FOLLOWING A TRAJECTORY: ON "TRACING A TRAJECTORY" AND "EXPLAINING AND VALUING," BY JAMES M. GUSTAFSON

by Melvin Konner

Abstract. The roots of religious faith—and the provenance of ethical thought—may be sought in the human sciences, the physical sciences, literature, religious traditions, and deep human intuitions. Gustafson's religious stance and the author's, while different on their face, in common reflect a mingling—and tangling—of skepticism, understanding, and transcendence. Let all of us hope and believe what we can.

Keywords: epistemology; ethics; James M. Gustafson; *sensus divinitatus*; transcendence.

My qualifications for commenting on James Gustafson's work are questionable. Certainly I know little of the great theological controversies he addresses, and I fear I may offend without meaning to. But perhaps if I restrict my remarks to the interface between his work and some aspects of the sciences, I will be less likely to go astray. In addition to the target articles, I have read major portions of Gustafson's *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (1981-84), as well as a number of other articles and addresses. Perhaps most important, I have been privileged to have him as a midlife mentor. Since his arrival at Emory I have participated in a full-semester faculty seminar led by him, reawakening a long-dormant youthful interest in philosophy. I have read, at his urging, Reinhold Niebuhr's *Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941-43) and H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self* (1963), among other works, and have had many private conversations with him on various aspects of philosophy, religion, ethics, and science. My own prior trajectory included an Orthodox Jewish childhood and adolescence; a so-far permanent loss of faith at seventeen; a pursuit of scientific questions that seem transparently to continue the general

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search I began in childhood; and a reawakening, not of faith, but of some of the forms of the religion of my childhood, initially occasioned by the birth of the first of my three children. I thus exemplify the odd but widespread phenomenon of a person passing on to his children a faith he claims not to hold.

Gustafson describes, in "Tracing a Trajectory," to the extent that I can understand it, what seems to me a theocentric epistemology. It describes different, but in some sense reverential, ways of understanding the world. Some use the lens of religion, attempting to ignore science or to demote it to a status of epistemological vulgarity. Others do the converse. Of those who respect both these ways of knowing, some keep them on very separate and parallel tracks. The hallmark of James Gustafson's life and work has been not merely to posit a "porous membrane" between religion and science, but to discover and invent a particular way for that porous membrane to function. His interpretation of its function allows religion to respond to the growth of scientific knowledge.

Religion has always done so. Those who claim that it shouldn't would seem to bear a heavy burden of explanation for religion's responses to science in the past. As Professor Gustafson points out, Thomas Aquinas and others in the medieval Catholic church demanded a certain consistency between their theology and the worldview of Aristotle, a philosopher-scientist for whom the Judaic tradition was alien and unimportant and the Christian tradition as yet unknown. Maimonides gave Jewish theology a similarly "porous" involvement with Aristotle. When Galileo began to insist that the Ptolemaic model of the solar system should be replaced with the Copernican, the Church found this an unacceptable assault on its theology. Yet subsequent Church theology finds it perfectly acceptable, and Galileo has recently been exonerated of doctrinal heresy.

Charles Darwin appeared to present a more difficult challenge, and some theologies continue to reject his contributions. But most Protestant denominations and two of the three main branches of Judaism have become comfortable, doctrinally, with a concept of God creating the world continuously, for a period that now stretches to fifteen billion years. Even some Orthodox Jews and others who take the Bible as revelation have decided that the first chapter of Genesis is not incompatible with physical and biological evolution. They offer a different hermeneutic—some would say a more profoundly respectful one—for Biblical exegesis, allowing interpretation, if not the text itself, to be "porous" to evolutionary science. Some religious thinkers even consider it patronizing to imagine that God could not create the world through the laws of evolution, but had to do it in a manner analogous to the work of human arts and crafts.

It may be useful here to introduce what I will call Einstein's conundrum: *The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.* Einstein toyed with the word *God,* saying that he was trying to read God's mind, and that "God does not play dice"—his famous one-line summary of his opposition to quantum theory. But he was aloof from, and in some of his writings contemptuous of, religion. To one kind of religious person there is no conundrum: the universe is *not* comprehensible to us, only to God; hence the "edge" of the universe, the Heisenberg indeterminacy principle, and other limits of knowledge.

To another, the conundrum is readily solved: God creates the world in a marvelous, intricate, continuously emergent way and places us here to, among other tasks, figure out what God has been and is doing. On this view, the universe is comprehensible because God designed us so that we could, albeit only through great struggle, finally come to understand it. Einstein again, in another verbally playful mood: "Rafiniert ist der Herrgott, aber boshaft ist er nicht." God is subtle, but not malicious. Understanding is possible because God wants us to understand. On this view science, far from developing in opposition to religion, is itself a religious activity, a devotional carrying out of an implicit command of God. If I read him properly, James Gustafson's view is close to this one—somewhere between that of Einstein, whose "God" is merely a metaphor, and that of a conventionally religious scientist whose God is personified and real. Wherever he may be on this continuum, Gustafson sees science as a vital method for the disclosure of truth.

A third approach to the conundrum might be called the fair-minded scientist's resolution. It is similar to the first in that it recognizes that scientific understanding simply stops at certain boundaries. While some scientists may try to rule out of court such questions as "What happened before the big bang?" and "Are there other universes?" the fair-minded scientist will concede that people have a right to such questions, even though it may be inherently impossible for science to answer them. Do they also have a right to nonscientific answers? Bertrand Russell and other analytic philosophers have challenged that right, claiming that it is best not to believe something for which there is no evidence. I personally accept this claim, but I understand that it is an epistemological value judgment and that others may judge differently. I subscribe to the sentiment that Darwin, in another era, expressed in a private letter: "Let each man hope and believe what he can."

This brings us to a central concern of Gustafson's: the widespread human capacity to hope and to believe. In "Tracing a Trajectory" he summarizes part of the message of his ethocentric ethics, something "like a theory of religion." This theory entails "various 'senses' that are part of human experiences, at least generally if not universally: a sense of dependence, of gratitude, of obligation, of remorse or repentance, and of possibilities." He goes on to cite "a kind of *sensus divinitatis* one finds in explicitly secular persons," and even to state that "the fact that I am a Christian and Protestant is as much a matter of the accident of my birth as it is a matter of profound conviction" (Gustafson 1995b, 182–83). In *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Gustafson makes clear that he sees a basic human sense of piety serving as the foundation for all religious belief, and even for reverential varieties of nonbelief.

Now we are squarely in the realm of the human sciences. Are Gustafson's senses, taken one at a time, part of human experience universally, generally, or less than generally? How do they interact with other universal or variable features of human nature? How do various religious communities and traditions build upon these senses to arrive at moral codes and theological texts? In what ways are the courses they follow parallel or divergent? To what extent do they succeed in shaping human thought and action, for good or ill? And how do they do it? Through their impact on the mind of the developing child? Through ceremony, the mobilization of mass emotion, the creation of texts, music, and plastic arts that speak to human longings? Through worldly power?

The answers to these questions are all attainable through the methods of psychology, anthropology, and other human sciences. While they may be technically difficult, and some may involve processes that are in a formal sense chaotic, emergent, or complex, they are logically and perhaps empirically solvable, unlike the above-mentioned unsolvable problems of modern physics. But how will theologians and philosophers use the answers?

I suspect that such research would confirm Gustafson's view that the senses he describes are very general, and also his view that religious and theological particularities are largely incidental. This would strengthen the claims of ecumenism, surely a positive force in a precariously divided world. But as for the central questions of faith, I suspect that this kind of research will have little effect. Those with faith will see the generality of Gustafson's senses as evidence for a divine motive in human affairs; those without it will see it as evidence for processes that explain such beliefs away, and will echo the contention of traditional theologians that Gustafson has "not successfully shown why 'Nature' is not a sufficient ultimate reference to [his] work, rather than 'God'." (Gustafson 1995b, 188).

But what of the role of science in ethical reasoning? Here in some sense we pass from Gustafson's theory to his method, and the result is, I think, decisive. He reports on his early experience of ethics applied in a general way to policy questions, saying that the results were sometimes platitudinous. "But when one examined more detailed research about very particular proposals . . . the issues became denser and more finely grained" (Gustafson 1995b, 184). He quotes approvingly the statement of Max Millikan that "the purpose of social science research should be to deepen, broaden, and extend the policy-maker's capacity for judgment—not to provide . . . answers." He goes on to say, "I came to a similar conclusion regarding ethical arguments" (Gustafson 1995b, 184-85).

But surely, the answer must be susceptible to being affected by the "denser and more finely grained" knowledge, or else why spend time and effort detailing it? Some ethical positions appear to be arrived at through errors of fact about, say, the mechanics of gene therapy, or the consequences of a flat-line electroencephalogram. Knowledge of the facts should change the argument and, in some cases, the conclusion. In the faculty seminar I participated in with Professor Gustafson, a philosopher used to refer contemptuously to "data"—pronounced with two short *a*'s—particularly in reference to my book *The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit* (1982). When I asked what philosophers had that was better than "data," she replied simply, "Argument." So I consulted her beloved Aristotle, and discovered that his *Nichomachean Ethics* was rife with the contemptible "data" from start to finish (including much historically questionable and even fictional data). As Aristotle understood, without data—which is, after all, just a fancy way of saying "experience"—there can be no argument, at least not about ethics.

I turn now to "Explaining and Valuing: An Exchange between Theology and the Human Sciences," which focuses in part on my above-mentioned book. Honored though I am, I have to take issue with Professor Gustafson's juxtaposition of my book with a work of such importance as *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, by a figure of such stature as Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr's book is one of the most widely read works of Christian theology in our century, by a mature thinker at the top of his intellectual form, charting a new course for theology based on most of a lifetime of work and thought. *The Tangled Wing* is an attempt by a young man, one whose energy now dazzles even me, to make scientific and human sense of rapidly growing new bodies of knowledge relevant to behavior and its biological causes.

Nevertheless, I appreciate the logic of the comparison, unequal as it is, and I will try to comment briefly on Professor Gustafson's graceful exposition of it.

Again we are in the realm of theocentric epistemology. Gustafson treats both works as ways of knowing about the human, ways of answering the question posed by Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book *Who Is Man?* (1965). Niebuhr's approach is of course explicitly theocentric; he strives to grasp the human situation from within Christian tradition, to give a "top-down" account of our confused, conflictful nature from a platform of strong faith. But Gustafson implies that *The Tangled Wing* is theocentric too, because it appears to be motivated by a *sensus divinitatis*, and because it tends (although not, he judges, tendentiously) toward a vision of something special, something higher about the human. This he says despite the book's "bottom-up" approach, beginning as it does on a platform virtually *in* the swamp of naturalism, employing, against Heschel's advice, "categories developed in the investigation of lower forms of life" (Heschel 1965, 3). Gustafson sees its young author as attempting throughout to assimilate scientific facts to a purpose which, even though it is God-less and explicitly antimetaphysical, can still be fairly seen as deeply religious.

It seems to me that Gustafson is right in this. Although, perhaps out of deference to what might be called antireligious sensitivities, he does not make it explicit in his lecture, I know that he applies the term "religious" to the middle-aged man the young author has become. I have no objection to this usage, provide we both understand that it does not mean faith in God, belief in an afterlife, or any other conventional metaphysical stance. *The Tangled Wing*'s "sense" of wonder surely has much in common with the notion of piety defined in Gustafson's work, and some rabbis who have read it claim that it could not have been written as it was without the provenance of a deeply religious, indeed (for them) deeply Jewish, childhood. Be that as it may, few who knew the bare biographical facts would fail to see the book as a working through of certain questions left in the debris of the author's much earlier loss of faith.

But Gustafson is quite right, I think, to notice a sleight of hand in the book's peroration. The question remains, how to get from the scientific facts in the naturalistic swamp to the lofty moral purpose toward which the conclusion appears to strive? It would probably take at least a short book to build even a passable footbridge across this logical gap, but I will attempt to outline a relevant argument here.

Professor Gustafson attempts to give special attention to the book's use of literary sources. "Disclosure of significance—a kind of truthfulness," he writes, "comes from the creative writer whose reflections are not backed by hard data. . . . For Konner, I believe, the literary sources provide insight into meanings that cannot be reduced to the scientific materials which provide the main basis of his argument. But they also do not stand over against that material; they disclose wider significance of it" (Gustafson 1995a, 174). Here I would only take exception to the notion that the literary sources do not function as data.

They are not tabulated or statistically analyzed of course, but, like the literary sources in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, they are adduced as part of the evidence of human experience, as recorded by some of the keenest observers ever to have watched the passing human scene. They also serve as the evidence gleaned from self-observation by some of those same, often acutely self-aware, observers. Freud, Jung, and other scientists of the human paid special attention to literary sources, and in recent years a small body of literary criticism has emerged, motivated and informed by sociobiology—and presumably informing the latter in turn. So I think of the literary sources as part of the maze of the human sciences, although they may have greater value outside of it, and may at times function as lamps beside the way.

And what of the literature of religion? Gustafson writes that if literature in general helps to disclose significance, "one can argue that symbols and concepts from religious traditions can (not necessarily do) also disclose significance or meaning." *The Tangled Wing* explicitly acknowledges this possibility in at least two ways. First, the chapter titles of the crucial middle section—"Rage," "Fear," "Joy," "Lust," "Love," "Grief," and "Gluttony"—overlap curiously with the seven deadly sins, and with some other central moral concepts in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Second, explicitly religious sources, such as the Psalms, the Talmud, and Dante, are among the literary works cited. Pivotally, Psalm 10 is quoted at the end of the section "Change," and the words "that man who is of the dust of the earth may be terrible no more"—followed by "Amen. Selah"—lead into the book's quasi-religious peroration. Here the distinction between literary and religious insight blurs.

At the risk of stretching the point, the psalmist's clause might be seen as subsuming the book in a few words. "Man who is of the dust of the earth" might be seen as summarizing the book's view of, and evidence for, humankind's naturalistic provenance. It appears to imply that something made of dust has no right to be terrible, but also that comprehending this earthly provenance may help us to "be terrible no more." Thus the apparent hope and faith of the last chapter, and the remarkable convergence with Niebuhr's vision.

But how is this being terrible to end? Here, as Gustafson realizes, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and *The Tangled Wing* part company. Despite his explicit rejection of classical eschatology, Niebuhr has, through faith, confidence in transcendence. The author of *The Tangled Wing*, even today, rejects such confidence on grounds close to those Russell cited in objecting to metaphysics: that we shouldn't believe in even mundane transcendence until we see (or bring about) evidence that it will happen. With today's world news of overpopulation, rising economic expectations, nuclear proliferation, and increasingly general warfare of a surprisingly tribal kind, there is little such evidence. Nor do I claim a nineteenth-century sort of confidence in progress, in the potential for science alone to solve all our ills. In this sense, despite my distaste for the term, both *The Tangled Wing* and I are postmodern.

What I do claim is that transcendence, if we attain it, will have been pragmatic in execution, regardless of how inspired its motivation. That pragmatism requires a thorough and growing knowledge of the sciences, and a decisive rejection of the antiscience tenor of much of what passes for "postmodernist" thought, especially in the human sciences. James Gustafson has pioneered in a path that embraces science fully without deeming it alone an adequate path to transcendence. Necessary, yes; sufficient, never.

How then might we build a moral universe out of our disappointing human dust? With the human creature described in *The Tangled Wing* as a starting point, we may imagine a very simple society some tens of thousands of years in the past. Within each member there will be some balance between egotism and altruism, aggression and cooperation, aloofness and kindness, piety and cynicism, excess and remorse. Each of these motives (and more besides) may be understood first and foremost with reference to the makeup and function of the "dust"—nature's swampy provenance of human brain and behavior. But the balance differs for each individual. Over time, the creatures in question recognize the potential for imbalance in themselves and in others; in an ongoing collective conversation they find that the presence of others strengthens the side of them that is more cooperative, perhaps even more kind. Eventually this conversation results in common agreements; in "shoulds" and "should nots"; in moral judgments and codes.

Unfortunately for simplicity, dynamics occur among our creatures that change the significance of the codes. Primitive groups bump up against each other and each views the other as outside the covenant.

Dehumanization of the other ensues, and the dark side of the human dust becomes more manifest. Groups grow and coalesce; invidious distinction, even institutionalized exploitation, obtains within groups. Technology accords our creatures increasingly terrible power. Other species are extinguished. Gradually the planet is filled up with these engines of human dust. "Be fruitful and multiply," once a divine commandment, becomes almost a recipe for destruction.

So where is the hope in all this? It lies, I think, in an increasing understanding of human nature, and of the ways in which that part of nature has tried to transform itself in society and culture. It lies in a pragmatism about the analysis of the human that matches our pragmatism regarding technology and the environment. It lies in skepticism toward any philosophy that assures us of transcendence. It is not an assurance, just a hope.

The first time I went to Israel, in my late thirties—I am now forty-eight—I stood swaying one night, prayer book in hand, at the Wailing Wall. Behind me the tour leader, a very secular sociologist with a broad sense of humor, said to another tour member: "There's Mel Konner again, praying to the God that he doesn't believe in." I saw it not as prayer but as a kind of *haute* nostalgia, a recovery of the lost forms of childhood; but it was a very deeply felt kind of nostalgia, informed by an adult's sense of history and philosophy. I go to the synagogue occasionally; my favorite part is when the Torah scroll is removed from the ark. For me it is a symbol of all of Jewish history and belief, learning and achievement. But as I sing its praises in a language I barely know, I am aware of being among people who see it quite differently, who believe it to be the literal word of God.

What does it mean when our piety and nostalgia lead us to say and do things that others interpret as faith? James Gustafson is aware of this problem—it is keener for those of doubtful faith who must pray in their own native language—but I don't know that he has solved it. I can sympathize with those who almost withheld his ordination, but of course I am very glad that in the end they did not. Religious communities, I suspect, are strong enough to tolerate many kinds of piety.

Perhaps there will one day be a widespread religion that doesn't insist on declarations of faith—something like the Unitarian-Universalist Church of today, or like certain kinds of Buddhism. But for now most of us will continue to pass on at least some of the ancient, traditional forms. In the Friday night home service, there is a song in English my children sing, that begins, "We give thanks to God for bread." For a time I tried to get them to sing instead, "We are thankful for our bread," a presumably Gustafsonian expression of piety without an insistence on a personified God. But they didn't buy it, and I didn't press the point. I obviously must think that the beliefs I once had, the texts and rituals that evoke my nostalgia, would be good for them to have as well.

And of course I would like them to have, at a minimum, enough of a sense of piety to want to understand the world and make it better. According to Jewish tradition, God created an imperfect, always-emergent world, and part of our purpose here is to perfect or repair or heal it—Tikkun Olam is the Hebrew phrase. I feel myself to be deeply engaged in that purpose, and I would not want my children to grow up aloof from it. Tikkun Olam is perhaps my version of transcendence: Science, together with its emergent human meaning, as one among many forms of piety. I suspect that it is close to James Gustafson's as well. And perhaps he would agree that while we are about it we could do worse than paraphrase and follow Charles Darwin's advice—almost a prayer, perhaps: Let all of us hope and believe what we can.

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