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Against Ultimacy

Stephen Maitzen

3.1 Introduction

Much religion, as well as much philosophy of religion (including but not limited to perfect-being theology), concerns itself with what its practitioners take to be *ultimate* in one or more senses. Indeed, J. L. Schellenberg has prominently argued that, especially in light of our relative immaturity as a philosophizing species and the familiar problems that beset traditional theism, religion *ought* to concern itself more broadly with the ultimate rather than more narrowly with the God or gods of specific religious traditions.[1] If Schellenberg is right about the proper concern of religion, then philosophy of religion should likewise concern itself with the ultimate if it wants to maintain contact with what is most central to religion. Even if Schellenberg is wrong about religion in general, it's clear that many religious adherents and philosophers of religion do in fact see themselves as concerned with what they take to be ultimate.

The kind of concern with the ultimate characteristic of religion presupposes that the ultimate is *possible*: to adopt a characteristically religious concern with the ultimate is at least tacitly to assume that the ultimate is possibly instantiated. I will argue, however, that ultimacy in each of the following three senses is impossible: ontological (ultimate reality); axiological (ultimate value); and teleological (ultimate purpose).[2]

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[1] See, for example, Schellenberg 2007 and 2013.
[2] Schellenberg discusses the worry that "an ultimate reality [might be] so far out of our league as to be, in the details of its nature, eternally incomprehensible to us in any possible world in which we humans exist" (2007: 64). Elliott (2015: 12) worries that we would be unable to *know* that we're experiencing an ultimate reality even if we did experience it.

If I am right, then any religion concerning itself with the ultimate in any of these senses rests on a false presupposition, as does any philosophy of religion that endorses such a concern.

Schellenberg (2016: 166) identifies three senses of ultimacy by name as the proper and essential focus of "religion in the twenty-first century": axiological; metaphysical (which I refer to below, more specifically, as "ontological"); and soteriological (to which my criticisms of axiological and teleological ultimacy are germane). If Schellenberg is correct about what a religious concern with the ultimate requires, and if I'm correct about the kinds of ultimacy I discuss herein, then religion and philosophy of religion should take the pursuit of the ultimate no more seriously than mathematics and philosophy of mathematics take the pursuit of the "ultimate integer." I will conclude by asking what religion and philosophy of religion ought to become if my criticisms are correct.

3.2 The Ultimate Seduction

There's something undeniably seductive about the concept of the *ultimate* such-and-such, a concept we often try to form by taking this or that good or useful thing and extrapolating its virtues as far as our minds can see. Commercial advertisers know well this seductive appeal: the registered trademark of BMW is "The Ultimate Driving Experience," to take just one of countless examples of the use of "ultimate" in marketing. Marketers of other kinds also exploit the appeal of "ultimate." The Christian apologist William Lane Craig, for example, peppers his writings with forms of the word, claiming repeatedly that unless (Christian) theism is true, nothing we do makes any "ultimate difference," our lives are "ultimately meaningless," nothing is "ultimately right or wrong," and so on.[3] To my knowledge, Craig never defines any of the phrases of his I just quoted, perhaps because he presumes that his readers will find frightening enough the prospect of sacrificing the ultimate this or that, whether defined for them or not.

Mathematics, however, reminds us that we ought to resist the seduction of the ultimate. Mathematics routinely deals in sets of items that

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I intend to raise the very different worry that, for reasons we can easily comprehend, an ultimate reality is impossible.

[3] See, among many examples, Craig 2008 and 2009. For criticism of Craig, see Hubin 2009 and Maitzen 2011.

come in degrees, or admit of comparisons such as "larger than," yet lack values that are ultimate in any sense. These sets include the integers, the prime numbers, the real numbers more generally, and even the transfinite numbers (which are ever increasing orders of infinity). Mathematics teaches us that these sets and many others not only lack but couldn't possibly have a largest, final, or ultimate member. To take an example that recently received coverage in the popular press: while it remains an open question whether the set of "twin primes"—pairs of prime numbers that differ by exactly 2—has a largest pair, a recent breakthrough by a formerly obscure number theorist, together with further work inspired by his breakthrough, provides important evidence against the existence of such an "ultimate" pair of primes.[4] In what follows, I will defend a similarly skeptical attitude toward the religiously significant kinds of ultimacy mentioned above.

3.3 Ontological Ultimacy

As the label suggests, anything ontologically ultimate possesses *being*, or *existence*, to the ultimate or highest possible degree. But it's doubtful whether the notion of "degrees of being" even makes sense. How can two things, both of which exist, exist to different degrees? How can one existent be literally more real than another? In order not to saddle proponents of ontological ultimacy with the problematic doctrine of degrees of being, I'll assume that anything ontologically ultimate must enjoy *complete ontological independence* from other things.

Now, according to Platonism, at least some abstract entities exist as a matter of metaphysical necessity and therefore possess the highest possible degree of ontological independence from other entities, namely, existing under *all possible* circumstances.[5] These abstract objects include pure mathematical objects such as the empty set. But it's hard to see how an abstract object, lacking by its very nature any agency or causal power, could count as ontologically ultimate in any sense relevant to widely held

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[4] Chang 2013; Klarreich 2013.
[5] I say "at least some abstract entities" because although all *sets* are abstract objects, any set exists contingently if it contains a member that exists contingently. The identity of any set depends solely on the identity of its members. So, for example, the set {Mars} exists only because Mars exists, and Mars could have failed to exist.

religious concerns. Only the zaniest adherent of Pythagorean mysticism could believe that the empty set is the ontological holy grail. Instead, if it exists, the ontologically ultimate will be *concrete* yet independent of everything else.

Independent in which way? As Schellenberg explains (using the term "metaphysical" where I've been using "ontological"), the kind of independence at issue here is explanatory independence:

> Metaphysical ultimacy . . . involves the property of fundamentally determining what exists and . . . that it exists as it does—a property that . . . will be relevant explanatorily. Something is metaphysically ultimate . . . just in case its existence is the ultimate or most fundamental fact about the nature of things, in relation to which any other fact about what things exist and how they exist would have to be understood in a correct and comprehensive account of things.
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> (Schellenberg 2016: 168)

There's good reason, however, to deny that any concrete being could count as explanatorily ultimate. On the contrary, the very desire that makes sense of the intellectual quest for the ontologically ultimate—namely, the desire to explain the existence of *every* concrete being—gives one reason to accept the principle (call it "LSE") that every concrete being has a logically sufficient explanation of its existence in terms of one or more other concrete beings and hence fails to be explanatorily independent of the latter. For consider: if LSE is false, then some concrete being either (a) exists as a matter of brute fact, lacking any logically sufficient reason for its existence; (b) provides a logically sufficient reason for its *own* existence; or (c) has a logically sufficient reason for its existence solely in terms of one or more *abstract* beings. As I'll explain, none of those options is tenable for anyone seeking the ontologically ultimate.

To accept (a) is to give up the motivation for seeking the ontologically ultimate in the first place, for to accept (a) is to concede that the desire to explain every concrete being's existence is *bound* to be frustrated, in which case it makes no principled difference whether the desire is frustrated just once or more than once. Indeed, it is to accept that the desire itself is fundamentally mistaken. To put it another way, there being an explanation of X's existence isn't a defect in X in contrast to which there being *no* explanation of X's existence is a virtue in X. So the quest for the ontologically ultimate cannot sensibly be the quest for some special X possessing that virtue. Nor can it sensibly be the quest for a brutely existing concrete X *as such*, for we couldn't ever be sure that our

quest had succeeded: we couldn't be sure that there isn't a logically sufficient explanation of X's existence that simply eludes us. Instead, what makes sense of the quest is the conviction that an explanation exists for every concrete being's existence, which (a) simply denies.

By contrast, if LSE is true then every concrete being's existence *has* an explanation. One might object that LSE demands the impossible, namely, a logically sufficient explanation of the existence not just of each individual concrete being but of the *entire series* of concrete beings in terms of some concrete being(s) not belonging to the series. This objection misfires, however, for the simple reason that no series of concrete beings is itself a concrete being, just as no *set* of such beings is itself concrete: series and sets are abstract objects.[6]

Alternatively, one might object that LSE isn't demanding *enough*: because LSE allows us to invoke concrete beings at every stage of explanation, fulfilling the terms of LSE still leaves unexplained why there are *any concrete beings at all*. But this objection is also misguided. It stems from a genuine criterion of correct explanation, namely, that in order to explain why a kind K has instances at all, one must invoke something *not* belonging to K. As William L. Rowe puts it, using *man* as the kind in question, "If *all* we know is that there always have been men and that every man's existence is explained by the causal efficacy of some other man, we do not know *why* there always have been men rather than none at all."[7] But the objection misapplies the criterion because it mistakenly assumes that "concrete being," like "man," names a *kind* of being.[8]

Option (b) fails because nothing, and in particular nothing concrete, is literally self-explanatory.[9] It's widely recognized that nothing that exists *contingently* is the explanation of its own existence, but neither is anything that exists noncontingently (i.e., necessarily). Let N be any

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[6] Merriam-Webster.com gives eleven definitions of *series*, ten of them in terms of other abstract-object words, namely, *number*, *set*, *sum*, *group*, *succession*, *division*, and *arrangement*. The remaining definition, "the coins or currency of a particular country and period," is peculiar to numismatics and arguably *also* defines an abstract object.

[7] Rowe 1998: 154–5. I construe Rowe's use of "man" as synonymous with "human being," rather than as a term applicable only during some arbitrarily defined phase in the life of a male human being.

[8] For details, see Maitzen 2013: 260–5. Mistakes of this sort are a source of confusion in various ontological debates, as Thomasson 2009 points out.

[9] As I argue in Maitzen 2013: 256. See also Morreall 1980 (especially 210–12), and Wielenberg 2009: 29–30.

necessarily existing being. Why does N exist? Even if we answer that question by appealing to the fact that N *must* exist, that fact *about* N isn't identical to N itself, as it would need to be were N literally self-explanatory. The same holds even if the explanation of N's existence derives from N's own nature or essence: "It's in the nature of N to exist" and "To exist is part of N's essence" are no better than "N exists necessarily" as an explanation of why N exists, and again none of those explanations makes N self-explanatory.

According to option (c), some concrete being—call it "G"—explains the existence of every other concrete being but doesn't explain its own existence. On this proposal, G's own existence isn't a brute fact, however, because G's own existence is explained *by the fact that G exists necessarily*. Now, assuming that there's such a thing as the fact that G exists necessarily, that fact itself is abstract rather than concrete: facts in general, and in particular the modal fact that G exists necessarily, belong to the category of causally inert things that includes propositions. Three problems therefore arise for this proposal.

First, it's hard to see how an abstract object can explain why a concrete object exists. Arguably it can work in the opposite direction: the existence of the concrete object Mars may well explain why the abstract object {Mars} exists, assuming that the latter does exist. But no one would be tempted to say that Mars exists because {Mars} does. Second, it seems like special pleading to say that the explanation of every other concrete being requires the *concrete* being G, whereas the explanation of G itself resides in an abstract object: if an abstract object ever explains the existence of a concrete object, then there is no independent reason to hold that it never happens more than once. Third, if the explanation of G's existence requires invoking some abstract object, then that abstract object has a better claim than G does to be regarded as explanatorily and hence ontologically ultimate, which is the Platonistic view we rejected earlier when we concluded that the ontologically ultimate must be concrete. I needn't hold that no concrete being can exist necessarily, only that even if it does, its existence isn't explained by the fact *that* it exists necessarily. Option (c) therefore fails, closing off the last way of rejecting LSE. But if LSE is true, then the ontologically ultimate, in the sense of explanatorily ultimate, does not exist.[10]

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[10] If we assume that explaining the existence of any concrete being requires invoking the existence of some *pre-existing* concrete being(s), then LSE rules out an earliest concrete

3.4 Axiological Ultimacy

The axiological ultimate would be or would possess unsurpassable—the maximum possible degree of—value or goodness.[11] But why is there any more reason to countenance a maximum possible degree of value or goodness than to countenance a maximum possible integer? Famously, Anselm's Ontological Argument infers the existence of an unsurpassably great (or greatest conceivable) being. But the standard versions of the argument rely on either (d) the confused notion that two things can differ only with respect to whether each of those things *exists in reality*, or else (e) the premise that an unsurpassably great being is at least logically possible, which begs precisely the question at issue in this context, namely, whether unsurpassable greatness is indeed possible.[12]

The fourth of Aquinas's Five Ways, the Argument from Gradation, infers the existence of a *highest possible good* from the observation that mundane things vary in their degree of goodness. But Aquinas's argument relies on the highly suspect doctrine, mentioned earlier, that two existing things can vary in their "degree of being," i.e., in the degree to which they are real. Furthermore, Aquinas's own presentation of the argument relies on a defective analogy: just as one thing is hotter than another thing because the former "approaches nearer the greatest heat," he says, one thing is better than another because it more nearly approaches the highest good (*Summa Theologiae* 1.2). Aquinas held the then standard view that fire, misclassified as an element, possesses the greatest heat possible, not recognizing that the temperatures of various *kinds* of fire themselves vary considerably. It is scientifically controversial whether the actual laws of nature imply a maximum possible temperature (and, if so, which temperature), but even if they do it's clear that *metaphysical* considerations by themselves imply no

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being. That consequence, however, doesn't imply that time stretches infinitely into the past, as Smith 2007 explains. Nevertheless, I find the claim that past time is infinite more plausible than the claim that past time is merely finite. It's important to see, moreover, that Big Bang cosmology doesn't establish that past time is finite; rather, it *says nothing* about times, if any, that preceded the Big Bang. By the same token, Newton's theory of universal gravitation says nothing about why gravity exists, which of course doesn't imply that gravity *has* no explanation, including the explanation later discovered by Einstein.

[11] According to Schellenberg, "axiological ultimacy is completely *unsurpassable* splendor and excellence" (2016: 169, emphasis in original).

[12] See Malcolm 1960 and Plantinga 1974.

such maximum. For all metaphysics says, there's no such thing as the hottest possible temperature. Aquinas's analogy fails, and in any case there are counterexamples to the principle that any comparative concept, such as *better*, presupposes a superlative concept, such as *best*. There are infinitely many cases in which one integer is *larger* than another, despite the impossibility of a *largest* integer.

Kant's influential moral philosophy asserts that our moral striving makes sense only if we postulate the existence of the highest possible good. Kant's assertion seems to derive whatever plausibility it has from his prior assertion that all of us have a moral duty to *promote* the highest possible good, which Kant characterizes as the state of affairs in which everyone's degree of happiness arises from and is perfectly proportioned to his or her degree of virtue. But even here Kant seems not to have specified a highest *possible* good, for if it's good that happiness and virtue stand in that relation with respect to each of the n persons who actually exist, then it would be even better if happiness and virtue stood in that relation with respect to each of the $2n$ or $3n$, etc., persons who would inhabit a more populous universe. Because, necessarily, those coefficients of n have no upper limit, no state of affairs represents a highest possible, or unsurpassable, level of goodness. I hasten to add that this state of affairs— i.e., the impossibility of a logical upper limit to goodness—doesn't *itself* count as a case of ultimate or unsurpassable value, any more than the impossibility of a largest integer is itself a largest integer.

Moreover, it's far from clear that we have a moral duty in the first place to promote the highest possible good rather than simply a duty to promote the *higher* good, i.e., to promote the better over the worse. But even if we have a duty to *promote* the highest possible good, we don't thereby have a duty to *achieve* it. A duty to achieve it implies its attainability, on the Kantian principle that "ought" implies "can," but a duty merely to promote—i.e., to strive for—the highest possible good has no such implication. A golfer can strive to shoot the perfect round of golf, treating the perfect round as a regulative ideal, without any expectation that the perfect round is attainable.[13] So even a Kantian duty to strive for

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[13] Except perhaps in the case of the late North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il, who was reported by his country's official news agency to have shot a round of 38 under par on a 7,700-yard, par-72 golf course, in his first and only attempt at the game, including 11 holes where he required just one shot.

the highest possible good would not imply the existence of the highest possible good.

Furthermore, why must there be a maximum possible degree of value or goodness if there is no maximum possible degree of disvalue or badness? Why the asymmetry?[14] One might try to support an asymmetry as follows: maximum possible goodness is achieved by whatever lacks any moral defects at all, whereas maximum possible badness would require having every possible defect, and to any collection of defects we could always add one more. That reasoning fails, however, because the absence of moral defects is only *necessary* for maximum possible goodness, not sufficient for it: the number 2 lacks any moral defects without thereby counting as the best possible thing.

Consider a final reason for doubting that axiological ultimacy is possible. It seems obvious that goodness comes in more than one type, including aesthetic, instrumental, and moral. Even within the context of moral goodness, there's likely more than one relevant value (despite what simplistic hedonism may claim) and more than one relevant virtue (despite what Plato may claim in some of his dialogues). Furthermore, these values and virtues seem incommensurable: the questions "How much virtue is worth a given amount of pleasure?", "How much prudence is worth a given amount of fortitude?", and "How much beauty is worth a given amount of pain?" sound like bad jokes. If these values and virtues are incommensurable, then there will be no such quantity as the *total goodness* of any state of affairs and therefore no such thing as a logical upper limit to that quantity.

3.5 Teleological Ultimacy

A teleologically ultimate entity would be an entity whose purposes (goals, aims, ends) are ultimate. Alternatively, the label "teleologically

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[14] One answer to this question relies on the medieval doctrine that *being and goodness are identical*, which implies that nothing completely lacking goodness can even exist (see Stump and Kretzmann 1991). Suffice it to say that this doctrine is even more doubtful than the doctrine that *being comes in degrees* (which I criticized earlier, and which it presupposes) and at least as questionable as the axiological asymmetry that the doctrine is being invoked to defend.

ultimate" might apply not to the entity whose purposes those are but to the purposes themselves. Either way, I'll argue, *ultimate purpose* is an incoherent notion.

Aristotle points out that there are some purposes we aim to fulfill only as a means of fulfilling other purposes. For instance, I flip the switch on my reading lamp not merely in order to turn on the lamp but because I need the lamp on in order to read the newspaper, and I want to read the newspaper not for its own sake but because I want to learn news about events in my community. It's easy to see how some purposes (goals, aims, ends) fail to be ultimate by instead being intermediate, that is to say, by being purposes whose fulfillment is necessary for achieving some other goal.

Yet a purpose doesn't count as ultimate in any philosophically interesting sense just by failing to be intermediate. Suppose that I want to learn news about events in my community but not for any *further* reason, such as my wanting to be a more engaged citizen: I want merely to learn about events in my community, i.e., to satisfy my curiosity on that topic. That purpose, let's suppose, is the "end of the line" in any purposive explanation of why I flipped the switch on the lamp. But it doesn't thereby count as "teleologically ultimate" in the sense relevant to those who say that our religious focus should be on what's ultimate. Instead, in the case I described, my wanting to learn news about my community is a *brute* purpose, a purpose whose fulfillment has, as a matter of contingent fact, no further purpose. By contrast, an *ultimate* purpose must be a purpose whose fulfillment not only lacks but *couldn't possibly have* any further purpose or justification. In Aristotle's phrase, an ultimate purpose must be "that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1097a).

In the case of both brute and ultimate purposes, the question "Why seek to fulfill that purpose?" has the same answer: "No reason." But an ultimate purpose differs from a brute purpose in not only eliciting that answer but in making the very question itself somehow *senseless* or *ill posed*. Again, a purpose counts as ultimate only when fulfilling that purpose couldn't possibly have any further purpose, and in that sense therefore the question "Why seek to fulfill that purpose?" is not well posed. Therein, however, lies the problem for teleological ultimacy, because the question "Why seek to fulfill that purpose?" is *always* well

posed.[15] With regard to any purpose, it's never senseless to ask (even if it might be hard to answer) why one ought to seek to fulfill it.[16]

It would be wrong to think that Aristotle solves this problem when he observes that *happiness* is something (indeed, he says, the only thing) that we desire always purely for its own sake. For it's clear that Aristotle uses "happiness" in this context merely as a placeholder, an item of shorthand having no more content than "whatever it is (if anything) that we always desire purely for its own sake." Granted, it can seem confused to ask why we ought to seek "whatever it is (if anything) that we always desire purely for its own sake" if we interpret the quoted phrase *de dicto*. But if we interpret the phrase *de re*, focusing on whichever *thing* the phrase purports to denote, then the question is far from confused. Aristotle's own candidate for filling in the placeholder is *eudaimonia*, a complicated mixture of wise and virtuous living, and it's eminently sensible to ask why one ought to seek *that* way of life over any other; philosophers have disagreed with Aristotle without thereby evincing conceptual confusion. Teleological ultimacy requires having, or being, a "purpose to end all purposes," a purpose *for which* it would make no sense to demand an explanation or a justification. Given the very nature of purposes, there is no reason to think that such a thing is even possible.[17]

My criticisms of axiological and of teleological ultimacy also bear on what Schellenberg calls "soteriological" ultimacy, which he identifies as the third of the three senses of "ultimate" that are central to religious

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[15] Thomas Nagel (1971: 721) makes this point with regard to the following purposes, at least some of which are commonly regarded as ultimate: "[T]he progress of human history, or of science, or the success of a society, or the kingdom, power, and glory of God."

[16] In his comments on an earlier version of this chapter, Paul Draper suggested that an ultimate purpose might be one that "couldn't possibly *need* a justification in terms of some other purpose even if it could have such a justification." However, because the question "Why seek to fulfill that purpose?" is always well posed and would generate the need for a justification if it *were* posed, no purpose could count as ultimate in Draper's sense either.

[17] For elaboration and defense of this claim, see Maitzen 2011. In response to the claim, William Lane Craig repeats a standard theistic line: "There *can* be nothing greater than knowing the greatest Good!" (Craig 2012). Presumably, "knowing the greatest Good" is knowledge by acquaintance rather than (solely) propositional knowledge. What is it like to know the greatest Good by acquaintance? Why can there be nothing greater than that? The more specific one gets in reply to the first question, the less convincing one's answer to the second question will be. Why is my knowing the greatest Good by acquaintance greater than, for instance, my experiencing ever more intense states of pleasure, without end?

concern. According to Schellenberg (2016: 170), "a reality is soteriologically ultimate just in case in relation to it an ultimate good can be attained." Clearly, then, any doubts that axiological ultimacy—an ultimate good—exists, or any doubts that it is *attainable* even if it does exist, transfer to soteriological ultimacy. The impossibility of teleological ultimacy matters here as well, if we assume that the ultimate *good* for an agent bears some relation to his or her ultimate *purpose* for living.[18] No purpose for living can be ultimate in the sense of being immune to further rational questioning—which, as I argued earlier, is the only sense in which any purpose could count as ultimate rather than simply brute.

3.6 Consequences for Religion and Philosophy of Religion

I'm no anthropologist, but it strikes me that Schellenberg makes a plausible anthropological point when he identifies the concern with, and the search for, an ultimate reality as central to the religious impulse felt by many people, especially as our species continues to mature intellectually. Intellectually mature human beings don't need the jumble of minor deities that their pre-Axial ancestors invented in a vain but understandable attempt to explain and control an unpredictable, dangerous world. Increasingly, they no longer need any of the versions of the creator God later concocted during the Axial age either. Schellenberg gives them reasons to continue in this direction—to get beyond, or grow out of, their parochial inheritance and seek instead an ultimate reality unencumbered by the constricting cultural accretions that have characterized all religions to date.

I'm offering them, in turn, reasons to go even further—to get beyond the preoccupation with an ultimate reality. If, as Schellenberg has argued,[19] traditional theism is false, then the admittedly seductive notion of a Cosmic Father turns out to be illusory. I've been arguing that the admittedly seductive notion of an Ultimate Reality is likewise an illusion, something it's also time we humans outgrew. Any religion that seeks an

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[18] If someone who devotes his life to collecting string says that questing after string is ultimately good for him, our doubt that he's correct stems from our doubt that collecting string is an appropriate purpose for living.

[19] See, e.g., Schellenberg 1993 and 2004.

Ultimate Reality seeks a chimera no less than any religion that seeks a Cosmic Father. Where, then, should religion for a maturing human species go next? Surely not back to the parochialism of the Axial age, let alone back to the primitive animism that came before it. Perhaps, as some have recently suggested, religion for a mature humanity ought to focus on the very minimal idea that "there is merely *something* transcendental worth committing ourselves to religiously" (Elliott 2015: 1).

If that suggestion is right, and if "religiously" means "devotedly" or "earnestly" (as in "She follows the Cubs religiously"), then we can already identify a superb candidate for the object of such commitment: *philosophy*, using our most careful reasoning to pursue wisdom, broadly construed. Arguably philosophy can provide the three types of transcendence— although not, of course, the three types of ultimacy—that Schellenberg describes as distinctive of religiosity: metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological. Schellenberg (2016: 167) defines "transcendence" as going beyond or beneath the "mundane reality" that we encounter in our everyday, unreflective (and therefore unphilosophical) activity. Philosophy certainly achieves such transcendence with regard to metaphysics and axiology by digging below the superficial commerce of life and trying to answer the most basic questions we can ask about the nature of reality and the nature of value. It has also been known to bestow a salutary, even salvific, effect on those who engage in it seriously, thereby transcending mundane reality in a soteriological way as well.

If religion requires something more than I've just described, does philosophy count as sufficiently religious? It shouldn't matter. Unlike, say, the term "rational," the term "religious" has no positive normative heft: being religious, as such, isn't a virtue. It follows that even if "a religious way of life, on some useful and interesting construal, can add value to the human experience,"[20] it will not do so *in virtue of being religious*. By contrast, being to at least some degree earnest, thoughtful, and reflective *is* a virtue, one that philosophy encourages and rewards. On this view, the *philosophy* of religion becomes the philosophy of philosophy, which is just to say: philosophy.

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