argument in seriousness. If we allow that seriousness is a good because of its strong connection to meaningfulness then we can proceed to the question: what happens if the worst case scenario is eliminated? By the very nature of seriousness, by the measure of how much my acts matter for my own well-being and the well-being of others, a retreat from the worst case scenario is a retreat from seriousness. My acts will no longer matter for the possibility of myself and others

in becoming agents.

The meaning of human life can be thoughtfully viewed as the bonds that we have created with and through others (given what has already been argued regarding intersubjectivity). The meaning and depth of the bonds forged corresponds directly to the stakes regarding why the bonds were forged in the first place. Within the theodicy presented here the bond created is the one that is based on our recognizing and establishing our own possibilities and so denying those possibilities (the stakes). Cases where the denial is realized and nihilistic evil is made present, raises the stakes even higher: we are not just capable of denying our possibility as human beings, we have *actually done it and so laid waste to various human ecologies for no benefit to ourselves (nihilism)*. That we could return from destroying a significant swath of our humanity is communal redemption of the most serious and meaningful sort: we can create agency out of the worst case scenario or even because of the worst case scenario.

The most meaningful world, and the most serious world, is then the one where we are entirely responsible for our own acts but only as they stand in relation to the acts of others for the possibility of agency: it is the world where we are jointly responsible for creating anything of lasting value. Hence it is the world where “personal responsibility” if that means “only being responsible for myself” translates into “not being responsible at all.” This is the moral parallel to Wittgenstein’s private language argument: meaning is possible only in community and agency is possible only through community. What we have in ourselves to address the victims of nihilistic evil depends, of course, on how well we have developed ourselves. To forget our communal essence is to forget nihilistic evil and this is the same as perpetuating nihilistic evil. On the other hand, to face the reality of nihilistic evil from the ecological background of our existence is to face the depth and meaning produced by our actual responsibility. And this recognition is constitutive of living in a world where every human act matters for the well-being of our selves and others.

### CONCLUSION

Hence, we might conclude, after lengthy struggle and yet with many points admittedly undecided: perhaps God created the most serious world with the deepest possibilities for meaning. Within the possibilities of meaning is the possibility of communal redemption. To see ourselves having, at least in some community, overcome our worst case scenario is to realize a greater good than never facing

the full reality of our worst case scenario. This, I know, is a dangerous conclusion but redemption seems to be what best stabilizes religious faith. To have the power of communal redemption in the face of the worst case scenario is to be created in God's image.

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