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As Ground of Being, God Favors Good Over Bad Choices: Confucian Response to Wesley J. Wildman

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I. Historical/Historic Location

Throughout the history of Western exploration of worldviews and lifepaths, three figures prominently herald the overarching nature of Wildman's scholarship on science, philosophy, theology, and religion: Aristotle, Spinoza, and Tillich (along with his contemporary counterpart, Robert C. Neville). While the link between Tillich-Neville and Wildman is extensively articulated in Wildman's own writings and the festschrift[1] dedicated to him, I will center my discussion on Aristotle and Spinoza.

The thoughts of all three aforementioned historical figures constitute a lineage towards merging science, philosophy, theology, and religion into an open inquiry process concerning the foundational conditions of human existence. This inquiry also has profound practical implications for humanity's pursuit of the ultimate meaning and power in life that are larger than any human self. Aristotle's architectonic philosophy, evident in the early currents of Western thought, reveals the organic links among all major disciplines practiced in the modern academy. For Aristotle, "theology,"[2] focused on the ultimate cause of the world, is nested within "metaphysics." This discipline delves into the most fundamental natures of reality and is a subset of "theoretical philosophy." This broad category also encompasses sciences such as "mathematics," "physics," and the study of animals and plants—what we now term "biology." In the "practical philosophy," Aristotle crafted his renowned virtue "ethics," advocating for individuals to cultivate stable character traits through a liberal arts education and a well-informed democracy, all in the pursuit of a

1. F.Leron Shults and Robert C. Neville, eds., *Religion in Multidisciplinary Perspective: Philosophical, Theological and Scientific Approaches to Wesley J. Wildman* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021).

2. The word appears in Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VI, 1026a 18–22. English translations of Aristotle's works discussed in this paper are from Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. I and II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). A detailed analysis of the term "theology" can be found at Stephen Menn, "Aristotle's Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle*, ed. Christopher Shields, online version (Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–45.

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eudaimonic, or fulfilling, life. This aspiration for the good life aims to emulate and perpetually approach the achievements of the ultimate reality, the eternally self-contemplating Nous, on a cosmic scale. This grants Aristotle's philosophy a deeply "religious" dimension.[3]

The virtual confluence of "philosophy" and "science" involves mastering all requisite knowledge and tapping into multi-generational and multicultural intellectual assets to support and refine one's theological hypothesis about ultimate reality. Moreover, it entails understanding the practical and religious implications of such theological inquiry. These facets of Aristotle's thought align closely with Wildman's conception of "religious philosophy" or "philosophical theology."[4] I contend that if the Western world had consistently embraced Aristotle's liberal arts educational model, without the extended influence of Christian theology on medieval universities, Wildman, as a teacher-scholar, would likely feel entirely at home within a modern branch of the Peripatetic school based in the Lyceum.

The affinity between Wildman's religious philosophy and Spinoza's thought is more substantive than formal. The Spinozian notion that equates God with nature echoes Wildman's religious naturalism. Wildman's inclination towards the Plotinus model of ultimate reality as the ground of being, which envisions the emergence of distinct entities from the One akin to "breaking off pieces from an endless and paradoxically edgeless chocolate bar,"[5] is reminiscent of Spinoza's distinction between God as "natura naturans" and the world as "natura naturata."[6] Furthermore, the "dipolar monism" metaphysics[7] Wildman employs to address the hard question in neuroscience and the philosophy of mind is clearly derivative of Spinoza's monistic parallelism between mind and body.

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3. The categorization of philosophy by Aristotle is explored in different sections of his works. See the analysis in Christopher Shields, "Aristotle," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, *https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/aristotle/*. For a more detailed explanation of the architectonic nature of Aristotle's philosophy, you can refer to Bin Song, "Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art," *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, no. 31 (Nov. 2020): 92–113.

4. Wesley J. Widman, "Response to *Religion in Multidisciplinary Perspective*," in *Religion in Multidisciplinary Perspective*, 304, 321,

5. Wesley J. Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumblings at the Limits of Language* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 70.

6. Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 2, in *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed., trans. Edwin Curley (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): 104.

7. Wildman, "Response," 296.

More crucially, by equating God with nature, Spinoza posits that revealed truths about God are merely particular instances of natural truth. The "prophets" described in the Hebrew Bible don't necessarily possess unique wisdom about this natural truth. Instead, they have vivid imaginations, enabling them to employ those particular instances of truth to appeal to the masses' senses, thereby cultivating morality and serving various institutional and political aims. When aligned with natural reason, religion, as thus understood, complements philosophy and science in fostering the humanistic ethics of the general populace. However, when rooted in superstition rather than natural reason, it becomes a source of political manipulation and societal unrest.[8] Echoing Spinoza's views on religion, Wildman presents a compelling refutation of the distinction between revealed and natural theology, leaning in favor of the latter.[9] Yet, Wildman is still open to retaining "God" as the term for ultimate reality to uphold the moral-guiding role of traditional religious institutions.[10]

In essence, across three major epochs of Western thought—ancient (Aristotle), early-modern (Spinoza), and late-modern (Tillich-Neville)—we encounter luminaries who seamlessly integrate philosophy, theology, religion, and science. This gives us ample reason to position Wildman's seminal work within this tradition of Western thought. Regrettably, the socio-political impacts of medieval Christendom and the early modern separation of church and state continue to profoundly influence the contemporary Western academy. Our disciplinary vocabulary, coupled with the institutional framework for teaching these disciplines, remains largely rooted in the separative approach established by distinctions like philosophy vs. religion, philosophy vs. theology, and religion vs. science during medieval times. From the perspective of a Ruist[11]comparative theologian, I deeply resonate with and am enthusiastic about championing Wildman's monumental efforts.

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8. Spinoza's perspective on religion is primarily presented in his work, *Theological-Political Treatise*, found in *A Spinoza Reader*, 10–48.

9. Wildman, "Response," 298–99; Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable*, 188–89.

10. Wildman, "Response," 312.

11. In line with scholarly reflections on the nomenclature of world traditions, particularly in the field of comparative religious studies and consistent with my other publications, this chapter will refer to "Confucianism" as "Ruism" or the "Ru tradition." Similarly, "Confucian" or "Confucianist" will be referred to as "Ru" or "Ruist." When used as a noun, the plural of "Ru" or "Ruist" is "Ru" or "Ruists." "Ru (儒)" denotes a civilized human, the traditional term used for self-identification before the 19th-century invention of "Confucianism" by Western missionaries and scholars.

II. Shortage: Cause and Consequences

It would be presumptuous to claim that there's a shortage in Wildman's architectonic and encyclopedic scholarship on religion. Thankfully, this gap has been highlighted by Sarah E. Fredericks[12] and acknowledged by Wildman[13]: a theological ethics that links his ground-of-being theology with a systematic ethic that can be further applied in varying domains of human life.

While not systematic in his approach to ethics, we find a wealth of ethical insights in Wildman's writings. His comprehensive ethical framework combines a Nietzschean commitment—where the ethical direction of human actions is based solely on human decision—and a ground-of-being theology, as well as the practical emulation of Jesus' agape and Buddha's compassion.[14]

The reason this ethical framework doesn't constitute a systematic theological ethic is that, according to Wildman, the ground-of-being God, without intentional and interventional agency, "ontologically supports all decisions" and doesn't "favor one choice or another."[15] If any direction is suggested by realities filled with valuational possibilities, it's not as a command but in an "if-then" structure. The realization of this structure ultimately hinges on human decisions, such as: "if I repeatedly lie, then people will stop trusting me," or "if I love my enemies and forgive those who persecute me, then I will experience greater peace of mind and happiness while my enemies may eventually find themselves transformed."[16] In a word, "moral inassimilability"[17] is a fundamental nature of the ground-of-being God, and this God is "morally unscaled to human interests and concerns, thereby requiring human beings to find their own moral way in the world."[18]

Given the principle of moral inassimilability, it's understandable why Wildman cannot advocate, from a theological standpoint, for the favorability of Jesus' agape and Buddha's compassion over other ethical teachings. This accounts for the notable shortage in Wildman's otherwise comprehensive scholarship. To

12. Sarah E. Dredericks, "Wesley Wildman's Lessons for and from Ethics," in *Religion in Multidisciplinary Perspective*, 53

13. Wildman, "Response," 308.

14. Wildman, 308–9, 318.

15. Wesley J. Wildman, *In Our Own Image: Anthropomorphism, Apophaticism and Ultimacy* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 210; Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable*, 49.

16. Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable*, 208.

17. Wildman , 209.

18. Wildman, "Response," 308.

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highlight the root cause and delve deeper into the implications of this shortage, I aim to draw a more detailed comparison between Wildman's ideas and those of Aristotle in the following. It can be argued that Aristotle, in his unique approach, is a ground-of-being theologian[19] who integrates "theology" into "philosophy," a comprehensive discipline that is essentially akin to "science" and includes "ethics."

Taking the Unmoved Mover (which is the first cause of the existing world) as theology's unique object of inquiry, Aristotle's theology transformed the anthropomorphic idea of deity prevalent in ancient Greek folklore and mythology into a conception of ultimate reality which attracts the same extent of rational investigation as all other domains of scientific knowledge. In a further analysis, this first Unmoved Mover is identified as Nous (thought or intellect), a pervading energy (energeia) of pure activity, which moves the other parts of the world like an object of perception triggering perception while itself remaining unmoved[20]. As the ultimate efficient cause, Nous is involved in a perpetual process of contemplation upon itself, and all existing beings in the world, while moved by it, change, grow and strive for it as their final cause.

The practical wisdom (phronesis) propounded by Aristotle in his ethics also has a final cause. Following his teacher Plato, Aristotle defines the Unmoved Mover of Nous as the ultimate "Good," and thinks the purpose of practical wisdom, which adjudicates good or bad in concrete situations, is to create conditions of human life that resembles the divine life of Nous as much as possible. Therefore, for Aristotle, the best life of human beings is pure contemplation upon all beings in the world. However, the union between human life and its final cause, Nous, is mysterious and beyond what any philosophical discourse can describe. It happens momentarily and instantaneously, and hence, can never achieve the state of divinity unique to the perpetual self-contemplative

19. As I'll explain shortly, Aristotle's Nous theology can be viewed as a precursor to a particular lineage of ground-of-being theology. This theological perspective situates the world's origin within an infinite and indeterminate field of formless being, from which self-differentiation and self-specification emerge, leading to the creation of finite and concrete beings. It is apparent that Plotinus, as interpreted by Wildman, and Spinoza, as interpreted in my previous discussion, are part of this theological tradition. However, I hold a differing viewpoint from Wildman's interpretation of Plotinus, and I present my own interpretation of Plotinus in Chapter Three of Bin Song, "A Study of Comparative Philosophy of Religion on 'Creatio Ex Nihilo' and 'Sheng Sheng' (Birth Birth, 生生)" (PhD Diss., Boston University, 2018)

20. About Aristotle's God as Nous in relation to ethics, please refer to Stephen Menn, "Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good," *The Review of Metaphysics* 45, no. 3 (Mar., 1992): 543–73.

life of Nous.[21] So, human life on the earth unfolds as a ceaseless process of self-perfection guided by both practical wisdom and its ultimate holy cause.

In a nutshell, as the ground of being that sets all possibilities of reality into motion, Aristotle's God favors human choice of nurturing eudaimonic virtues because the *telos* of these virtues is God, and accordingly, the choice is good. What is particularly noteworthy about Aristotle's theological ethics is its emphasis on a methodical approach to nurturing virtues that is consistent with his understanding of philosophy and science. Aristotle assembles his students at the Lyceum, guiding them to *understand* the necessity of virtues, *learn* from historical and contemporary examples, and ultimately *habituate* themselves to virtuous actions, leading to the acquisition of these virtues. Since "we are made perfect by habit,"[22] this process anticipates trial and error, much like any other scientific engagement with the world, as virtuous actions are always context-sensitive and aim to find the middle ground between extremes.

This science of self-transformation, so to speak, was also present in other major Hellenistic schools such as Platonism, Epicureanism and Stoicism. In these philosophies, practitioners employ a methodical approach to engage in diverse "spiritual exercises" aimed at transforming themselves from inauthenticity to authenticity, establishing a connection with a broader cosmic whole. This concept, as eloquently expounded by Pierre Hadot,[23] underscores the commonality across these schools in their pursuit of personal transformation.

Regrettably, the inherently spiritual and practical aspects of philosophy and science became obscured in medieval Europe. The establishment of Christianity altered the foundational relationship between theology, philosophy, and science in Western discourse and academia. Philosophy was divested of its profound spiritual essence and evolved to serve predominantly as an intellectual and analytic tool to substantiate established theological doctrines. Meanwhile, the methodical pursuit of self-transformation within a broader cosmic framework was confined to the practice of spiritual maturation within religious institutions. This heightened emphasis on the intellectual aspect of philosophy, as opposed to its spiritual dimension, remains a prominent feature of the modern academy, even though its analytic tools no longer exclusively cater to religious dogmas. In conjunction with the dwindled function of philosophy, when science

21. Aristotle's mystical tendency and mysticisms in ancient Greek philosophy are analyzed in Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Belknap Press, 2004), 88, 157–63.

22. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a14–1103a25.

23. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed., by Arnold Davidson (Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).

experienced a resurgence in the late medieval and early modern eras, its primary revolutionary impact was manifested through the lens of an "observer" rather than a "self-transformer." Put differently, conventional modern science perceives nature as an object and humans as detached observers. The development of technology based on scientific findings primarily aims to serve broader societal needs in a utilitarian fashion, rather than to reshape the inherent nature of the human self and transform individuals.

Arguably, it wasn't until the convergence of ancient Greek ethics, Eastern thought, and the Enlightenment movement in the late 18th century that philosophers and scientists began to revisit and expand upon the ancient science of self-transformation, leading to the creation of empirical psychology.[24] In contemporary therapeutic methods like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, we can discern echoes of Aristotelian and Stoic ethics, which were once integral to the discipline of philosophy. However, a downside to this evolution of behavioral science is its shift in socio-political context. Psychotherapy is now typically administered in a clinical setting, characterized by a doctor-patient dynamic. Consequently, those seeking therapy are often perceived as clients or patients. They discreetly pay for services and decide whether to obey the authority of therapist-scientists to receive treatments for diagnosed mental disorders. The pedagogical approach to self-transformation, so prominent in Hellenistic schools, has been overshadowed. The dynamic has clearly transitioned from a teacher-student or scholar-to-scholar relationship to that of doctor-patient, which is rather limited by the structure of scientific and technological endeavors within the modern capitalist medical industry.

Conversely, the manner in which philosophy, as well as other humanities disciplines, is taught in academic institutions shifted due to an overemphasis on human intellect during the aforementioned medieval disciplinary transition. Deprived of their inherent practical and spiritual core, the humanities saw a significant decline in the secularized modern academy and began to rely on the model of natural sciences for funding and daily operations.

The reason I need to recount the historical development of the philosophy and science of self-transformation is, as mentioned, to highlight the cause and consequences of the shortage of theological ethics in Wildman's writings:

24. Christian Wolff (1670–1754), the crucial philosophical link between Leibniz and Kant, plays a significant role in the creation of modern empirical psychology, who was also famous to introduce and advocate Ru ideas to Europe in his time. See Břetislav Horyna, "The Idea of Care for Reason in Chinese Philosophy and its Influence on German Enlightenment: The Reception of Confucianism in the Moral Philosophy of Christian Wolff," *Knowledge Cultures* 9, no. 2, 2021: 7–43.

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Firstly, within the U2-C2 model[25] of naturalistic ground-of-being theology, many theologies have delved into a deeper and more integral relationship between metaphysics and ethics. This includes notable aforementioned philosophies like Aristotle, Spinoza, Stoicism, and various Eastern thoughts. While Wildman adeptly used comparative method in *In Our Own Image* to advocate for his preferred U2-C2 conception of ultimate reality, he did not conduct an equally thorough examination of how metaphysics and ethics intertwine in the diverse U2-C2 philosophies and religions globally. As such, Wildman's Nietzschean claim that there is virtually no substantial linkage between ground-of-being metaphysics and the ethical direction of human actions appears to be hasty.

Secondly, the lack of systematic theological ethics in Wildman's work results in his contribution to the modern evolution of the ancient science of self-transformation not being as substantial as his impact on other disciplines. He appears more inclined to delegate this domain to traditional religious institutions rather than delving into its application in modern secular universities. The ramifications of this approach can be viewed from various angles, as detailed below.

Firstly, Wildman's study of spiritual and religious experiences through the lens of neuroscience and evolutionary biology[26] primarily aims to assess the cognitive plausibility of various conceptions of God as ultimate reality. While Wildman acknowledges the wider implications of such experiences on individual self-transformation, he does not give them equal attention. Notably, the final three chapters of *Effing the Ineffable* stand out. In these, Wildman adopts a phenomenological approach to reframe human experiences of loneliness, intensity, and bliss, probing their wider impact on the cultivation of ethical virtues. As I'll argue later, it's particularly in these chapters that we observe Wildman's wrestle with the principle of the ground-of-being God's moral inassimilability. To such an extent, one might even question whether the discussions in these chapters come close to contravening this central moral tenet of his ground-of-being theology.

25. Wildman employs two sets of criteria to conceptualize potential conceptions of ultimate reality: U1 agential-being, U2 ground-of-being, and U3 no coherent model; C1 supernaturalism, C2 naturalism, and C3 eliminativism (understood as monist materialism). The model supported by Wildman, U2-C2, envisions ultimate reality as a combination of Tillichian ground-of-being and a closed causal network that embraces both facts and values within the physical realm, thereby negating disembodied intentionality and agency. See Wildman, *In Our Own Image*, 26.

26. Wesley J. Wilman, *Science and Religious Anthropology: A Spiritually Evocative Naturalist Interpretation of Human Life* (Routledge, 2009); Wesley, J. Wildman, *Religious and Spiritual Experiences* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Secondly, Wildman rarely delves into his teaching styles within liberal arts contexts, providing us with scant insights into his pedagogical practices. However, there have been significant advancements in the fields of philosophy and religious studies aimed at resurrecting the ancient approach to self-transformation. Noteworthy examples include the "Philosophy as a Way of Life" initiative at the University of Notre Dame and the interdisciplinary "contemplative pedagogy" emphasized by the contemplative studies unit at the American Academy of Religion. It would be intriguing to know Wildman's perspective on these modern innovations.

Thirdly, While Wildman seeks to amplify the influence of the humanities in society, he employs an approach rooted in modern natural science. Utilizing cutting-edge technologies like computer modeling and employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods, he has established institutions to transform research into large-scale societal policy outcomes.[27] Wildman's achievements in this realm are undoubtedly remarkable and set a high bar for most academic scholars. However, I hold a more measured view of his assertion that the humanities should "help scientists do better science" to address the modern university's humanities crisis[28]. As I've previously stated, the humanities, as an age-old tradition predating the advent of Christianity in the West, inherently possess a scientific aim directed at individual moral self-transformation. I firmly believe that in contemporary secular colleges and universities, this ancient philosophical and scientific approach to self-transformation, as opposed to a clinical one, retains immense value and merits scholars' dedication to its fullest potential.

III. Struggle with the Theological Principle of Moral Inassimilability (TMI)

In Wildman's writings that explore a tighter link between metaphysics and ethics, we observe a tension with the theological principle of moral inassimilability (TMI). I'd like to highlight a few examples to suggest that even from Wildman's own standpoint, the asserted tenuous relationship between the ground-of-being theology and ethics warrants reevaluation.

Firstly, Wildman argues that "a lonely ground grounds loneliness," and "it is fitting to regard loneliness as a virtue."[29] This implies that God, as the

27. Richard Sosis, "The Man Who Receives Too Many Emails: Exploring the Construction of Wildman's Institutional Reality," in *Religion in Multidisciplinary Perspective*, 273–88.

28. Wildman, "Response," 302.

29. Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable*, 160–61

foundation of existence, favors the human choice of leading a virtuous lonely life, given that God is inherently lonely. Wildman could counterargue that, in a hypothetical scenario, human choices to not live virtuously in solitude are also grounded in God as the ground of being. However, in such a case, it would be challenging to assert that a non-lonely human life is "supported" or "favored" by a lonely God.

Secondly, intense experience, as per Wildman, "structure human values and commitments more profoundly than anything else. They are more than important; especially when subjected to proper rational consideration, they are the best and brightest guides to life that we humans have."[30] As demonstrated by Wildman's scientific study of religious and spiritual experiences, intense experiences are among the most potent in revealing the nature of ultimate reality, especially in the context of the U2-C2 model, which stands as the most plausible among various models of ultimate reality. Nonetheless, if the valuational landscape of realities rooted in God as the ground of being can influence human convictions and provide the fundamental principles for the most exemplary and enlightened paths in life, it becomes challenging to assert that such a God is morally inassimilable.

Thirdly, Wildman offers a profoundly intricate and captivating portrayal of the experience of bliss emerging from pain and suffering towards the end of *Effing the Ineffable*. In particular, Wildman asserts, "extreme pain was the engine that levered me open to that arresting vista with its astonishing gift of empathetic connection to endless hordes of suffering organisms."[31]

The issue of pain, suffering, and evil stands as the most potent criterion in the contest over models of ultimate reality, challenging the concept of God as an agential being.[32] Accordingly, Wildman's phenomenological exploration of bliss is conducted within the framework of the U2-C2 model of ultimate reality, which accounts for the condensation of vast possibilities of value in a blissful experience that overwhelms the human recipient. Nevertheless, If extreme pain can indeed open one's heart to genuine empathy for all other suffering organisms, it suggests that there is still a morally significant choice or action to be made[33] in response to the spontaneous feeling of empathy that arises from such extreme suffering. Similar to my critique in the preceding point, the moral potential arising from the profound depths of God as the ground

30. Wildman , 188.

31. Wildman , 200,

32. Wildman, *In Our Own Image*, 138.

33. I deem how Wildman responds to his nurse during such a painful experience is a right action, as per Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable*, 199–200.

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of being, leading to empathetic human connections through the experience of agonizing bliss, appears to be at odds with Wildman's assertion that such a God is morally inassimilable.

Fourthly, one could argue that Buddhism represents the most promising tradition for establishing the necessary link between metaphysics and ethics in Wildman's perspective. This assertion is based on two key factors: A significant portion of Buddhist metaphysics is atheistic and aims to ground tangible entities within the extensive interconnectedness of all entities; and Wildman's ethics aims to align with Buddha's compassion. However, Wildman's stance on Buddhism is somewhat ambivalent. On one hand, he cites Buddhist teachings to support the argument that to live well with loneliness and ultimately consider it a virtue, one must detach from their aversion to loneliness.[34] This smooth transition from Buddhist metaphysics, i.e., that Śūnyatā deprives things of their self-nature, to Buddhist ethics, that is, detachment, contradicts Wildman's general assertion that ultimate reality, as the ground of being, does not offer a comprehensive moral direction.

On the other hand, when discussing the experience of bliss from a theological perspective, Wildman references the *Dhammapada* in the Pali canon of Indian Buddhism. He uses this as an example of how traditions attempt to "tame bliss" since this Buddhist sutra envisions blissful human existence as entirely free from pain or suffering, indicating a prejudice towards the pleasant.[35] In this context, the guidance provided by Buddhism, from metaphysical principles to ethical living, seems somewhat limited.

Wildman does not elaborate on his efforts to harmonize such interpretations of Buddhism within a Buddhist framework. As readers, we might infer that Wildman has not yet identified a tradition that offers a more robust connection between ground-of-being theology and humanistic ethics that aligns with his preferences.

IV. A General Critique of TMI

When Wildman asserts that, as the ground of being, God supports all moral decisions without favoring one over another, his understanding of "support" or "favor" is evidently influenced by his personal experience of divine negligence,[36] which leads to doubts regarding the plausibility of God as an agential being.

34. Wildman, 162.

35. Wildman, 209.

36. Particularly see the "Afterword" in Wildman, *In Our Own Image*, 220–28.

The doubt arises from the observation that good people do not necessarily receive good rewards.

However, it's worth noting that across various philosophical and religious traditions, the definition of goodness in human character or action can vary significantly. The fact that good individuals may not always receive positive rewards could simply mean that we need not define goodness as inherently entailing timely rewards.

In the following discussion, I will provide a general philosophical critique of TMI while adhering to the U2-C2 model of ultimate reality. My critique will consist of ontological and cosmological components, with the overarching goal of arguing that, as the ground of being, God still favors good human choices over bad ones.

The First Ontological Critique

Ontologically, the determinacy of things, processes, and actions in the world is shaped by their interrelationships. The indeterminate nature of the ground of being[37] does not introduce any additional factors to the determinate characteristics of these entities; it simply affirms their existence. Consequently, we can employ the following formula to understand why God, as the ground of being, is not morally inassimilable:

> *As ground of being, God favors good over bad choices because it is a fact that humans make good choices that align with a human perspective, in whatever sense "goodness" is defined.*

In simpler terms, the ground-of-being God doesn't furnish any additional support, favor, or reward beyond affirming the fundamental fact that humans make good decisions. When a fact aligns with what is considered good from a human perspective, it inherently implies that God supports it by means of the existence of such a good fact. Conversely, when a fact aligns with what is seen as bad from a human perspective, it inherently implies that God disfavors it by means of the existence of such a bad fact. God's favor or discover would be equivalent to saying, "it is indeed good" or "it is indeed bad."

I purposefully maintain the term "a human perspective" or "goodness" in a vague manner to accommodate the various ethical traditions that may define

37. I interpret the two models of the ground of being identified by Wildman, namely Plotinus and Neville, both as indicating an indeterminate ground. See Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable*, 63–82. However, I think Neville's model is more consistent in this regard, as I concluded in my 2018 dissertation cited previously.

goodness differently. Human decisions can stem from a range of perspectives, including individual, familial, communal, national, international, global, and even cosmic. However, since these decisions ultimately originate from humans, it is sufficient to describe them all as being filtered through a human lens. Therefore, we can vaguely categorize all these perspectives as being human.

Furthermore, the concept of goodness can be defined in numerous diverse ways, making it a complex task to encompass this wide array of ethical traditions, particularly in standard college-level ethics instruction. In this regard, we can draw from any of these traditions to provide a more specific expression of the general formula outlined above. The following is an example of ground-of-being theological deontology:

> *As the ground of being, God favors good choices over bad ones because it is a fact that humans make choices that align with what distinguishes them from non-humans. In this sense, a "good" human choice adheres to categorical imperatives dictated by human reason, emphasizing respect for free agents. Consequently, such good choices invariably lead to the self-contentment of human individuals with regard to their intrinsic dignity.*

However, irrespective of the specific nuances within the formula regarding vague terms, the fundamental equivalence of a good decision to a decision that a human should make implies that humans are morally obligated to make good decisions from their own perspective, aligning with a concept of goodness that is suitable for that perspective. This represents the overarching moral direction provided by God as the ground of being.

Certainly, humans are continually engaged in debates to determine the most fitting understanding of goodness within a specific human perspective, as demonstrated by the diversity of ethical traditions around the world. Given that a fundamental philosophical principle governing human activity is that without considering alternative viewpoints, none can be held with sincerity, it becomes evident that a critical and dynamic exploration of the concept of good is good in its own right. Therefore, to avoid the somewhat perfectionist language in the original formula, we can offer a modification:

> *As the ground of being, God favors good choices over bad ones because it is a fact that humans try to make good choices from a human perspective, striving for the best understanding of "goodness" suitable to that perspective.*

This adjusted formula emphasizes that humans are morally obliged to study and consider all available ethical traditions, striving to arrive at the best possible decision from a human perspective. This aligns with the overall moral direction that God, as the ground of being, can provide.

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The Second Ontological Critique

In both Plotinus's and Neville's models of ultimate reality, there exists the most abstract layer of created reality that explains the most generic nature of cosmic realities. For Plotinus, this would be the infinitesimal departure of Intellect from the One, whereas for Neville, it would be the four transcendentals of any determinate thing as a harmony: each harmony has its form, components, existential location, and value-identity.[38]

For a robust form of the U2-C2 model of ultimate reality, whether the highest ontological layer of created reality derives from a plenitude of infinite being or *creatio ex nihilo*, the basic characteristics of such a layer need to be summarized through a fallible and improvable process of investigating the *de facto* existence of cosmic realities. These characteristics represent the most generic traits of existing realities when viewed from a non-temporal perspective. Therefore, we can attempt to offer the second ontological critique of TMI in this way:

> *As the ground of being, God favors good choices over bad ones because good choices try to manifest the most generic traits of realities created by God from a human perspective, and hence, are God-like.*

It's worth noting that this formula may not align with non-religious ethics that do not seek to establish ethics within a ground-of-being God. However, among ground-of-being theologies, the principle of the vagueness of terms is still rigorously upheld in this second ontological formulation regarding the moral assimilability of the ground-of-being God. Consequently, we can provide examples to specify these vague terms. Aristotle's ethical concept of virtues, leading to eudaimonia as a process of imitating Nous, serves as such an illustration. Employing Neville's framework, we can also posit that a virtuous human choice contributes to the creation of the simplest form that harmonizes the most components, thereby nurturing a robust individual personhood. Such a robust personhood fits well within their existential location facilitating other individuals to adopt the simplest form that harmonizes the most components. Ultimately, each individual in this existential milieu possesses a unique value-identity and achieves co-flourishing. This kind of choice is considered good and favored by God because it aspires to emulate godliness from a human perspective.

Of course, humans also make bad choices that deviate from godliness. In such instances, it is easy to argue that the ground-of-being God disapproves of these bad choices because they are not aligned with godliness.

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38. The conclusive explanation of Neville's view can be found at Robert C. Neville, *Ultimates: Philosophical Theology*, Vol. One (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

Cosmological Critique

To view God as the ground of being cosmologically means to examine the outcome of divine creation, whether understood as a genuine *creatio ex nihilo* in Neville's sense or as the breaking-off of an infinite chocolate, as interpreted by Wildman following Plotinus. Specifically, we shift our focus to the end results of divine creation, taking a close look at the *de facto* existence of natural realities from a temporal perspective. The aim is to contemplate whether the ground-of-being God also supports or favors good human decisions by means of these cosmic realities.

In this context, I believe it's necessary to delve deeper into the "if-then" structures identified by Wildman as indicators of the potential value inherent in cosmic realities. While I agree that whether humans respond to these "if-then" structures in a moral manner is ultimately a result of human decisions, my counterargument is that these structures also exert a certain pressure or vector force, which serves to facilitate rather than determine these human decisions. In simpler terms, I maintain that while affirming the fundamental fact that humans try to make good choices, the ground-of-being God gives rise to cosmic realities that are rich with an "if-then" valuational structure to aid humans in actually making these good decisions.

So, the added-on cosmological formula of moral assimilability of the ground-of-being God is as follows:

> *As the ground of being, God favors good choices over bad ones because it is not only a fact that humans try to make good choices from a human perspective, striving for the best understanding of 'goodness' suitable to that perspective. But it is also a fact that there exist patterns of realities that facilitate humans in actually making these good choices.*

An illustration of the cosmological endorsement by the ground-of-being God for good human choices, which this God supports, is evident in how Wildman interacts with his nurse during his times of pain. It is clear that the feeling of empathy towards all suffering living beings emerges spontaneously in Wildman's heart, whether this spontaneity is influenced by human genetic makeup, social nurturing, or most likely, a combination of both factors. *If* we feel empathy in such challenging circumstances and in such a setting, we can *then* treat our nurse kindly and inquire, "How can you bear to witness the pain you see on a daily basis?"[39] *If* the nurse responds to our question with grace, we *then* feel grateful towards her. This sense of gratitude *then* motivates us to pay more attention to taking good care of ourselves.

39. Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable*, 199.

In a conventional sense, it is widely understood that choosing to treat others and oneself well even during times of extreme distress is the right course of action. These good choices are significantly facilitated by the feelings of empathy and thankfulness, which typically arise spontaneously. In other words, these feelings originate from a depth of realities larger than human beings. While humans can certainly choose not to be kind even when experiencing empathy and gratitude, these emotions indeed serve as motivators to encourage humans to make the right choices.

Certainly, the ground-of-being God, without intentional agency, gives rise to patterns of realities that can also facilitate humans in making bad choices. However, as our first ontological critique has already indicated, God only favors the fact that humans strive to make good choices, not bad ones. Furthermore, the existence of these natural patterns of realities serves to facilitate rather than determine the actual making of human bad choices. Considering that "bad choices" designate decisions that humans should correct, it follows that the ground-of-being God indeed gives rise to patterns of realities that facilitate humans in rectifying their choices. This is essentially equivalent to stating that "it is a fact that humans strive to make the best choices," our first ontological principle of moral assimilability.

Taking all of these factors into account, the ground-of-being God not only possesses valuable tools to guide moral direction but also offers a solution to the problem of theodicy. It seems that Wildman's thought highlights the latter advantage but overlooks the former one.

V. A Ruist Response

At this juncture, I must confess that my ontological and cosmological critiques of TMI are influenced by my sensitivity to Ruism. If we were to organize a competition of worldviews and lifepaths within the framework of the U2-C2 models of ultimate reality, focusing specifically on the criterion of whether a ground-of-being metaphysics upholds humanistic ethics, I would confidently anticipate that Ruism would emerge as a winner. While a comprehensive argument for this anticipation is beyond the scope of this paper, I can clarify the connection of traditional Ruist metaphysical ethics to my critiques of TMI as follows.

Researchers frequently cite the opening chapter of Laozi's *Dao De Jing* as a prime illustration of apophatic theology in ancient Chinese thought.[40] However, they often overlook the fact that Ruism is an even more robust tradition of

40. See my detailed analysis on this tendency in Bin Song, a review of William Franke, *Apophatic Paths from Europe to China: Regions without Borders* (Albany: State University

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metaphysics within ancient Chinese thought, advocating for a U2-C2 model of ultimate reality. This perspective is exemplified by the mystical Kongzi (or Confucius, 551 to 479 BCE) when he stands in awe of the profound and overwhelming creative power of the entire universe: "What does *Tian* (天, heaven or universe, a form of ground-of-being God) ever say? Yet the four seasons are put in motion by it, and the myriad creatures receive their life from it. What does *Tian* ever say?"[41]

However, when it comes to grounding human morality in an ultimate ground-of-being principle—often referred to as Dao in both Ruism and Daoism—Laozi and Kongzi express markedly different views. Laozi states, "Humans follow the earth, the earth follows the heaven, the heaven follows the Dao, while the Dao proceeds out of its own."[42] This reflects a more passive ethic, suggesting that humans should merely adhere to the established natural patterns of cosmic realities. Conversely, Kongzi asserts, "It is humans who advance the Dao; it is not the Dao which advances humans"[43] and "Without human beings, Dao would not proceed automatically (in the human world)."[44] This suggests that the manifestation of the universe's all-encompassing creativity in human society—in a uniquely humane manner—depends on human effort. The apophatic Dao of the universe (equated with the concept of *Tian* in this context) does not confer any extra quality to the ceaseless human moral pursuit of humaneness. Kongzi's perspective sheds light on the first ontological formula concerning the moral assimilability of the ground-of-being God.

During the second apex of the Ru tradition in ancient China, spanning from the Song through the Ming periods (960–1644 CE), which is often referred to as "Neo-Confucianism" in English (albeit inappropriately), Ru thinkers were significantly influenced by the metaphysical-ethical wisdom found in the ancient *Classic of Change*. They endeavored to establish all ethical criteria based on the most fundamental characteristics of the cosmic creativity of *Tian*.

According to the Word of Hexagram Qian in the *Classic of Change*, *Tian* exhibits four fundamental traits in its creativity: *Tian* gives rise to everything,

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of New York Press, 2017); *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 1 (March 2020): 278–81.

41. *Analects* 17.19. Translations of ancient Chinese philosophical texts in this article are my own, and follow these texts' received versions after Han Dynasty, as documented by the Chinese Text Project, https://ctext.org/.

42. *Dao De Jing* 25.

43. Analects 15.29.

44. The *Appended Texts* of the *Classic of Change*. I take the anonymous author of the *Appended Texts* as being influenced by Confucius's thought.

thus initiating (元) the entire world. *Tian*'s creativity permeates (亨) all aspects of the world. Each created entity acquires its distinctive nature during this process, while *Tian* also harmonizes (利) these entities to integrate (貞) all creatures into a dynamically unfolding whole. Within this metaphysical framework, virtuous human qualities and actions were seen as promoting the same traits of initiation, permeation, harmonization, and integration within the human realm. Consequently, they gave rise to a variety of virtues that resonates the qualities of *Tian*. This overarching metaphysical-ethical framework within Song through Ming Ruism informs my perspective on the second ontological critique of TMI.

The Ru tradition is not devoid of cosmological reflections on how the natural patterns of realities facilitate humans in actually making good and humane choices either, which underpins my earlier cosmological critique of TMI. In a thought experiment,[45] Mengzi (372–289 BCE) imagines every human spontaneously having a feeling of alarm and concern when seeing a baby about to fall into a well. If one does not act upon the feeling, one will accordingly have another feeling of shame and disgust. If one succeeds in acting upon it and saves the baby, others will look at them with a feeling of respect and deference. Together, these spontaneous reactions indicate the ubiquity of the moral sense of right and wrong. In Mengzi's view, these "four incipient sprouts" of moral feelings manifest four cardinal virtues (viz., humaneness, righteousness, ritual-propriety, and wisdom) which define the good aspect of human nature distinguishing humans from non-human beings.

We can assert that Mengzi's thought experiment bears a resemblance to Wildman's discussion of blissful pain, through which the feeling of empathy can be bestowed by a ground-of-being God upon humans. The intricate "if-then" dimension of Mengzi's thought experiment suggests that, after adopting "humaneness" or "humanity" as a universal moral standard, the naturally and spontaneously emerging feelings of empathy, shame, respect, and others effectively facilitate humans in actively pursuing humaneness. In fact, the nurturing of these feelings and the related other methods of the transformation of one's character form a long-standing component of Ruist philosophy known as self-cultivation (修身). I believe that the Ruist practical philosophy of self-cultivation contains a wealth of wisdom that can guide us in reviving the ancient Greek "science of self-transformation," as I argued in the earlier sections of this article.

45. Mengzi 2A, see Bryan W. Van Norden, trans., *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company., Inc., 2008), 46–47.

Due to the space constraints of this article, it is not feasible to provide a detailed explanation of how Ruism establishes humanistic ethics within an apophatic and naturalistic theological framework. To delve into this explanation, it would be essential to explore how Ruism addresses theodicy, the problem of evil. Based on my extensive historical and philosophical examination of Ruism, I have recently formulated the Ruist teaching in this context into five succinct sentences: "The reality of *Tian* is utterly good with no evil. The fundamental state of heartmind tends towards good while evil exists. There are good and evil when intentions are aroused. Knowing good and evil is attaining awareness. Doing good and eliminating evil is handling things." I would encourage interested readers to delve into the specifics of this Ru theology of nondualism for a more comprehensive understanding.[46]

VI. Conclusion

I am struck by the contemplative vision of the afterlife suggested by Wildman, where there is no Ruist exemplar available for coffee chats about the apophatic God.[47] While this contemplation does bring about a certain sense of unease, it is heartening to see the unparalleled academic camaraderie that Wildman has fostered with Neville, a renowned Christian-Confucian scholar and also my academic mentor.

However, I believe the absence of Ru in this vision might be attributed to a perceived disconnection between Wildman's ground-of-being theology and his admirable ethical praxis that exemplarizes humaneness and proactive social engagement. I hope that my previous critique might encourage Wildman to reexamine and strengthen this connection, ensuring that such a remarkable companionship can continue not only in Wildman's current life but also in the life to come.

46. Bin Song,"A Ru (Confucian) Theology of Nondualism in Light of Kongzi and Wang Yangming," in *Nondualism: An Interreligious Exploration*, ed. Jon Paul Sydnor and Anthony Watson (Lexington Books, 2023): 243–60.

47. Wildman, "Response," 294.