Gordon Kaufman's Legacy to Theology and Science

with Myriam Renaud, "Gordon Kaufman's Humanizing Concept of God"; Jerome P. Soneson, "The Legacy of Gordon Kaufman: Theological Method and Its Pragmatic Norms"; J. Patrick Woolley, "Kaufman's Debt to Kant: The Epistemological Importance of the 'Structure of the World which Environs Us'"; Thomas A. James, "Gordon Kaufman, Flat Ontology, and Value: Toward an Ecological Theocentrism"; and Karl E. Peters, "A Christian Naturalism: Developing the Thinking of Gordon Kaufman."

GORDON KAUFMAN, FLAT ONTOLOGY, AND VALUE: TOWARD AN ECOLOGICAL THEOCENTRISM

by Thomas A. James

Abstract. Gordon Kaufman's theology is characterized by a heightened tension between transcendence, expressed as theocentrism, and immanence, expressed as theological naturalism. The interplay between these two motifs leads to a contradiction between an austerity created by the conjunction of naturalism and theocentrism, on the one hand, and a humanized cosmos which is characterized by a pivotal and unique role for human moral agency, on the other. This paper tracks some of the influences behind Kaufman's program (primarily H. Richard Niebuhr and Henry Nelson Wieman) and then utilizes the flat ontology that emerges in the work of philosopher/sociologist of science Bruno Latour and of environmental philosopher Timothy Morton in order to point toward a reconstructed immanent theocentrism that no longer stakes meaning and value on the unique place of the human. Such a theology remains theocentric, but is now fully ecological.

Keywords: dark ecology; ecological theology; flat ontology; immanence; Gordon Kaufman; Bruno Latour; Timothy Morton; naturalism; H. Richard Niebuhr; theocentrism; transcendence; Henry Nelson Wieman

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Gordon Kaufman's legacy in theology, and especially in conversations about the relations between theology and science, is formidable and yet also idiosyncratic. He has lots of fans, but few followers. Perhaps that is because readers easily recognize both a profound courage to face difficult

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questions in Kaufman and also a tension if not outright contradiction in his work that he was not able to overcome. Kaufman was pressing toward a theology that was deeply responsive to the naturalistic picture of the world being worked out in the natural sciences. He was also profoundly committed to the idea of God as the ultimate point of reference in terms of which everything else must finally be understood and in relation to which every value must be assessed. In the end, he wanted a radically immanent God belief which does not demand that we sacrifice naturalism but which nevertheless remains a transcendent point of reference which can call us to account. What we find in Kaufman, in other words, is a more recent edition of the modern theological preoccupation with somehow relating immanence and transcendence.

But this does not capture the entirety of the tension in Kaufman. After all, there is a rather easy and elegant solution. We could say simply that the processes of nature are what we mean by God. They are transcendent in the sense that they are, in the end, beyond our manipulation, and we may hold that there is no larger context for human life in which we might situate ourselves. This, of course, would mean a radical dehumanizing of reality. Human moral values would no longer have any significant place in our picture of the world, except as something we madly fight to preserve in face of overwhelming cosmic indifference if not hostility. But Kaufman cannot (and, wisely, does not) pursue that path. The deepest tension in his work, in fact, is between the moral values to which he was so profoundly committed and the naturalistic account of the world to which he was equally indebted. The problem which he never fully resolved, then, was that of successfully relating the transcendent notes of theocentrism with the naturalistic picture of the world and its stress on immanence without doubling or tripling down on a kind of rigid metaphysical austerity which would undermine human motivation and also, as we will see, raise questions about why one would engage in theological reflection and construction at all.

The constructive point of this paper is to suggest a path toward reconstructing Kaufman's immanent theocentrism in part by bringing in some other conversation partners. Primarily I will draw attention to the "flat ontology" that emerges from Bruno Latour's approach to science studies, arguing that it fits nicely with some of Kaufman's key emphases and influences, and more importantly that it offers several key conceptual resources for moving Kaufman's theology beyond its impasse. Latour's flat ontology, I will argue, provides a way to account for multiple instances of transcendence within immanence, and for real footholds for value in the world that are nevertheless in tension with human interests in a variety of ways. In the end, I believe, we will have a pathway toward an ecological theocentrism that is true to Kaufman's methodological principles and a faithful extension of his substantive commitments.

The argument calls for making and defending two kinds of points. The first is an account of what drove the collision between immanence and transcendence in Kaufman. So first, I will provide something of a history of Kaufman's project (truncated and very selective, of course). Second, I will need to show how the impasse we find in it can be overcome by bringing in flat ontology. That will be the topic of the second, and concluding, section of the article.

Assembling Immanent Theocentrism

Gordon Kaufman's theological output can be divided roughly into two phases, the transition between them being marked by his 1993 magnum opus, *In Face of Mystery* (Kaufman 1993). During the first part of his theological career, Kaufman was working out the theological program he inherited from his doctoral mentor, H. Richard Niebuhr. In that project, a strong emphasis on divine transcendence combined with and supported a commitment to doing theology in a historicist mode: a transcendent God underscored the flux and transience of historical life. With *In Face of Mystery*, for reasons that we will detail below, his program underwent radical changes, exchanging an emphasis upon transcendence for a radically immanent God. Methodologically, the transition embodied a final break with the revelation-centered approach of his mentor toward one of "imaginative construction" which entailed for Kaufman a rigorous engagement with the natural sciences until the end of his life.

But that does mean that Kaufman left Niebuhr behind. Indeed, his mature theology, roughly from *In Face of Mystery* through his last book, *Jesus and Creativity* (Kaufman 2006), had roots in a variety of sources. Included in these are Niebuhr's theocentrism, whose influence continues to be felt in Kaufman's later work, and also the theological naturalism of Henry Nelson Wieman. Both of these predecessor programs, importantly, sought to be responsive both to the breadth of human experience (as it was available to them), and more specifically to contemporary scientific research. Both Niebuhr and Wieman had a lot to say about the interactions between theology and science, even though, substantively, their programs resulted in quite different pictures of God's relation to the world.

A distinctive if not unique theological program resulted from this dual influence. With Wieman, Kaufman rejected the transcendent God of classical theology, but, with Niebuhr, he embraced and even sought to advance its austerity about the subordinate place of humanity in relation to ultimate reality. In Kaufman, God is the center of being and value, but is not construed in anthropomorphic terms such as personhood and is not primarily oriented toward what is good for human beings. In, other words, Kaufman's appropriation of Niebuhr and Wieman is both nonanthropomorphic and nonanthropocentric. Rather than the all-too-human God of

biblical religion, we have a God which is the "serendipitous creativity" that pervades the universe—a creativity which gives rise to countless "trajectories," some of them beneficial to humans, some of them hostile, and of course most of them quite indifferent (Kaufman 2004, 67). While it is "humanizing" to be devoted to creativity insofar as such devotion holds out hope for possibilities beyond what is presently the case for humans and other creatures, it is also profoundly "relativizing," since creativity promises us only possibilities within deep, intractable limits.

After his death, a question that arises is whether this program has a future, or whether it is an idiosyncratic admixture which dies with him. There are reasons for believing the latter. As a purely intramural theological question, why combine these two trajectories? Austere theocentrism, when combined with a nonanthropomorphic process perspective, seems to double down on theological grimness. H. Richard Niebuhr's theology was insistent that God, and not humans, is the center of being and value, but his God was a personal God with whom humans are in redemptive relationship. Wieman's theology, and process theologies more generally, do not offer guarantees, but they do render a kind of devotion that is at least potentially more forthrightly oriented toward the human good. But theocentrism undermines orientation toward the human good, and understanding God as "creativity" (following Wieman) rather than as a personal creator undermines confidence in a personal, redemptive relationship between God and ourselves. And so, Kaufman's combination of the two perspectives appears to forbid any of the available mitigating factors to the austerity of each.

And beyond intramural questions, we have to ask about whether Kaufman's position advances the conversation between theology and the sciences in a viable way. If we double down on austerity, why not simply go with a scientific naturalism? What difference does theology make in the conversation? How different, for example, is Kaufman's theology from the conclusion of Weinberg's *The First Three Minutes*? Aside from tonal differences, aren't both in the same position as statements about the place of human beings in the universe? So, there are a number of reasons for believing that Kaufman's theology, admirable though it may be in many ways, is a dead end.

Of course, here I am arguing that it is not. I believe that both the general project of combining the austerities of theocentrism and modern science and the more perhaps idiosyncratic combination of Niebuhr and Wieman in Kaufman are theologically viable. In order to make this case, I will need to strike out in a more constructive direction. First, however, an account needs to be given as to what is at stake in the project. How did Kaufman come to want to combine the austerities of theocentrism and a kind of naturalism?

One can hardly read Kaufman's first attempt at a systematic reinterpretation of Christian faith, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*

(Kaufman 1968), without being struck by its deep indebtedness to a broadly neo-orthodox framework, and especially to what Martin Cook has described as H. Richard Niebuhr's "open confessionalism" (Cook 1990, 87–108). There is, to start, a strong doctrine of revelation, and with it a central place for divine transcendence. It is the latter, in particular, which provides the leverage for some of Kaufman's most creative and decisive moves in this early work. Chief among these is his argument that the cosmos must be understood "historically" rather than "structurally." Briefly, it is "historical" only if it is the field of an ultimate kind of action—the sort enacted by a transcendent agent. If we concede that the universe is more "structure" than "history," he urged, then we fall into a view in which events either do not happen or do not ultimately matter (Kaufman 1968, 255–65). Christian faith, he argued, cannot accept this kind of account because it is committed to an idea of God who acts in history to bring about redemptive change. We may note here an important expression of Kaufman's open confessionalism: one in which interpretive insights are drawn from religious convictions which are held from the outset, but which risks disconfirmation or at least radical reformulation in light of empirical knowledge.

A notable example of this open confessionalism can be seen in Kaufman's *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*. While writing on the doctrine of creation, Kaufman urges that theology has a stake in the then current debate between Hoyle's steady state view of the universe and emerging big bang models. He argues that, should Hoyle be right, then history and the redemptive change it makes possible is little more than a perturbation within an eternally unchanging cosmos. Christian theology, he believed, is committed to the more historical cosmology suggested by the big bang theory (Kaufman 1981, 209ff.). The reason for Kaufman's partisanship is entirely theological, and yet by inserting a theological preference into the matter he openly puts it at risk of empirical disconfirmation.

At about the same time, in the essays that eventually comprised *God the Problem*, Kaufman drew a sharp distinction between perspectives that he called "religious" and those that he named "theistic." Again, we have in this distinction reverberations from a Niebuhrian legacy. The "theistic" view differs from the "religious" primarily in its notion of a transcendent center of value which exerts leverage on the order of the world both ontologically and normatively. A "religious" standpoint views everything as bearer of the divine presence. The infinite saturates and shines through the finite (Kaufman 1972, 209–21). Thus, historical events add or subtract nothing from the sense of sacredness that is available in our experience of the world. A "theistic" orientation, on the other hand, stakes everything on certain luminous events which change the way we view everything else. It is not that everything bears the presence of God, but that we may see everything as in relation to God once we are struck by the luminous event—which,

Kaufman argues, is the meaning of particular divine actions (Kaufman 1972, 135–40).

Finally, in his 1993 magnum opus, *In Face of Mystery*, the idea of a transcendent point of reference remains prominent. The functional logic of the idea of God, we are told early on in the argument, includes both "relativizing" and "humanizing" motifs (Kaufman 1993, 6ff., 301–21). The relativizing motif in particular highlights Kaufman's theocentrism: no finite object, nor even the universe itself, is the center of value. Belief in God means that finite values are relativized and any kind of absolutization of them is prohibited. This includes, of course, human values, and even the value of humanity itself. As Niebuhr once urged, God, the ultimate source and reference of all value, is the "last reality" (Niebuhr 1989, 65).

In some ways, though, by the time we get to *In Face of Mystery*, talk about the "relativizing" features of God-talk and about "theocentric" faith have become a bit jarring in relation to the some of the other themes that we find in his theology. That is because another tributary, if you will, has begun to assert itself on the shape of Kaufman's account of God and the world. To understand why this happens, I believe we have to go back to conversations that ensued following Kaufman's still-Niebuhrian account of God's relation to the world as it was given with such clarity in *God the Problem*. There, Kaufman had leveraged the theme of transcendence to account for the uniqueness of divine action vis-à-vis finite agencies: he argued that divine intentionality is transcendently "hidden" from view—and, just as one cannot necessarily tell what another person is doing until the act has been completed, the purpose of God's action in relation to the world cannot be discerned (and thus judged) until it is complete at the end of the world's history (Kaufman 1972, 137). The challenge that was raised against this rather elegant solution to the problem of divine agency by critics was that it was subtly but unmistakably Cartesian (McLain 1969). It seemed to suggest a transcendence that is not only distinct from but in fact independent of events in the world. As in Descartes' theory of mind, there may be a parallel between internal intentions and external causes and effects, but there does not seem to be any interaction between them.

One way to put the problem is to say that Kaufman appeared to have taken refuge from an "open confessionalism" in a decidedly closed one. Since we cannot know divine intention while we are still in history, claims about divine action would seem to have to be taken simply on faith, without being made vulnerable to empirical disconfirmation or revision. Also, and worse, the transcendence suggested in this picture offers no empirical and experiential mediation: the transcendent purposes of God are never empirically discernible.

By the time we get to *In Face of Mystery*, therefore, another kind of solution to the problem of divine action is required. Kaufman is still a Niebuhrian, in a sense—there still must be some way to talk about a

transcendent center of value leveraging influence upon the world both ontologically and normatively. That is why he is still dealing with the problem of divine activity. But what happens is that Kaufman draws upon a conception developed in the theological naturalism of Henry Nelson Wieman in order to satisfy these requirements. Wieman's contribution was the distinction between the "created good" and the "creative good" (Wieman 1995, 54). This distinction, for Kaufman, provides the conceptual, normative space between God and world required by the "relativizing" theme of the theocentric orientation inherited from Niebuhr. But this theocentric naturalism does not have the same problems as theories of divine action run up against. God is not an agent, but is activity itself. God is not creator, but creativity itself. There is no more hidden Cartesian subject behind cosmic history. Rather, there is the rich process of history itself.

This reformulation of theocentrism both allows for a mediation of transcendence, thereby easing though not eliminating his earlier distinction between "religious" and "theistic" perspectives, and restores Kaufman's method to a genuinely "open confessionalism." God's "purposes" are no longer hidden and thus protected from empirical scrutiny. In fact, if God is simply creativity itself, there are no "purposes" at all, at least in the conventional sense. This excision of purpose is a tribute to the openness of Kaufman's confessionalism reasserting itself. Instead of purpose, there are "trajectories" that may be discerned and identified retrospectively by human agents seeking orientation in the world. This perspective is "confessional" in so far as such perceptions of divine creativity are always framed by prior commitments to a logic of God-talk which is embedded in a particular historical tradition (for Kaufman, the "relativizing" and "humanizing" functions of God-talk which is a language game played in Western cultures). It is "open," however, because the content of those perceptions has to be provided by a constructive use of human experience and/or observation—thus, claims about God and about divine activity are always subject to empirical scrutiny.

So, while this is an interesting mix of emphases—on the one hand, it is God-centered; on the other, it is nonsupernaturalist and empirically open—the mixture stands in a deeper tension with Kaufman's commitment to human moral values. Despite the problems, however, I argue that immanent theocentrism embodies an important combination because it provides an orientation in the world that both accepts the deep connections between human agents and their environments, as well as between God and the world, and offers critical leverage against various kinds of wish-fulfillment and projection. Again citing Niebuhr, God is the "last reality"; and, though liberation and human progress are supported by the ordering of the world, they are not guaranteed.

But, is there any reason to suppose that this mixture has a future beyond Kaufman's own version of it? Again, to answer that question in the

affirmative is to hold that there is a way to overcome the contradiction between austerity and humaneness without violating the strictures of immanent theocentrism. In the remainder of this article, I want to suggest the rough outlines of a version of immanent theocentrism which actually deepens both the immanent and the theocentric motifs of Kaufman's own and provides loci of value in the world.

Reconstructing Immanent Theocentrism

First, let us return to Niebuhr. A crucial piece of Kaufman's theology is the relation between humane values and what he once called the "structure of the world" (Kaufman 1975, 45–07). How does what one is committed to morally fit with the realities, with the possibilities and limitations, which characterize the pervasive order or ordering of nature and human community? The Niebuhrian framework Kaufman inherits suggests a theocentric orientation toward value: value is neither intrinsic nor instrumental, but relational (Niebuhr 1960, 100–13). In other words, value does not supervene upon objects or states of affairs, as in ethical naturalisms, but is grounded in relationships between objects or states of affairs and their relevant contexts.

How does this play out in Kaufman? As Kaufman's theology developed, there was a persistent tension between a kind of theological humanism, grounded in the unique possibilities of freedom characteristic of moral agency, and an austere naturalism and realism. I believe that the tension was not characteristic of Niebuhr because, as I noted above, his austerity was mitigated from the start by his conception of the ultimate point of reference as personal and hence moral. But Kaufman does not have that ready-made solution available to him. So, how are human values related to broader, cosmic contexts that appear to having nothing to do with human interests?

First-time readers of *In Face of Mystery* might have thought that they were coming upon a potential solution when they arrived at a chapter entitled "An Ecological Ethic" (Kaufman 1993, 193–209). Perhaps, value is still relational, as it was for Niebuhr, but the context of value is not personal but ecological. Perhaps value is a feature of the network of interlocking and interdependent interests? Unfortunately, however, the ethic (really a kind of meta-ethic) that is sketched in the chapter is "ecological" in a quite restricted sense. The term "ecological" there describes the feedback loops characteristic of moral agency, but it does not refer to other objects of concern or loci of value to which humane intentions are to be related. For Kaufman, following Kant, value is a product of agency.

We might suspect, then, that Kaufman has actually abandoned Niebuhr's relational account of value at this point. In Niebuhr, obligation is a matter of "responding" to one's context rather than "obeying" rational moral principles (deontology) or "making" outcomes that are beneficial to the

largest number (utilitarianism). Kaufman adopts the same language of "response" but the three "imperatives" that form the content of his "ecological" ethic are actually categorical rather than open and relational. The broadest action-guiding principle, for example, prescribes support and maintenance of the context that makes agency possible. This surely includes what we call environmental concerns, but these clearly are generated not by the wider context (i.e., the environment) but by a central imperative to respect and promote the capacity to act (Kaufman 1993, 202). Unlike Kant, Kaufman offers a robust account of the ways in which human agency is entangled in a broader network of relationships (hence the "ecological" aspect of Kaufman's account of value), but through *In Face of Mystery* he continues to hold that the substantive values that are to be conserved and advanced are values that are connected to (indeed, generated by) human capacities to act.

Again, for a true value relationism in the Niebuhrian tradition, value is intrinsic to neither agents nor states of affairs. In other words, it is produced neither by intentions nor by outcomes. Rather, value is a feature of relationships, and the ultimate source of value would be the ultimate contexts in and to which all *relata* are related. Kaufman's theocentrism acknowledges this in principle, but his nonsupernaturalism compels him to balk at a radically transcendent source of value and consequently to fall back on human moral agency as the source and final arbiter of value.

So, a step toward a more genuinely ecological view of God following a theocentric and nonsupernaturalist trajectory would be to press further toward a thoroughly relational account of value that is not grounded in human agency. And there is no reason why that should not be possible, given his emphasis upon God as the creativity that pervades the universe. Indeed, in his last two books, *In the Beginning . . . Creativity* and *Jesus and Creativity* (Kaufman 2004; 2006), Kaufman was beginning to acknowledge the need for doing so, though he never worked out a conceptuality for it.

How might we get beyond this impasse? I suggest that we can if we think of an ultimate context of value that is not transcendent, but wholly immanent and yet not collapsible into current states of affairs. As I mentioned, this is the intention behind Kaufman's move toward "creativity," but in his lifetime he was never able to clarify the relation between creativity and value. Since value tended to be identified with humaneness, and creativity was in most instances sublimely indifferent to the human, creativity tended to be separated from value, and value marginalized by creativity. This tension is at its highest pitch in Kaufman's last book, *Jesus and Creativity*, where the redemptive effects of Jesus' mission are part of a broader but still quite marginalized trajectory toward humaneness that is enjoyed only in a tiny corner of the universe (Kaufman 2006, 110).

I suggest that there are philosophical resources available today which draw on the natural sciences and which can help reconstruct Kaufman's

immanent theocentrism in a more consistent manner. A key resource is the wholly immanent value relationism advanced in Bruno Latour's flat ontology. The virtue of Latour's philosophy for Kaufman's project is that it locates value in the interaction of things and suggests an indeterminate and open context of value rather than one that is fixed and reified. Thus, there is no transcendent center of value which anchors all the rest, but there is a field of interactions which, *qua* indeterminate and open, transcends any particular configuration of values. So, in Latour, human values (for example) are relativized by a much larger network of value, but there is no singular transcendent being who enacts the relativizing. The network has no outside: creativity is wholly immanent.

Latour's philosophy developed as a form of what is called in the Anglo-American world "science studies," an often controversial program of research which studies the practice of scientific inquiry using broadly sociological approaches. Scholars in this field often have to defend themselves against the charge of undermining the objectivity of science: to critics, what they produce appears to be a form of social constructivism. Latour's defense against this charge actually takes the form of a full-blown realistic and relational ontology (Latour 1988, 153–238; 1993). In it, objects are not inert, but leverage influence on other objects and upon observers and others to which they are related. Latour coins the term "actant" to indicate the capacities of objects to exert influence. They are not (necessarily) actors, because being an actant requires neither intentions nor even subjective states.

Since objects (including physical ones) are actants, Latour is able to maintain a nonnaturalistic account of value (values do not supervene on states of affairs) without embracing nonrealism nor a reduction of values to human constructions. Value is constructed, but it is constructed in a network of actants not all of which are intentional or human. An interesting corollary of Latour's view is that there are not two separate realms of facts (a "structure of the world") and values, but rather there are potential "objects of concern" which exert influence on us, thus petitioning our conceptualities for a place within them. Thus, Latour's perspective is "ecological" in a dual sense: first, it locates value not in things or in a transcendent realm beyond them but in the interactions between them; second, the loci of value are not restricted to or even centered around human agents. Actants create value by the leverage they influence within our conceptualities—what Latour calls our "commonwealth" of "objects of concern" (Latour 1993, 142–45). Microbes, works of art, firearms, dirt, and beach balls all leverage influence, and thus value is a product of the potentially infinite interactions between a wide variety of objects.

Another interesting corollary is that the commonwealth of actants cannot be fixed or reified. There is no closed totality in Latour's ontology, which means that we do not have to choose between a naturalistic pantheism and

a transcendent deity as the final context of value. There is no such final context, only a potential infinity of local "trials of strength" among objects of concern. To translate this into the concerns of modern theology, we may say that in Latour's ontology there are multiple transcendences within a single, nontotalizable, open network of immanent being and value.

These concepts support the relational value theory of Niebuhr and deepen Kaufman's "biohistorical" conception of the human (Kaufman 1992)—the former by locating value in the push and pull between various kinds of objects, including humans, in a ceaseless, constantly renegotiated "trial of strength" (Latour 1988, 158–59); and the latter by further flattening out the ontology suggested by Kaufman. Not only is the human shot through with biological as well as historical factors, but the human agent is placed in the midst of a wide variety of nonhuman agencies including other mammals but also microbes, hammers, and paint. This broadens Kaufman's theocentrism and supports his motif of immanence, I suggest: the former because it further relativizes the human in relation to a broad array of things; the latter because the "network" character of Latour's vision does not depend on a transcendent center of value. Rather, the center is the network itself: it is distributed evenly across the endless array of connections and trials, and does not exist outside of them.

What, then, about God? Since it replaces a singular transcendence with multiple immanent instances of transcendence, and since it rules out "Nature" or some other totalizing concept as the final context of being and value, can a flat ontology of the sort that I am suggesting retain a viable role for God? For what it is worth, this is exactly the kind of question that motivated Kaufman's thinking, so we are at least on terrain he would have readily recognized.

Another version of flat ontology provides a metaphor which is consistent with Latour's philosophy and also with theocentric themes in Kaufman. Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" refuses boundaries between human beings and the natural environment. There is no pristine nature, and there are no independent human beings. Instead there is what he calls the "mesh," a directionless, ever-shifting network of relations in which we ineluctably participate. Nature is always already sullied by human influence, and humans are already implicated in a relationship of mutual, dynamic interdependence (Morton 2010, 59–68). Dark ecology is "dark" because there is nothing about this mesh of interrelations that guarantees the well-being of any of its participants. Relationality is not a bright virtue (and shame on us if we refuse it!), but simply a fact of life.

I suggest that we might appropriate Morton's language to designate God as the "mesh." God, so construed, does not, properly speaking, exist, since Morton's "mesh," like Latour's "commonwealth," is not a fixed totality. The mesh is an open concept, holding together by an act of imaginative construction that which is irreducibly plural and nontotalizable. God, in

this view, names the fact that transcendences abound within a nexus of mutual relation, but does not name a discrete entity. Kaufman, famously, also held that "God" does not name a specific being (Kaufman 2004, 53–56).

Elsewhere, I have argued that there is a way to hold to the reality of God while denying God the status of actuality (James 2012). Briefly, the argument (which also applies here) is that one may follow Gilles Deleuze and others in distinguishing between actuality and virtuality within a broader conception of the real. The virtual is the multitude of forces, powers, or potentials that are in play in actual states of affairs (Deleuze 1994, 208–09). God may be construed as this virtual, and the concept of God that results is both irreducibly plural and nonactual, but capable of being conceptually differentiated from "the world" and affirmed as real. God, when construed in this way, is eternally incomplete and open, not closed and actualized; *potentia purus*, not *actus purus*.

Such an immanent theocentrism shuns the thought of transcendent beings and yet it insists that there is an ontological and normative center of things which is not collapsible into states of affairs or even into the largest conceivable aggregate of them. All value, in the end, is connected to this virtual real, to this immanent center, or source, of value.

I believe that this appropriation of flat ontology in order to defend Kaufman's project of immanent theocentrism yields a perspective that is both theocentric and rigorously ecological—indeed, more consistently theocentric than Kaufman and much more forthrightly ecological. Like Kaufman, I mean "ecological" to refer to a cybernetic process of feedback agents and environmental factors. For Latour, this wouldn't be a feedback relationship between two different categories of beings, of course, but a series of feedback loops among actants. Unlike Kaufman, I mean to reject any limitation of such a process to human agency, but to locate it instead in the pervasive, chaotic, noisy activity which is expressed an endless variety of cosmic trajectories: those that we would, anthropocentrically, call either "good" or "evil." As Kaufman understood well, we have good reason to hope for the good and as well as to fear the evil.

A final corollary to such an ecological theocentrism is that it is not certain that God is good in some final sense, or that there is a final sense. It is only sure that God is the source of good, and that it makes sense to commit ourselves to the source, accepting that there will be losses while doing our best to mitigate them. Value is everywhere, not just within the realm of the human, but the constant "trials of strength" which generate value make it impossible to imagine some final harmony or even maximization of value which could be assessed. This result is in sync with Kaufman's own instincts, though it more consistently resolves the tension between humaneness and creativity toward affirmation of the latter. Humaneness is the result of a particular series of trials of strength, but God has other things going on.

Note

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