

# Modeling Ultimate Reality: God, Consciousness, and Emergence

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Philosophers of religion and religious thinkers in every tradition refer to what they take to be ultimate by means of models. These models range from careful metaphysical constructs to wild symbols and the manners of articulation and justification of the models exhibit astonishing variation. Sometimes the models are referred literally, or nearly literally, and sometimes even the best models are affirmed to be false because the ultimate cannot be modeled. This essay and at least one other in this collection, Whitney's, argue that ultimacy cannot be modeled and that this is the more profound truth than is to be found in any apophatically-denied model. The overall question of models of ultimate reality is highly illuminating, however, because it provides a context for deep comparative, critical, and imaginative thinking. So this essay should be read in the context of all the other essays in this volume, a contribution to the larger exploration.

This introduction states in abstract terms the hypothesis to be developed here. The explication of these terms follows in the body of the essay. The hypothesis is that the primary ultimate reality is an ontological act of creation, the terminus of which is everything determinate, constituting and unfolding in space/time. This ontological creative act cannot be "modeled" in any sense of *isomorphism* because anything with a form or *morphe* is in the endpoint or terminus of the act, not the act of creation itself. Anything that can be modeled cannot be the ultimate reality of the ontological creative act. Nevertheless, religious engagement of this ultimate reality, which is ancient and multifarious, requires "signs," if not exactly models. At least some of these signs need to be intimate to human life so as to provide orientation to ultimacy.

Among the signs that have been used in the history of religion for this ultimate reality are models of persons, as in some personifying monotheisms, models of pure consciousness, as in some Hinduisms and Buddhist schools, and models of process

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and emergence, as in some Daoist and Confucian schools. These models are not stable, however, being pushed at once in transcendent directions toward the unmodelable ontological act and in intimate directions toward human experience. Reaching for experiential intimacy, for instance, are models of anthropomorphic Gods, consciousness of the sort experienced in meditation, or emergence and flow in nature. The philosophical and religious moral of this is that ultimate reality can well be engaged with these models but that the object engaged, the ontological creative act, never should be confused with what is modeled.

Symbolic engagement with the models needs always to be understood as indexical, not iconic in the sense of construing the model to model the object. Rather, the model models an analogue in human experience that is turned into a sign referring indexically to ultimate reality, distinctions that will be explained in the section [“Semiotics of Symbolic Engagement”](#) here.

The hypothesis also says that there are four cosmological ultimates that derive from the transcendental traits of anything determinate—all created things are determinate to some extent. These are form, components formed, location in an existential field, and achieved value. Relative to human life, these constitute four ultimate conditions: being under obligation, needing wholeness, engaging others with due care, and finding ultimate meaning. These will be explained in more detail in the section [“The Ontological Creative Act”](#).

So there are three parts of the argument for this hypothesis: (1) a brief analysis of some intimate models of ultimate reality that are or can be legitimate signs of ultimate reality but that model something other than ultimate reality, (2) a defense of the philosophical hypothesis that ultimate reality is the ontological creative act that creates anything determinate, and (3) an explanation of the process of symbolic engagement and its consequences for thinking about ultimate reality. Readers who doubt that the ultimate is an ontological creative act and hence find the analysis of “broken” models too labored and tortuous to get through might read the section [“The Ontological Creative Act”](#) first.

## **Personhood, Consciousness, and Emergence**

As will be argued in detail in the next section, ultimate reality is an ontological act of creation that cannot be modeled, because only determinate things can be modeled. The determinate world and its parts can be modeled, but not the world’s status as the terminus of the ontological creative act. The determinate world is the terminus of the creative act, and thus part of the act, not a product that might be separated from the act.

Nevertheless, models for ultimate reality have been taken from elements within the world and carefully cultivated within reflective religious traditions to serve as signs for engaging the finite/infinite ultimate realities, ontological and cosmological. In most cases, these models have been subjected to qualifications that, on the one hand, indicate the highly transcendent, abstract, and unmodelable aspects of the

ultimate and, on the other hand, function as intimate signs to which human life can be related in ultimate matters.<sup>1</sup> The three models for ultimate reality to be discussed here are those of the person, of pure consciousness, and of emergence. Persons, consciousness, and emergence are all determinate things within the world, and can be developed into theological models. They also can be used as signs of ontological ultimate reality. Historically they obviously have been used as such signs, and the section “[Semiotics of Symbolic Engagement](#)” will explain a bit of how this has worked.

Many kinds of theism build models of human personhood to use as signs of ontological ultimate reality. Gods are not ordinary persons, of course, and perhaps the history of the development of ideas of personified gods should start with the common belief in many early cultures that there are supernatural agents as part of the world, deified ancestors, trees with intentionality, spirits of weather or war. Most models of personhood for ultimate reality have a range of levels of personification. For instance, Vishnu and Shiva are conceived to have very human avatars, such as Krishna who was Arjuna’s charioteer in the Bhagavad Gita and like any other man except for his divine knowledge. Vishnu and Shiva themselves are thought to be able to manifest themselves to human sensibilities, as Vishnu does in the Bhagavad Gita, but also have forms that transcend ordinary or even miraculous human knowing. In the Abrahamic monotheisms God is conceived to be something like a person with a proper name, Yahweh or Allah, with intentions, who both creates the world and intervenes within it as an actor in human narratives. Moses speaks with God and sees his backside, and Isaiah sees the hem of his robe in the throne-room; Allah speaks or thinks in Arabic. Sometimes the anthropomorphisms are plainly intended to be metaphors, as when the 23rd Psalm likens God to a shepherd (and people to sheep). Other times the signs are taken to refer without much qualification to ultimate reality. And yet in these theistic traditions the personifications are linked within certain systems of thought to understandings of the transcendent indeterminacy of the ultimate, as Vishnu and Shiva are reflectively understood really to be Brahman who is beyond qualities. The author of Colossians says (in Chap. 1) that Jesus is the first image of the invisible, that is, beyond determination, God. Christianity, Islam, and Cabbalistic Judaism have been much influenced by the Neo-Platonic idea of the One that is beyond any determinate differentiation. How are these highly transcendent symbols of God as beyond determination linked to the personifying symbols?

Thomas Aquinas had perhaps the most explicit answer. God is the pure Act of To Be, he thought, and as such is simple, without determination, unable to think intentionally about anything outside the pure fullness of Actuality, knowing things in the world only by knowing their causes within the divine actuality, not knowing anything in a way that is different from simply being that thing in infinite fullness,

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<sup>1</sup> The problem of the tension in religious symbolism between needs for transcendence and needs for intimacy is very complicated and will not be addressed in this paper. The point can be taken informally here.

not being a thing in a genus (such as a god, or person), or even a genus itself. Yet Thomas said that this pure Act of To Be also is the personal God of the Bible. He was able to say this because he claimed that finite personhood in ordinary people is a good, positive thing and as such is a finite derivative from the infinite actuality of God. So, God is an infinite person as people are finite persons and personhood can be attributed to God by analogy. There are difficulties with his theory of analogy, because it is problematic to compare the finite and infinite.<sup>2</sup> But he clearly recognized the problem of conceiving of God on a scale from very anthropomorphic personifications to philosophically acceptable transcendent ones. The Neo-Platonic theory of levels of reality addressed a similar concern.

The advantage of the symbols at the personifying end of the spectrum is that people can imagine themselves relating to ultimate reality as a person, praying to it, hoping to be known and loved, conceiving it to be in a narrative in which they also play roles, finding an identity as a subject to a ruler, and loving God like loving a person. Another advantage is that the caprice of the world, the fact its main powers are not scaled to human affairs, and alleged divine promises are not kept, can be imagined in terms of a capricious personal God.<sup>3</sup> Yet another advantage is that the personified signs for ultimacy can articulate religious connections with the four cosmological ultimate realities. Obligations to shape one's life with the right *form* can be understood as divine personal commands. The brokenness of life, manifested in mal-adjustments to life's *components*, can be understood in terms of divine powers of making whole. Engagements with others in the *existential field* can be understood in terms of divine intentions to love, or fight, or preserve. *Achieved value-identity* can be understood as standing under the judgment of a personal God.

Different religious traditions parse these symbols differently, and often with contradictions within a single named religion. But building a model of ultimate reality based on human personhood allows for many ways of intimate connection with ultimacy. At the same time, the reflective thinkers of many of the traditions have known that the personal model does not work iconically. God is not really a person with intentions and agency within the world, but thinking of God that way does pick up on something important about ultimate reality that is metaphysically beyond personification.

A deep motif in South Asian religious thought is that "true reality" is something like consciousness without objects. This motif has had many manifestations in various Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist schools. Roughly put, where there is diversity in experience, especially change, there must be a deeper substratum of experience. The Samkhya tradition distinguishes the self, which is pure consciousness, from nature which constitutes the objects of consciousness. Most people confuse their true selves with the self in which consciousness has passing objects, and need to learn to abstract from those objects to consciousness itself. This tradition was closely

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<sup>2</sup> See the detailed argument in Neville (1968), chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> See the elaborate discussion in Goldstein (2002), chapter 1, of the devices used by the authors of the Hebrew Bible to explain how God is both predicted and unpredictable, especially in times of apparent abandonment of His people by the One who promises protection.

allied with the yoga tradition which has been developed in many schools of Hinduism and also Buddhism, but the emphasis on clarifying consciousness of its objects was taken by a variety of traditions to constitute a kind of metaphysical move to deeper reality. Advaita Vedanta, for instance, rejects the reality of diverse nature entirely and identifies consciousness as the true self, which in turn is identical with Brahman which is imagined as something like consciousness.

The intimacy in the model of consciousness is that everyone can experience it, and can practice meditative techniques such as those in Buddhisms and Hinduisms to purify consciousness. Some Buddhist schools, usually associated with Yogacara Buddhisms, say that reality is “consciousness only.” Others, associated with Madhyamika Buddhisms, say that even a substratum of consciousness is too ontologically oriented, and the only real things are the risings and ceasings of conscious contents or “dharmas.” For most Buddhist schools, “Buddha-mind” is a state of perfected consciousness that does not make mistakes about what is real and what is not, with the result that a person who attains or uncovers Buddha-mind is never attached to anything in a way that causes suffering. For most Buddhist schools also, meditative techniques can bring people into some kind of experience of this Buddha-mind, if not abiding in it fully. In a vague sense, differently specified by different South Asian and some East Asian traditions (such as Chan or Zen Buddhism), consciousness is something that is intimately accessible and yet can be interpreted in highly transcendent, indeterminate ways as the reality that lies behind and is the source of the suchness of the world.

To continue with this highly abstract characterization of models derived from finite determinate reality to be used as signs of the ontological creative act, a deep motif in East Asian thought is the model of emergence, as in the flow of the Dao. Themes of novelty and spontaneity, as well as continuity and inertia, have been developed around emergence. Both Confucianism and Daoism, in different ways, teach living according to the Dao so as to conform to the inertial situations of the past and to act to accomplish things that emerge with novelty. This can be understood in intimate ways. But both also say, as the Daodejing does, that the Dao that can be named, that is, the emergent flow, is not the true Dao, which rather is the source or mother of the flow. In some special sense, the flow emerges from something deeper that cannot be named. For the Confucians the emergent flow is to be understood as the harmonizing of the unruly forces of various processes by the patterns of harmony that come from Heaven or Principle. But underneath that is a deeper emergence that the great Neo-Confucian philosopher, Zhou Dunyi, describes as follows:

The Ultimate of Non-being and also the Great Ultimate! The Great Ultimate through movement generates yang. When its activity reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil. Through tranquility the Great Ultimate generates yin. When tranquility reaches its limit, activity begins again. So movement and tranquility alternate and become the root of each other, giving rise to the distinction of yin and yang, and the two modes are thus established. By the transformation of yang and its union with yin, the Five Agents of Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, and Earth arise. When these five material forces are distributed in harmonious order, the four seasons run their course.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Zhou (1963), p. 463.

So there is a kind of double emergence, the emergence of temporal flow involving the temporal emergence through yin and yang, from something more basic than flow, beginning with the Ultimate of Non-Being, which has no qualities. Thus in any temporal emerging there is also a non-temporal or eternal emerging of flow from nothing. The relation between the Ultimate of Non-Being and the Great Ultimate is a symbolic way of speaking of the ontological creative act whereby something determinate comes to be.

Personification, consciousness, and emergence are not the only models drawn from modeling finite determinations and used as signs by religious traditions, and they themselves are only broad motifs that have been elaborated in many, often contradictory ways. But they illustrate how reflective religious traditions have responded to the task of developing signs of ultimacy that are usefully intimate on the one hand by virtue of modeling something known in the world and that can be pushed or broken into the transcendent kind of reference appropriate for engaging the ultimate reality of the ontological act of creation which, apart from the creation, is not determinate and that make the creation gratuitous, arbitrary, undeserving, and surprising. One push in the development of signs for ultimacy is that toward intimacy, for which intimately known and experienced things can be symbolically transformed into models for referring to ontological ultimate reality. A contrary push also is in contention, namely, toward signs that indicate the reality of the ontological creative act that transcends any model.

## The Ontological Creative Act

To make the point about the push for transcendence in the models of ultimate reality, a metaphysical argument is necessary. This argument stands on its own and is not an induction from a comparative survey of models of ultimacy. But it is reinforced by the intellectual dialectic in so many traditions that moves from the determinacy of personhood, consciousness, and emergence to something that is beyond determinacy, as, for instance, Brahman with qualities is really a presentation of Brahman without qualities. The metaphysical argument provides the framework for the preceding discussion of models of ultimate reality. The argument begins with an analysis of determinateness, the most universal trait of things.

To be determinate is to be something rather than something else.<sup>5</sup> The “rather than” indicates that determinateness in one thing is always with respect to some other thing. *A* is determinate with respect to *x*, *y*, and *z*, for instance, but perhaps not determinate with respect to *p* and *q*. If *a* is not determinate with respect to anything at all, it is not determinate at all, not something rather than something else. Therefore,

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<sup>5</sup>This argument about determinateness and the conclusion drawn from it about ontological creation was first made in Neville (1968).

a determinate thing has to have “conditional features” by virtue of which it relates to those things with respect to which it is determinate so as to be different from them, for instance causal conditions. The things with respect to which a thing is determinate might also, but might not, have conditional features from the thing so that they all are mutually determinate, constituting a field of determinate connections.

But a thing cannot be only conditional features, that is, only the influences from other things. It also needs to have “essential features” by virtue of which it integrates the conditional features into its own being. Without essential features, a thing would be only the conditional influences of other things, but those would be influences on nothing: a thing without essential features could not be a term in any of its conditional relations. Without conditional features, a thing would be only an atom with no internal relations to other things, and thus indeterminate with respect to them. A thing could not have only external relations because it would have no capacity on its own to enter into any relations, internal or external.

A determinate thing is a harmony of essential and conditional features. That it is a harmony means that its features just fit together.<sup>6</sup> If one thing is a determinate harmony, there must be other harmonies with respect to which it is determinate. Therefore determinateness requires a plurality of determinate things (which may also be indeterminate in some respects, as the present is partly indeterminate with respect to the future).

The plurality of harmonies is such that each exhibits four transcendental traits merely by virtue of being harmonies.<sup>7</sup> One is the trait of form: every harmony has a pattern by virtue of which its features just fit together. Some harmonies are discursive, that is, play out their parts through time, so that their pattern is an unfolding of temporal development and fit. From the standpoint of a present moment, the future has form under the aspects of possibilities, sometimes with alternative possibilities of differing value. For human beings, facing a future with possibilities of differing value places people under obligation to choose the better rather than the worse insofar as they can act to affect which possibilities are actualized and which excluded. A second transcendental trait of all harmonies is having components or features that are formed in the harmony’s pattern. The components themselves must also be harmonies. A third transcendental trait of all harmonies is having existential location with respect to other harmonies. The conditional features that harmonies have from one another and by virtue of which they are determinate with respect to one another constitute an existential field within which the mutually determinate harmonies are located. A fourth transcendental trait of all harmonies is that they achieve the value-identity of getting these components together with this form in this existential location. That harmonies have value, by the very definition of determinateness, is a controversial point that will not be pursued further here, but assumed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Whitehead called this “just fit” a “contrast.” See Whitehead (1978), p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> This point summarizes an elaborate theory of harmonies in Neville (1989).

<sup>8</sup> But see the argument in Neville (1989).

A plurality of harmonies is such that each has both essential and conditional features. The harmonies could not be determinate with respect to one another without their mutual conditional features, which constitute collectively their “cosmological togetherness,” their field of relations. But the harmonies also could not be determinate with respect to one another without each having its own essential features, which are required for the harmonies to be terms on their own in relation to one another. Therefore, their cosmological togetherness, accounting for their relations, cannot account for their ontological togetherness that allows them to be together with their own essential features. There must be an ontological context of mutual relevance within which harmonies are together with their essential as well as conditional features. Within the cosmological togetherness alone, one harmony grasps another only in terms of its conditional features. That it does not grasp the other’s essential features is what gives the other the status of being other and external, and capable of being determinate on its own. The existence of a plurality of determinate harmonies supposes that they exist within an ontological context of mutual relevance.

What can the ontological context of mutual relevance be? If it is another determinate thing, then for it to be determinate with respect to the other determinate things so as to hold them together, an even deeper ontological context of mutual relevance would be required for the first ontological context to be together with the other determinate things. This would result in an impossible infinite regress of assumptions so that no determinate things would have the possibility of being ontologically together, and hence would be impossible themselves. The ontological context of mutual relevance thus must in itself be indeterminate.

What can in itself be indeterminate and yet constitute the context within which determinate things can be together, each with its own essential as well as conditional features? The answer is, an ontological act of creation that simply makes the determinate things together with their essential and conditioning features. The act is indeterminate except in giving itself the nature of being creator of the world of determinate things created. The act is a sheer making, a creating, terminating in determinate things. The determinate things are what they are, with their determinate natures with respect to each other. The kinds of relations and unities they constitute are various; we seem to live in a cosmos with islands of intense connection and order in an ocean, as it were, of minimal connections. What the determinate things are is a matter of empirical determination. The determinate things are also the elements of the terminus of the ontological creative act, which they have in common and which constitutes them as together in the ontological context of mutual relevance. Thus they are determinate with respect to one another, and are determinate together instead of being nothing at all. Each bears its part of the dynamism of the ontological act of creating.

Some people find it difficult to imagine an act creating something new. They cite the old adage that “out of nothing, nothing comes.” But this supposes that all the reality in an effect is contained in its cause, an Aristotelian principle. If all the reality in the effect were in the cause, however, how would it be possible for the effect to differ from the cause? It could not, except by the creation of limitations or negations



by the cause so as to produce an effect that differs from it by virtue of being less than it. The creation of negations is more obscure than the creation of positive things. Process philosophies of many types have argued that within finite things is some spontaneous capacity to create novel things, often by rearranging old things but also necessarily by the addition of something new that makes a difference to the old things. In the case of the ontological act of creation, there are no old things, only the sheer creation of determinate (and partially indeterminate) harmonies.

The ontological creative act, then, is eternal and immense in the sense of creating things that are temporal and that constitute a spatio-temporal field as they unfold.<sup>9</sup> Eternity is the togetherness of the modes of times and the places of space, a togetherness that modern physics is only beginning to allow us to imagine. The ontological creative act, creating all times, does not take place at a time, not at the Big Bang, if that is how the cosmos started in time, nor now, nor in some consummatory future. It simply creates and the product of creation includes the accoutrements of temporal and spatial things. And the ontological creative act has no nature apart from being the creator of the determinate things. If it did, it would be determinate and therefore could not be the ontological context of mutual relevance.

Given the ontological act of creation, the ontological ultimate reality has a distinguishable tri-partite nature. First is the act itself, the making. Second is the world as the terminus of the act, the made. And third is the nothingness that would be the case if there were no ontological act creating the world. In West Asian religions, this has been called creation *ex nihilo*, meaning that the act of creation arises from absolutely nothing. It is not the case that there is absolutely nothing: there is in fact the world as created, and in this sense the ontological act of creation is determinate as the act creating this determinate world. The ontological act is not determinate in any sense apart from the world, however, and so does not need a deeper ontological context of mutual relevance. Creation *ex nihilo* in this sense does not mean that a determinate God creates a world out of no stuff rather than out of a divine stuff, as in Thomas Aquinas' philosophical claim that finite actualities are delimitations of infinite divine actuality (Pure Act of To Be). Rather, it means that the ontological creative act is gratuitous, arbitrary, undeserving, and utterly surprising. There is no reason why the world is created—any “reason” would itself have to be created. But the determinate world exists, and it could not exist unless it be created by an otherwise indeterminate ontological creative act. This is my complex hypothesis about primary or *ontological* ultimate reality.

The discussion of the four transcendental traits of harmony, however, exhibits four other ultimate realities that can be called “cosmological” in contrast to the “ontological” ultimate reality. They would not exist unless the ontological ultimate reality created a world of determinate things, and thus are secondary to the ontological creative act. Nor could the ontological ultimate reality create a world that did not have determinate, or at least partially determinate, things in it.

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<sup>9</sup> See Neville (1993).

But given a determinate world consisting of harmonies, which is what determinate things consist in according to this hypothesis, having form is an ultimate reality. Having components formed within that pattern is an ultimate reality. Having location relative to other harmonies through conditional features is an ultimate reality. And achieving some value-identity by having these components in this location with this pattern is an ultimate reality. So, according to this hypothesis there is one ontological ultimate reality, the ontological act of creation by virtue of which every determinate harmony exists relative to others in an ontological context of mutual relevance. And there are four cosmological ultimate realities, form, components, existential location, and value-identity that are necessary if there is to be anything determinate; these cosmological ultimate realities come to be with the ontological creation of determinate things. Any created world whatsoever, so long as it has some determinacy, exhibits these cosmological ultimate realities.

“Ultimacy,” or the “ultimate” in ultimate reality can now be defined more precisely. Of course, it means a final condition beyond which there is nothing more. Relative to human life it means those final or boundary conditions that define the world. These can now be characterized as finite/infinite contrasts. The finite side of a finite/infinite contrast is some finite thing that defines the world. In the ontological ultimate reality, the act of creation including the determinate world as its terminus is the finite side. The infinite side of a finite/infinite contrast is the counterfactual condition of what would be the case if the finite side were not real. In the case of the ontological ultimate reality, there would be absolutely nothing if it were not for the ontological creative act creating the determinate world. In the case of the ultimate reality of form, form itself is the finite side, and pure unformed chaos would be the infinite side. In the case of the ultimate reality of components, having components to be harmonized is the finite side, and a pure, empty lack of anything to be formed would be the infinite side. In the case of the ultimate reality of existential location, having an existential field of things with respect to which to be determinate is the finite side, having nothing else to be determinate with respect to, with the resulting impossibility of being determinate, would be the infinite side. In the case of the ultimate reality of value-identity, having such an identity is the finite side, having no determinate identity would be the infinite side.

It is possible, of course, to experience the existing world without wondering about how it exists, just as it is possible to experience forms, components, place, and value-identities, and think about how they might be different, without wondering about what would be if there were no forms, components, places, and value identities. This would be experience of only the finite side. But these ultimate realities in fact are the boundary conditions of the world and sometimes the significance of this is grasped in religious and philosophical thought. Sometimes people have signs that express the finite/infinite contrast. They feel the finite side as well as its radical contingency or what-if-there-were-no-finite-side. These are religious engagements of the ultimate. Precisely because the ultimate conditions are finite/infinite contrasts, religious cultures develop signs for addressing and engaging the radical contingency of the ontological act of creation and the transcendental traits of anything determinate. The concrete feeling of the ultimate realities includes a sense

of their mystery as expressed in the felt infinite side. Some experiences of the ontological ultimate in terms of personhood, consciousness, and emergence include also the feel of their counterfactual absence. This raises again the question of experience.

## Semiotics of Symbolic Engagement

By what semiotic theory of engaging ultimate reality, understood philosophically as the ontological act of creation, can we understand how these models can be signs of ultimate reality? The theory I propose arises from the pragmatic tradition which concerning this point turns on the problem of reference.<sup>10</sup> A model is a conceptual tool whose elements are supposed to be in some kind of isomorphic relation to the object modeled, a mode of reference that Peirce called “iconic.”<sup>11</sup> Early modern Western science modeled nature as a machine: knowing how to construct the “machine of nature,” meant that nature’s own workings were known.<sup>12</sup> Mathematical physics models certain natural processes with the mathematical expressions. Poets model realities with their imagery, so that even when the images are obviously metaphoric, there is a sense in which reality is like what the images project.

Only determinate things can be in iconic or isomorphic relation to a model. Ultimate reality is not only determinate things—it is also a making of the Dao itself. Therefore any model of ultimate reality has to be false insofar as it is understood to refer iconically. The ultimate reality of the ontological creative act cannot really be in iconic relation to the model of a person, or of human consciousness, or of the emergent flow within time. So if those models are taken to be signs for the engagement of ultimate reality, they are necessarily false in their iconic reference.

Another form of reference, however, is indexical, by which is meant the establishment of some kind of real connection between the object engaged and the signs of engagement so that something true is picked up in the engagement. Pointing with the index finger causes the interpreter to look and see something that otherwise would be missed. All interpretations that engage real things have some indexical characters in their references. So the question is whether models of ultimacy such as personhood, consciousness, and emergence might point to ultimate reality, establish some kind of real connection with it, and allow for what is important in ultimate reality to be carried across in the symbolic engagement. They might do this even though, iconically, the ultimate reality of the ontological creative act cannot be personal, conscious, or emergent.

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<sup>10</sup> This argument summarizes the more elaborate analysis in Neville (2006).

<sup>11</sup> For a closer analysis of Peirce’s terminology in semiotics, see Corrington (1993); see also Corrington (2000). My treatment of Peirce’s semiotics is in Neville (2009), chapters 6–7.

<sup>12</sup> For a sophisticated recent defense of this sense of modeling nature see Gallistel (1980).

How can we tell whether such models indexically refer to ultimate reality in true ways? To answer this question, several observations need to be made about symbolic engagement. First, the signs in an interpretation are neither true nor false unless the interpretation actually engages its object. An interpretation takes the signs to stand for the object in a certain respect. The engagement intends the object by means of the sign. And the interpretation itself is a third thing that relates the object and sign intentionally; it is part of the experience of the interpreter. Second, interpretive engagements are always particular and contextual, depending on actual people making them. Signs that are used to interpret truly in one context might be false in another, true for one person but false for another. Therefore, third, some external way needs to be found to discern whether for this person in this context this sign of ultimacy as a personal being, pure consciousness, emergence, or some other, carries over what is important about the ontological act of creation.<sup>13</sup> The great religions have profound traditions of spiritual discernment and direction, aimed to determine just what difference the engagement of ultimacy with this sign or other makes to a person's experience.

Such individualism in the discernment process is unwieldy for the cultural processes of religion, however. So, religious traditions have evolved to focus on the symbols that engage truly for the most part, for most people, in most contexts which then are taken by the culture to be the normative contexts for engaging ultimate reality, usually ritualized contexts. This remark vastly oversimplifies the complex character of the cultural embodiment of religion, but it can serve its purpose in the present argument. Pragmatically effective markers for habitual engagements of ultimacy with certain signs are developed in religious cultures. St. Paul, for instance, talked about "living in the Spirit," by which he meant, at least partly, living in a community of people who think of themselves as "belonging to Christ Jesus" and who interpret ultimate reality in terms of Jesus and his teachings about the God of the Hebrew Bible. The fruit of living with these signs in their particular lives, he said, "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."<sup>14</sup> In the case of individuals who live in this community but who are conspicuously lacking in these fruits of the Spirit, the signs are not engaging them with ultimate reality truly. What is true for many of the others is not true for them.

Paul's point can be generalized in terms of the metaphysics of ultimacy. The ontological creative act whose terminus is the determinate world unfolding through space-time was described above as gratuitous, arbitrary, undeserved, and surprising. The act is gratuitous because there can be no reason in any reality prior to the act for the act to happen. The act is arbitrary because there can be no reason prior to the act for it to be one way rather than another. The act is undeserved from the human

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<sup>13</sup> An elaborate defense of the claim that truth is the carryover of value or importance from the object into the experience of the interpreter in the respects in which the signs stand for the object is to be found in Neville (1989), part 1.

<sup>14</sup> Galatians 5:22–23, NRSV translation.

perspective because whatever good is found in the determinate world does not justify or fulfill some prior need. The act is surprising from the human perspective because everything in the world just is what it is, contrary to expectations.

Now, the fruits of getting these points, these values, in the ontological act of creation are something like the following. You can tell if people have grasped the point about the gratuity of the ontological creative act if they have a deep acceptance of being, of the field of existence, of their own lives; most people are ambivalent about this. Whether the symbols for ultimacy are personifying ones, matters of pure consciousness, or emergence, they are true if engaging the ultimate with them produces what Jonathan Edwards called “consent to being in general.”<sup>15</sup> With respect to arbitrariness, you can tell that their symbols are indexically true if they result in acknowledgment and acceptance of the singularity of the world, especially people’s own singular position, rich or poor, educated or not, belonging to a powerful group or not, and so forth. With respect to the undeservedness of the ontological creative act, you can tell that people’s symbols are indexically true if they produce a kind of ontological humility, a profound feeling of not deserving to be what one is. With respect to the surprisingness of the world created, you can tell that people’s symbols are indexically true if they spark self-transcending awe and astonishment. Acceptance of being, and of singularity, ontological humility, and self-transcending astonishment and awe, are all modes of gratitude toward the ontological creative act.

These last remarks have focused on signs for engaging the ontological ultimate reality. There are also the four cosmological ultimates mentioned earlier, of form, components, existential location, and value-identity, all engaged as finite/infinite contrasts. The same signs, or systems of signs, that engage the ontological creative act also engage the transcendental traits of anything determinate. From the human perspective, engaging form is a matter of choosing among alternative possibilities of different values, in respect to which people live under obligation. If people’s signs of ultimacy give them discernment of justice and mercy with regard to human failings, they are indexically true of the ultimate reality of form. If people’s signs of ultimacy give them increasing wholeness and personal integrity, they are indexically true of the ultimate reality of having components in their life with respect to which they should comport themselves appropriately. If people’s signs of ultimacy lead them to engage others with care and respect, including nature and institutions as well as other people among the others, then they are indexically true with respect to the ultimate reality of having existential location in a field with others. If people’s signs of ultimacy lead them to achieve the best value-identity they can and to accept that achievement as what they really are, those signs are indexically true of the ultimate reality of having value-identity.

A thousand qualifications need to be added to what has just been said. Every time the signs are said to be indexically true, the statement should be amended to say they are true to a certain extent, in some respects but not others, and so forth.

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<sup>15</sup> See Edwards (1989).

Those limitations should be tied to the particulars of the ways the signs are used and the intentionality behind them.

But enough has been said to indicate how it is possible to use models of ultimate reality, such as personhood, consciousness, and emergence, to engage the ultimate reality of the ontological act of creating the world in ways that might be indexically true. By implication, enough has been said to indicate when those very same symbols are false in their engagements of ultimacy, namely when they reinforce injustice, an arrogant sense of self, bigotry towards others, despair and ontological ingratitude.

The philosophical theology that advocates judging the truth of signs in symbolic engagements of ultimacy by their fruits needs to stay in close touch with the metaphysics that shows that ultimate reality is the ontological creative act and that this cannot be modeled because it is not wholly determinate. In practice this means constant vigilance against any serious claim that the models such as personhood, consciousness, and emergence might be iconically or literally true. First naiveté in cultural religion is dangerous and second naiveté is difficult to attain. The skepticism that rejects the first without attempting the second is simply a withdrawal from attempts to engage the ultimate matters of life. The other kind of skepticism that negotiates between first and second naiveté is where most reflective people are on ultimate matters. In this day, when so many people are not simply located within any one rich religious tradition but instead are moving through several with ambivalence for all, the simple pragmatic tests mentioned above might be too vague to be helpful. In the short run, at least, most reflective people are more like individuals seeking personal spiritual discernment than like congregants finding meaning in common rituals. This is all the more reason to pay attention to the metaphysical arguments about ultimate reality, arguments that build in the denial that ultimate reality can be modeled with anything determinate, such as a person, consciousness, or emergence.

This essay has taken three very different approaches to the question of modeling ultimate reality. The first section has examined three very common models, that of the person, resulting in some form or other of theism, that of consciousness, resulting in some ontology of mind and its purification, and emergence, resulting in an ontology of change with both continuity and novelty. These models provide experientially intimate ways of referring to ultimate reality. And yet ultimate reality cannot be captured by a model that supposes that its object is isomorphic with the model. So the traditions associated with personification, consciousness, and emergence also include transcending impulses that say that the ultimate is "beyond" anything registered in the respective models.

The second section has directly argued for the claim that ultimate reality is an ontological creative act and therefore cannot be modeled. This argument is highly metaphysical (and therefore unpopular in the current intellectual climate), but it shows how ultimacy can be defined in terms of the most abstract of all notions, determinateness. That definition of ultimacy is ontological, in accounting for the possibility of determinateness, and cosmological, in accounting for the ultimate

conditions of all determinate things. However unpopular such metaphysical arguments are, they must be dealt with by anyone who would like to say that ultimate reality can be modeled in isomorphic ways.

The third section shifted gears to reflect on the semiotic theory according to which models and other signs might refer to ultimacy. It claims that people engage ultimate realities by means of interpretations with signs, which can refer iconically and indexically, among other ways. Models aim to refer iconically, but they cannot in the case of ultimate reality because of the arguments of the section “[The Ontological Creative Act](#)”. Yet they can refer indexically if there are means for determining whether they carry over what is important in ultimate reality into the experience of the interpreters. Some religiously common and powerful tests for carryover were discussed, albeit briefly.

These three approaches triangulate in on an hypothesis about modeling ultimate reality.

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