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Divine Power and Critical Religious Naturalism

Introduction

IN THE PREFACE TO HIS MONUMENTAL TWO-VOLUME *ETHICS FROM A Theocentric Perspective*, Gustafson affirms that his book is the “product of at least thirty years of ‘homework’ and fifty-five years of living.”¹ It is not only a product of scholarship but also of reflection on the events and circumstances of his life. The effort to understand thinkers such as Gustafson and Jonas requires that some attention be trained on their biographies.

For Jonas, one of the life-experiences that so radically shaped the direction of his work was that of World War II. Removed from his books and seminars, living in the trenches of resistance against his homeland and the barbarism of Hitler, Jonas became acutely aware of the perishability of life. This awareness and concern shaped the trajectory of his thought and scholarly output from that point on. For Gustafson the relevant life-experiences occur much earlier and are more subtle and diffused.

Gustafson’s account of the impact of his early formative experiences registers a more complex view of the human relation to nature and history and the divine in comparison to Jonas’s more focused attention on organic individuals.² But like Jonas, Gustafson understands

1. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, 1:ix.

2. One of my burdens in these first chapters is to draw out the significance of the relatively greater relationality of Gustafson’s moral anthropology in contrast to Jonas’s accent on individual autonomy. In doing this, however, I do not mean to suggest that Jonas’s anthropology does not include a relational dimension. But the relation emphasized in Jonas’s work is that between a relatively autonomous individual and, as suggested in the conclusion to the preceding chapter, a somewhat homogenized account

that any human experience of the natural environment is conditioned by “decisive personal experiences that have affected our attitudes and outlooks.”³ Crucially for Gustafson’s methodology, as I will draw out soon, “experience” precedes explanatory rubrics, intellectual and moral spheres of attention, religious sensibilities, and the cognitive, affective, and evaluative influences of traditions of thought and practice.

In *A Sense of the Divine*, focused specifically on an environmental ethical application of theocentrism, Gustafson acknowledges the formative impact of his childhood in the northern woods of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Through long walks in the woods he learned to identify the distinctive flora and fauna of his home place, he relished foraging for berries and nuts. He canoed on nearby lakes and rivers, helped to chop and pile wood for his family’s kitchen stove, and delivered the local paper in the extreme winter weather conditions of the far north. In addition to these positive experiences in his home environment, he was also deeply affected by a local paper mill’s pollution of the Menomonee River, which ruined the fishing down river, and by the ugly heaps of slag from a nearby iron ore mine. When his family later moved to Kansas, he experienced and observed the devastation of a tornado and the infamous drought in the American plains of the 1930s.

In recounting these experiences, Gustafson acknowledges that he was early struck with awe by both the grandeur of nature’s beauty and nature’s great power to harm and destroy, and the way in which this awe is correlated to his enduring questions about the nature of God. Thus, in contrast to Jonas’s concern with the moral ambiguity of *human power*, Gustafson’s moral concern can helpfully be characterized more broadly as a theological concern with human moral evaluations and conceptions of *divine power* as these relate to understandings of the human good.

Gustafson’s awe before the power of the divine funds his scholarly agenda and contrasts with Jonas’s focus on human power. Where Jonas’s motivation is principally practical and anthropocentric, Gustafson’s

of the natural environment. As I put this earlier, Jonas’s vision of the relation between organisms and environments can be understood basically as an agonistic one. In contrast to this, the relationality of Gustafson’s anthropology comes to view as a more highly textured reciprocity between human selves and communities, the patterns and processes of nature and history, and God.

3. Gustafson, *A Sense of the Divine*, 1.

is quite different. He is motivated by a concern with the ambiguous patterns and processes of the world, natural and historical, which are ultimately divinely governed, and with the conceptual and practical challenges of morally evaluating this ambiguity from a theological ethical perspective. In this chapter I will interpret Gustafson's accounts of our morally troubling circumstances and the root cause of these, move to a treatment of his methodology, and conclude with a critical analysis of his hermeneutics.

The Problem of Anthropocentrism

Gustafson's interpretation of our cultural situation centers on the problem of anthropocentrism. He is motivated by a concern with the way in which anthropocentrism, which he deems to be suspect on scientific and theological grounds, exacerbates the human threat to the natural world and instantiates what he takes to be the fundamental flaw of human beings. With Jonas, Gustafson too is concerned with the powerful consequences of contemporary human action and holds that the scale of modern human efficacy today is distinct from any other time and unleashes new moral challenges.

The expansion of knowledge and technological innovation frees modern humans in many important ways from historic insecurities in relation to the natural world. For example, medical advances, pharmaceutical sciences, and the sciences of nutrition and sanitation have lengthened average human life spans and increased life-quality for many. And along with Jonas, Gustafson also affirms the biological underpinnings of unique human capacities. The history of biological evolution has resulted in the development of human capacities that extend "the range of [our] domination over forces and powers" that are beyond the control of other forms of life. A result and feature of these distinctive human capacities is the creation of culture, a second nature of "artifacts and meanings which are shaped to render the life of human community more immune to the uncertainties of natural conditions . . ."⁴

And yet, no reflective person need be told that the extension of human mastery not only has not fully eliminated certain fundamental and unavoidable anxieties, but that it has introduced new anxieties. While rendering humans more secure in relation to certain contingencies,

4. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, 1:4.

new threats have also been created. Gustafson writes, “this increase in mastery has not eliminated insecurity and anxiety: these feelings are evoked by different objects, by other contingencies, including new ones that are the unintended and unanticipated consequences of the extension of human mastery itself.”⁵ Gustafson here shows that he is sensitive to Giddens’ distinction between “external” and “manufactured” risk, discussed in my introduction, and that his interpretation of contemporary circumstances corresponds in a basic way with Jonas’s.

But while consonant at a basic level, Gustafson’s critique of our circumstances differs from Jonas’s in two important respects, rhetorical and substantive. Rhetorically, Gustafson’s writing is much less prophetically edged than Jonas’s. As Robert Bellah notes, Gustafson’s writing is a “measured reconnaissance,” undertaken at a “leisured pace.”⁶ This rhetorical calm of Gustafson’s writing contrasts sharply with the revulsion driving Jonas’s. Where Jonas writes like a Jeremiah, Gustafson manifests the detached wisdom of a Solomon. Gustafson’s muted, leisurely reconnaissance is perhaps ironic considering the radical challenge his theocentrism poses to the historically dominant anthropocentrism of much of Western theology and philosophy. But this may not be the case. The rhetorical differences between Gustafson and Jonas are not merely superficial, but reflect significantly different perceptions of the gravity of the environmental crisis of power and of the right moral responses to this problematic.

Differently from Jonas, Gustafson’s critique of the contemporary ethos is explicitly theological. In supplement to Jonas’s idea that the unanticipated and unintended results of contemporary power are inherent to the processes and tempo of modern technological innovation, Gustafson’s theological judgment is that this is shaped ultimately by the inwardly curved nature of human individual and communal self-interests. He considers this ultimate cause, what he calls the fault of contraction, to be the fundamental human flaw, the sinful condition of human nature.

5. *Ibid.*, 5.

6. Bellah, “Gustafson as Critic of Culture,” 143. The volume in which Bellah’s article appears contains a collection of papers from various distinguished interpreters of Gustafson given at a symposium on his *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* held at Washington and Lee University in 1985.

By “contraction” Gustafson designates the anthropocentric narrowness of a human sense of the world that stems from an exaggerated sense of human significance within it. All human achievements reflect this contraction insofar as all achievements are motivated by human valuations that are always perspectival. “Increase in knowledge is a purposive activity,” Gustafson affirms, because “it stems from the valuations of individuals and communities; it is directed toward ends that human beings value.”⁷ Given that purposiveness directs innovation, one can reason deductively from innovation to what humans in fact value, for example quality and length of life or material prosperity. But this, of course, is not at all the same as being able to determine *why* humans value what they do or *what humans ought* to value.

Why humans value what they do tends not to receive sufficient critical scrutiny. This, according to Gustafson, is partly the effect of the tendency of human valuations to be “curved in upon our immediate self-interests.”⁸ For Gustafson, humans are in denial about and neglect critically to face the inward curvature of our valuations. To the extent that this is the case, he claims, we refuse to acknowledge our human limitations and this refusal is to human detriment and the planet’s, along with being idolatrous. Gustafson’s rhetorical style, always carefully nuanced, reflects the impact of this judgment on his own scholarship.

Gustafson writes, “Knowledge and foreknowledge are expanded; capacities for control of future events are extended; finitude, however, is not overcome.”⁹ The denial of finitude is at the core of Gustafson’s theocentric indictment of anthropocentrism. According to Gustafson, this denial is inherent to anthropocentrism and foments the transgression of human limitation and the limits of the natural world. While the character of “limits” transgressed, the modes of critique of such transgressions, and the proposed remedies for it are culturally and historically variable, Gustafson argues that the sense that there are appropriate human limits that need to be observed is philosophically and historically perennial.

Critiques of the failure to acknowledge human limitation and finitude extend back through all recorded history. For example, ancient

7. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, 1:7

8. *Ibid.*, 8.

9. *Ibid.*

Greek tragedians and philosophers understood this as hubris and the biblical traditions as pride and sin. For both, the tendency to exaggerate human powers results in a distortion of humanity. While the tendency to pride and hubris is ancient, perhaps an intractable element of the human condition, the necessity of resisting it is in Gustafson's judgment more urgent in this time than ever before. Along with Jonas, Gustafson affirms that this is due to the fact that human efficacy has increased to the point that the moral consequences of pride and hubris now have a planetary dimension.

In contrast to Jonas, however, properly theorizing human power for Gustafson is a theological task that must be developed, in part, through analysis of religious experience. This demand is of course not based on the view that religious practitioners always have a proper sense of their place in the world or of their relation to God. Within religious life, the failure to acknowledge limitation is often reflected in the instrumentalization of religious beliefs and practices. According to Gustafson, religion is appreciated today almost solely for its utility value in the quest to secure temporal human ends. Religions on this account are reduced to therapies. The general religious admonition to "live for others rather than for self is, in modern interpretation, a cause of the problem [of individual self-fulfillment] rather than an answer to it . . ." ¹⁰ On this popular therapeutic account, binding obligations and duties to others, not to mention to the divine other, corrode rather than conduce to happiness. But for Gustafson there is much more to the phenomenon of religious conviction than its conciliatory character. ¹¹

At the core of Gustafson's project, then, is the burden to offer a non-utilitarian account of religion. Whatever values or consolations the religious life offers, he argues, ultimately stem from consent to the divine rather than to the finite, limited, inwardly curved interests of human selves and communities. Such consent reorders human interests and demands an enlargement of moral concern. Pride and hubris result from the failure to give this consent and shrink the horizon of moral sensitivity. Immediate self-interests take precedence over the divine will and the long-term goods of self, others, and the larger world. In Gustafson's judgment, "contemporary instrumental religion is wrong

10. *Ibid.*, 20.

11. *Ibid.*, 31.

theologically as well as practically because it does not set human life within the appropriate limits, not only of finitude, but of ordered relationships in institutions and between persons.”¹² To redress this, Gustafson understands the task of his constructive work to be that of resituating the human as a participant within the appropriate limits of ordered relationships.

In sum, Gustafson’s interpretation of our cultural circumstances consists of a critique of the entrenched anthropocentric view that the human species is the measure of all things. He does not deny that humans are endowed with unique capacities for thought and action. He does not deny that humans alone exist as “measurers” of the world by way of these unique capacities. He does, however, challenge the tendency to collapse the difference between “measuring” and “measure.” That humans can interpret, evaluate, and influence the world in ways that other forms of life cannot does not necessitate the position that the human species is the center of value in the world. Collapsing this difference is the essence of anthropocentrism.

In contrast to Jonas, the correction to anthropocentrism cannot depend on mere revision or qualification. As I will show further along through my interpretation of the fundamental and normative dimensions of his work, Gustafson challenges anthropocentrism by articulating a theocentric construal of the world and the implications of this construal for the moral life. Among other important things, this challenge consists of a critique of moral anthropologies emphasizing autonomy and a call for a heightened awareness of the dependencies and interdependencies that shape our personal and social lives, our relations to the natural world, and above all our relationship to God. But in order to clear the path for examination of these claims, it is important first to turn to an analysis of the methodology that supports them.

Critical Religious Naturalism

Gustafson’s project is shaped by a very broad theological ethical question: “what is God enabling and requiring us to be and to do?” To this question, he brings to bear a complex, variegated interpretive methodology, best characterized as a critical religious naturalism. He combines an emphasis on experience with a critical respect for its mediation by

12. Ibid.

tradition, theological, ethical, and scientific. While the character of his thought is emphatically theological, it is generated by reflection on the common, natural human experiences that underlie religious sensibilities rather than from prior theological or ethical premises—what I construe as a critical religious naturalism. He shares Jonas’s phenomenological commitment, but for Gustafson this funds a description of the world whose core insight is that there are forces and powers bearing down upon and sustaining life that are beyond human control, and these can be and often are religiously construed. From this, the task of the moral life becomes that of discerning appropriate practical responses to these powers. In the following sections of this chapter, I will first examine Gustafson’s methodology in its broadest character, and then I will transition to a closer analysis of the various focal commitments within the methodology.

A “Composite Rationale”

One of the distinguishing marks of Gustafson’s phenomenological approach is what Stephen Toulmin characterizes as the simultaneously “old-fashioned” and “revolutionary” theological discourse through which he relates it. It is old-fashioned, according to Toulmin, to the extent that it is stridently unapologetic. Gustafson writes and thinks in an uncompromisingly theological mode, he is secure in the justification and communicability of his Reformed theological interpretive lens. He is utterly convinced of the moral relevance of belief in God. And yet, perhaps ironically, it is this “old-fashioned” theological discourse itself that contributes to the “revolutionary” character of his theological positions. According to Toulmin, “Because [Gustafson] refuses to compromise the claims of his religion or explain them away as fictions or metaphors, he faces head-on issues that his contemporaries are prepared to fudge: notably, issues that arise out of post-Reformation changes in our scientific views about the world.”¹³ Gustafson does not shy away from but vigorously engages the broad fields of the various Western philosophical and scientific traditions precisely because his “old-fashioned” theological point of view demands this.

13. Toulmin, “Nature and Nature’s God,” 37–38.

More explicitly than Jonas, Gustafson's methodology is informed by a concern with the degree to which descriptions, explanations, and evaluations reciprocally influence one another. He is highly cognizant of the fact that no data are unmediated, that the tasks of description and evaluation are not purely isolable and always impinge on one another. Description is always partly influenced by pre-reflexive affective responses even as these affective responses themselves are always at least in part organized and codified by inhabited traditions of thought. It is this understanding that leads to the "critical" character of his religious naturalism that so significantly contributes to the fundamental and normative aspects of his work. With respect to his fundamental ideas, Gustafson's critical religious naturalism leads to a twofold focus on, first, the historical, natural, and cultural contexts of human moral existence, and, second, on the centrality of affectivity in his moral anthropology.

Like Jonas, Gustafson is an interdisciplinary thinker. The justification for Gustafson's interdisciplinarity rests on several mutually enforcing presuppositions. *Ontologically*, he presupposes significant unity between religious and scientific realities. Given this unity, support is granted to an *epistemological* presupposition that various modes of inquiry, such as religious and scientific, can gain access to dimensions of this common reality. Underlying and integrating these ontological and epistemic presuppositions is the *theological* conviction that "the experience of God's reality within the context of the Christian community and tradition is multidimensional."¹⁴ This theological affirmation of the multidimensionality of Christian religious experience means that "any articulation of that experience [of God] . . . must take into account the various aspects of God's relation to man that are present."¹⁵ Any effort to make the experience of God intelligible, in other words, demands that the broadest spectrum of relevant explanatory and interpretive resources be deployed. Thus, for Gustafson, scientific, theological, and ethical work mutually support one another and are necessary to gaining comprehensive understanding of human moral life in the world before God. As one of his interpreters has put this, Gustafson's project is ad-

14. Gustafson, *Can Ethics be Christian?* 138.

15. *Ibid.*

vanced through the deployment of a “composite rationale” that includes attention to experience, the sciences, the Bible, and tradition.¹⁶

Gustafson’s interdisciplinarity is clearly influenced by his mentor H. Richard Niebuhr’s understanding of Christian moral philosophy.¹⁷ The pluralistic methodology Gustafson deploys, supported by his view of the porous boundaries between the sciences, theology, and ethics, has been interpreted as both a great strength and potential weakness of his work. Within Christian theological circles, there are both critics and champions of Gustafson. Critics challenge Gustafson’s view that common human experience and the sciences should be the significant criteria for the backing and revision of traditional Christian doctrines. The basic charge is that his use of the sciences is excessive and leads to the abandonment of central tenets of the tradition, such as classic Christological, soteriological, and eschatological doctrines.¹⁸ Above all, in reference to his most systematic and comprehensive work, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, critics ask whether there is a sufficient distinction made between “God” and “Nature” as the ultimate reference of reality.¹⁹ According to this line of questioning, it is not ultimately clear how his position differs, except insofar as it incorporates modern scientific insights, from the classic Stoical position that the moral life consists of piously reverencing and conforming to the logos of Nature.

Yet along with critics there are also many who affirm the methodology that shapes Gustafson’s project. Writing on the positive contributions of Gustafson, theological ethicist Harlan Beckley, for example,

16. See Reeder, “Dependence of Ethics,” 119–37. This “composite rationale” is roughly equivalent to what has come to be known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

17. As Niebuhr explains in *The Responsible Self*, by describing himself as a “Christian moral philosopher” he intends to distinguish his work from Christian ethics understood narrowly as moral reflection on the particularities of Christian life. In other words, Niebuhr’s object, as with Gustafson’s, was not the Christian moral life in particular but human moral existence more broadly, considered from a Christian theological perspective. The task of Christian moral philosophy, as Niebuhr articulated it, is to think philosophically from a Christian perspective about human moral existence in general. This justifies and requires the use of multiple interpretive and explanatory resources in addition to specifically Christian ones, insofar as these are crucial to understanding the human moral situation broadly.

18 See for example, McCormick, “Gustafson’s God,” 37–52. I will deal at more length with these critiques in chs. 4, 6, and my conclusion.

19. See the essays by Gordon Kaufman, Edward Farley, John H. Yoder, and Robert Audi in *James M. Gustafson’s Theocentric Ethics*.

argues that, “Christian ethicists will more adequately exercise their vocational responsibility to persons within and outside the church and to society insofar as they adopt something similar to Gustafson’s approach.”²⁰ Arguments such as this turn on an expansive idea of the Christian scholar’s vocation. The Christian scholar’s proper vocational responsibility, on this view, extends beyond the boundaries of those within the Christian tradition to engagement with non-Christian and even non-religious people.

To the extent then that Gustafson’s interpretation of what is going on in the world is interdisciplinary, he lives up to the broad mandate of the Christian scholar’s responsibility to engage the broader public. The justification for this broad engagement is to clarify through interdisciplinary engagement the general question of what is going on in the world in order better to offer general and specific prescriptions for how morally to navigate human life within it. The project to clarify ethos and to offer normative guidance is best served, so this line of reasoning goes, when various disciplinary perspectives are brought to bear on it. As Gustafson’s mentor, H. Richard Niebuhr put it, the general concern with the interpretation of ethos is a philosophical common denominator that allows the Christian moral philosopher to speak beyond the distinctive questions of his or her own community to the questions of human moral existence in general. Thus Gustafson’s concern with the common denominator of human moral experience allows him to position himself as an interlocutor in the wider arena of philosophical and ethical discourses.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will provide summaries of the main elements of the composite rationale of Gustafson’s critical religious naturalism. Attention will be given, first, to his understanding of the methodological primacy of experience. After this, I will move to his interpretation of basic religious senses and his philosophy of religion. And then I will critically examine his understanding of theological symbols and his account of the proper relation between theology and the sciences.

20. Beckley, “A Raft that Floats,” 203.