

The Probable God: Toward a Quantum Theology

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*A man said to the universe:
“Sir, I exist!”
“However,” replied the universe,
“The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.”*

—STEPHEN CRANE, 1899

*Theologians, they don't know nothin'
About my soul.*

—JEFF TWEEDY, 2004

Despair

How can a theologian respond to one who says that the world brooks no obligation? What do I say if you presume a meaningless world? How do I respond to your despair? Faith is the opposite of despair, yet the former can not easily contradict the latter. I have no evidence that life is meaningful or that the world is purposeful, sensitive, or charitable. I have faith that living is important; in my short experience, the world seems precariously perched between meaning and meaninglessness. On balance I call myself a cautious optimist, yet I cannot point to any particular events or emblems that led to my hope in a purposeful world.

Nor could Muhammed. When asked for miracles, he gestured to the sun-

set and referred to the birds' song. I note music, an ephemeral endeavor of such transcendent beauty that it seems to defy rational deconstruction. Why are human beings driven to make music? Why should we destitute humans, eking our life out on this exacting canvas, pause to create or consider beauty? It's not a crop. How can a paper speaker-cone vibrate back and forth a few times and let the listener know how Rachmaninov was feeling last century? And why is John Coltrane's "After the Rain" so powerful? That is not a question of music theory, rather a demand: why should such things exist? I do not believe that they would find a place in an arbitrary world.

But that may just be a naïve *belief*, which is, to paraphrase Paul Tillich, an assumption of the improbable based on incomplete speculation. In *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich provides a superb definition of *faith* as "ultimate concern," both noun and verb. Faith is the inexorable focus of our highest attentions. True faith is devotion of the soul to the eternal. Further, Tillich makes an incisive case to separate faith from belief. Faith is not acceptance of the improbable or unproven. That is *belief*, says Tillich. Belief can supersede or contradict science. But *faith* is the state of being ultimately concerned, infinitely aspiring, turning the eyes on high. One may describe faith as humans' highest aspiration. Humans often misplace this ultimate concern in concrete manifestations that cannot contain ultimacy. Such conflation leads inevitably to idolatry. This is what promotes charges like "I believe in evolution, not creation;" or "How can I accept a God that permits . . ." There is no intellectually honest answer to such queries, because those statements are challenges to belief, not faith. Tillich says that they are a confusion of faith for belief, as the particular is substituted for the universal, the fleeting for the eternal. Nonetheless, one can believe in God without accepting creeds or catechisms. Being a faithful seeker does not require abdication of intellect to spurious beliefs.

However, we are obligated to pursue grace, to challenge the divine. Religion is a history of people striving beyond themselves, the footprints of peoples pursuing grace and divinity beyond. Thus, although their beliefs may vary, all religions ultimately point to the same goal: faith. Faith clears the path; religions mark it in their unique manners. One may say that religion builds cairns along unique paths to ultimate realization, but these are incidental milestones to the achievement of enlightenment. Imagine the plethora of world religions like a variety of arrows pointing up the highlands on a

topographic map. No two arrows on a map are congruent or parallel but they all point in the same direction. The divine presence is the shared orientation of belief arrows, pointing towards a generalization of their arguments. When the expressions of particular religions are minimized, what remains is faith. Like hikers ascending a peak from several faces, religions offer different routes to the summit. All paths reach the same goal, although the signposts may differ. It is the highest ideal of the human to climb. For helping humans pursue grace and scale peaks of faith, religion has value beyond its frequent destructive binges. Beyond ego, historical circumstance and dogma, humans are united in their dearest aspiration: to know the divine. Spiritual search can be the noblest vocation of human beings. It may not be obligatory, but a life without striving is somehow lacking.

As he pursues grace to make sense of his finite life amid the infinity he senses, Paul Tillich elevates doubt as the necessary counterpoint to faith. Even for a cautious optimist who continually wrestles between the belief in chaos and order, maintaining faith would be a continuous challenge. Rashi implies that doubt is a shameful matter (Numbers 20:12). I disagree, and Tillich's writing vouchsafes that faith is a risk that permits doubt. As Jacob wrestled the phantom until dawn and gained blessing through struggle, so Tillich makes a very convincing case for the matrix among faith, courage, doubt and risk. Just as Tillich praises the faithful for their courage to risk doubt, it is only through struggling courageously that a person is truly faithful through doubts. Courage is the arrow that moves us along. Perhaps courage is the necessary and sufficient condition for a worthwhile life.

Nonetheless, as implied by Stephen Crane, there are those whose courage is exhausted, or for whom faith is not available. This is no small problem of disbelief, but an actual rejection of faith. In his work, Tillich proposes that there are no real atheists once belief is disentangled from faith: Tillich says that there are no atheists because everyone must have some ultimate concern, a cause to which they stake their life. Disbelief in a unique or pluralistic deity is not precisely atheism. One can believe in "The Force" and still be faithful. I disagree. To me, the opposite of faith is not rejection of gods, nor elevation of science. Belief that the world is purposeless, arbitrary, and ultimately chaotic is denial of the divine and the sublime. *Atheism is the concern that there is no concern.* Cynicism is the oppo-

site of faith. Insignificance and drift are the antonyms of theism. Atheism is concern that the universe lacks purpose, is chaotic, and that the seeker has no ultimate aspiration. Neither God nor nation nor material can fill this existential void. All is vanity.

Despair is the opposite of faith—it is the surety of a universe that brooks no obligations. Literally, “despair” comes from the root meaning hopeless. Theology must find a response for the despondent. One possible recourse is commiseration; this is the response of the Psalter. David’s laments, his “blues” if you will, let the reader know that she is on a well-trod path. Another outlet is the sensual; this is the response in *The Stranger*. Camus’ protagonist, Meursault, fills the void in his life with women, food or violence. Unfortunately, sex, company, food, and drugs are mere medications, distractions from the essential existential despair that life may be superficial or haphazard. If someone is convinced that the universe is chaotic, I have no evidence of orderliness—that’s just my belief. In this writing, I hope to make room for divinity within despondency.

Evidence

Theologians cannot write of the divine in literal language because the object of our faith beggars description. We resort to metaphoric language to account for intangible yet palpable phenomena. Like Paul Tillich’s symbol and Neil Gillman’s myth, analytic science also uses models to describe ineffable processes. That is, scientists gather observations, and through extrapolation, interpolation and deduction, they infer and hypothesize about the unobservable. For example, a common and popular laboratory experiment in junior high school classrooms is the black box experiment. Students receive a small box, which contains some item or items. Without opening the box, they are asked to imagine what’s inside. Students may rotate, shake, smell, hear, or otherwise investigate, as one might do to a birthday present discovered the evening before one’s birthday. In the experiment, one can finish by opening the box, or not; the essential is to imagine what cannot be readily observed. In such a way, introductory physical sciences students understand how advanced scientists model atoms, quarks or forces (or how writers imagine ego, a passing game, or a jealous god).

My goal is to formulate a model for God that accords with my observations, yet reserves God an adequate place in the cosmos. This model will strive to balance scientific honesty with the soul's yearning for meaning. The fairest thing to any future debate, I suppose, must be to reveal my observations: If I consider a higher purpose, I can only say that it is subtle. I do not imagine a presence that moves mountains, sets the course of rivers, and orders human destiny. Rather, in a dangerous mix of foresight and free will, a presence initiated the comings and goings of earth, but has little reason to micromanage daily life. There is no divine intervention nor miracles, save a sunset or a whippoorwill if a person stops to attend to them. The divine presence does not mold or shape, but occasionally massages if one is alert to its touch. The divine's action in this world is not only subtle, but also largely poetic, and humans are poorly suited to the metaphors through which grace composes. In all, we are ill-equipped to apprehend the sublime, much less the divine.

More problematically, I observe no correlation between righteousness and quality of life. Some folks are vile, ill-mannered, and inhumane. Others live gently, and behave with dignity, grace, and nobility. Many live placidly to the fullness of life. Others struggle mightily and die early. Yet there is no observable correlation among the groups. Neither piety nor civic virtue seems to affect fate. Many kindnesses are unnoticed, and many crimes go unpunished. Do the wicked sleep poorly? That may be their only earthly punishment for heinous crimes committed against their citizens. Persons in power sleep atop billions in pilfered state assets, surrounded by adoring lovers and faithful bodyguards. Liberal, cosmopolitan cultures eliminated other sophisticated cultures over simmering frustrations about race and dogma. Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot removed whole classes of people. Almost four million have died in Congo and Sudan in this century. I haven't even mentioned the crimes committed for the sake of God. Of course, when a supplicant asked Buddha about the nature of suffering, he asked the seeker to gather a mustard seed from a household that had not suffered. Surely, the man returned empty-handed. After a certain age, there are no households ignorant of suffering. Judaism can be the lens through which to perceive heartache, an astrolabe to navigate life's caprice. "We suffer," as Marcel Proust said, "therefore we think."

So, how can one conclude that God is good and omnipotent? More

broadly, sidestepping the question of God's existence, can one conclude that the universe is purposeful, meaningful, and directive? Or is it merely random? There are a few explanations that theologians have traditionally offered for the problem of suffering and evil, none of which satisfy me. Quickly, I'll refute three possible arguments that God is both good and omnipotent. First, Maimonides offers the explanation that humans cannot quantitatively or qualitatively assess good and evil. Humans cannot measure suffering across the vast universe.¹ To this I say: indeed, some suffering is clearly subjective, yet it is no less real because it is mine alone. The second response is that God is inscrutable; humans cannot understand God's master plan. Really, this is no answer at all. Claiming that humans cannot comprehend or apprehend is just a deft reformulation of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Likewise, statements like "Maybe his brother died at nineteen in order to make room for someone else to cure cancer" are spoken only by fools or knaves. The third defense is that an afterlife will balance scales. This requires belief in something improbable; furthermore, an afterlife might be so far off as to be weightless in the balances of good and evil. So the "death of death" has a present discounted value of almost nil.²

So to account for evil and suffering, I strike the possibility of God's omnipotence. If God were capable of intervening in human affairs to reveal the Koran, to bear a son, to cause hemorrhoids, how do I account for the times that God does not interfere to prevent Rwandan genocide, to stave off childhood leukemia, or to free the wrongly imprisoned at Guantanamo? I prefer a limited deity, not the capricious God of Job. Yet why would God not be omnipotent? By nature, God must be supreme, or else fail to achieve ultimate concern. It must be the case that God only appears non-omnipotent in our world. Generally theologians have described God as limiting Godself to accommodate human free will. Isaac Luria called this the contraction of God. Accepting that God restrains Godself from acting in order to leave room for human maneuvering seems a pragmatic explanation to me. But this begs the question: What are the limits of the deity? I would like to reserve to God (or the universe, or The Force, or whatever name we give to our "ultimate concern") as much authority as possible, simply because that preserves the most meaningful, sublimely romantic worldview. Without gerrymandering God's realm to include fluffy bunnies but not cruel foxes, what portrait of God can I draw? What model will I use to account

for my observations? What I seek is a bridge between the dispiriting conditions in the world and passionate love of existence. Life is tragic and joyful, gargantuan and fragile.

Indefinity

Jewish theologians noticed this paradox and describe God as eclipsed or hiding God's face. I prefer the term occulted. Shia' Islam has an eschatological conception of the Occulted Imam. After the khalifate division between 'Ali and Abu Bakr, the twelfth imam in the Shia' lineage disappeared. In the eschatological formulation, he is described as occulted. That is, he was removed to an alternate dimension. His existence is obscure, absconded between the infinite wisdom of Koran and finite human understanding. Neither of the infinite universe nor of the finite earth, he has become "indefinite." Only at the end of the days will the twelfth imam's state be redefined. I lift this historical-eschatological myth in a theological conception. To the faithful, God is neither finite nor infinite.

God is indefinite. In the same way, God is both immanent and transcendent. I declare this not merely because, like Maimonides, I am wholly unable to say anything definite about divinity. My experience of the world also bears out an indefinite God. I know too much suffering to recognize an intimately involved God; therefore, God can not share finite human existence. At the other end, I accept the eternal, but find infinities incomprehensible. Hence, I believe that God rides the cusp between measured human action and measureless space. I observe a precarious balance between order and chaos, from meaning to meaninglessness. God is occulted within these tangents, eluding definition.

God is indefinite in the same manner which sub-atomic particles are indefinite. Quantum physics say that very small items lose their particle nature and are better described by wave equations. The observer cannot identify the location and momentum of a particle—it is effectively occulted. Thereafter, finding an electron becomes a matter of probability. This is also my contention about God. One may never know God's actual state: finite or infinite, immanent or transcendent. God has no permanent state, but eludes capture. It were wiser to speak of probabilities of finding God. This model I use borrows imagery from chemistry. At the extremely small, low-

mass level, electrons lose their particle nature and are more accurately described as waves. The presence or absence of these waves is often graphed in three-dimensional probability illustrations. The illustrations look like bulbous clouds, a haze describing regions in which one is more likely to encounter electrons. For example, when carbon's electrons bond to other atoms, their arrangement is often described by four dumbbell-shaped lobes radiating from the original nucleus. As drawn, there are darker regions within the lobes, to account for high probability of electron occurrence. The shading diminishes outward, and fades to nothingness in areas of limited probability. Then, there are points (for example, the nucleus) and planes where the electron cannot be found.

Likewise, God has a probable experience. There are regions of high God-density (e.g., synagogue, love, or a Da Vinci exhibition), and regions of lesser density (seventh grade, later seasons of Saturday Night Live), and of course there are empty points (war, malice, hypocrisy, corruption). As a corollary, humans experience God in probability. One may not always find God in prayer, and one may occasionally find God on CBS. For humans, the God-empty place is often the experience of despair. As intimated above, despair is the inference that the world is arbitrary, coincidental, aimless or trivial. That is, when one believes that "To stay or to go, it amounted to the same thing," one denies that the world has a will.³ Such existential despair is not merely sadness; rather, one is convinced that life is arbitrary and aimless. The despondent feels that the universe is indifferent to her destiny, her goals. The universe does not take her into account.⁴ Once again, in succumbing to despair, can there be God? How can a pastor or theologian respond to this conviction?

The imagery of the Indefinite God is one response. This God cannot be localized. God is neither finite or infinite, but rather indefinite. God is neither the prayer nor the petitioner. God exists as the tangent between infinite reality and the finite world. Conversely, we experience God as the interpenetration of infinity within our finite existence. The epiphany of *Swan Lake* for the viewer is the moment when the infinite pierces the skin of the finite with its grace and beauty. God is not the music nor the musician—God is among these things, the matrix of connection between Tchaikovsky's composition, Balanchine's choreography, the dancers and their audience. One may call the encounter with the Probable God a moment of revelation. The

Divine arrests us with moments beyond the ephemeral, attaining transcendence. It is this quality of being *arrested*, of being wholly silent and present, that marks the experience of God: “God is ours, a refuge and a strength, a help in distress, *very present*” (Psalm 46:2). Yet, it is not possible to hold onto these interpenetrated moments. We cannot even predict them accurately. When will we feel the small, still touch of divinity in our everyday lives? It comes upon us in waves, or more often not at all, like beams of light. God is neither infinite nor finite, just as photons and electrons are neither discrete particles nor noticeable waves. They are both and neither at the same time. Perceptible but not through discrete measurement; intangible but palpable.

If God is occulted from human understanding and God’s nature can only be described as indefinite, how is God experienced? Any seeker in faith must experience divinity on occasion or else become hopelessly discouraged. As I say, God cannot be tied down, nor supposed to be positively identified. We generally only perceive divinity through sublimity; that is, through Jimi Hendrix, *King Lear* in Central Park, the dream of a lover’s dark eyes on a frozen, windless night. We experience God in brief flickers of revelations, through the rare color of a cricket’s wing. To the seeker, that can’t be enough. She seeks more regular, or less irregular, knowledge of God. I offer a quantum theology: God perceived like electrons; neither particle nor wave, neither discrete nor infinite. By extension, like an electron, we can picture God through probability maps. Not a treasure map, to give degrees and minutes in latitude and longitude. This would determine and isolate God in a way that moderns since Maimonides revile. What we can do is find probabilities to God.

Apiculture

To clarify I’ll change the metaphor: picture your favorite meadow in May. In the meadow, imagine that there lives a hive of bees. Bees love pollen and the finer things in life: clover, blossoms, acacia, tupelo, wildflowers. In this beautiful meadow, all such things exist; it is a veritable amusement park for the bees. On a typical morning, the bees go about their lovely business of pollination and merriment; you are stuck at home without any honey, perhaps doomed to write an article before Monday. You can’t afford to fritter time away outside on this lovely morning, but remain in front of your

iMac without even a digital flower. Your mind wanders and you contemplate the life of a bee. Where are they? Draw a map. Beginning from an overhead view of the meadow, mark well its trees and clearings, and all other things that are fixed. But honestly, you can't tell where individual bees are—they are not like trees or stones—they move in search of mellow fruitfulness. Because there are thousands of lucky bees, and you can't be there to photograph, survey or even count them, you must guess. Bees are not static, they can not be pinpointed. You resort to guesswork. They are probably around those lilacs. It is possible that many are on the blooming apple tree. There may be a few on the mosses. One or two may perch on a scrap of candy you dropped recently. What you must draw is a likelihood map, indicating the probable locations of some bees around the landmarks. Devise a bee-key for your map: shade where they might be, darker patches where they should be, even darker on the particularly sweet pollen, a mark around the hive. If the scale is vast enough, the aerial view will encompass the entire cluster of bees. This map is no guarantee, however. Even the hive may be abandoned.

Mapping God is like mapping a swarm of bees. We begin to guess where God might be these days, as we stew about alone with our cynicism. God isn't here with me, but God could be in church, or maybe at the symphony (Charlie Parker and Dizzie Gillespie called that church), or at the museum. If we were to say that God is probably in church, are we speaking with any certainty? Of course not. It's all probability. I might trace my map of places to find God: my synagogue in Venice, Glacier National Park, skydiving, a James Brown concert would be darkly shaded. But these are all just likely scenarios. That is, it seems likely to find God in Langston Hughes, but there's no guarantee. As we cast about for places to find God, we may miss the God with us immediately. It is like going to a party with the hopes of finally meeting *her*; we traipse about often missing *it*. The girl of our dreams is not there, but the party could be marvelous if we just stopped looking for something more. Likewise, there are probabilistic God-maps tracing time, not space, that share the same problem. Maybe when I get the promotion or maybe when I finish therapy, maybe when I graduate or maybe when I have children, I will really know the divine. There are no assurances. In the meantime, fruitless waiting destroys any opportunity to appreciate the present. One must be arrested, neither vainly regretting the

past nor fruitlessly anticipating the future, but being aware and happy in one's present portion.

Another interesting effect is the correlate of the uncertainty principle in physics. From your salon, you can sketch the likely location of bees, but you eventually need to go to the meadow to find them, get honey or get stung. Once you arrive, there is no longer higher probability or lower probability of finding bees. They are there—either you find them or you don't. What was expressed as probability on a graphical representation becomes reduced to a binary experience: 0 or 1, yes or no, sting or honey, divine experience or lonely walk home. Probability is reduced to singularity. Taking action has ultimately affected your chances. You have disturbed the mathematical probability. Likelihood becomes an event, and as Milan Kundera describes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, life is an experiment that can not be run again. In effect, all probability designs are really just approximations. As intimated, we don't experience 10 percent of God when we go to a mosque, but we might experience God one time in ten. What's more, you and I may have entirely different maps. The fact is, each person must uncover and discover his or her God-map. It can not be received.

Response

Moreover, in the theology of The Probable God, what are human obligations aside from prediction and search? Humans must attend, testify and love. Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky taught me that Genesis 18 is a prioritization of hospitality. Abraham spoke to God intimately. He existed in a primordial state of Grace (*Hesed*) with God. Yet he recognized the primacy of human concerns. Travelers suffer. They ache, thirst and hunger. It was Abraham's duty to attend to human suffering. How much more so must one attend to suffering in the world of The Probable God? In a world where God is probable, the actual trumps the potential. We can't ultimately know how God exists, but I know that you exist. We must attend to alleviating the world's suffering, devoting ourselves Jewishly to repairing the world. Through this action, we might "add to positive energy quotient in the cosmos by the gift of our devotion."⁵ Gabriel Marcel calls this testimony. Human action, art, teaching and passion are testimonies of faith. We hold that a seemingly nihilistic world can be imbued with value. The shape

of our lives is the meaning we add to the world. Although we may be paralyzed to calculate the probability of God, life can still be “upleveled” to specialness, through the intentionality of action and the ardentness of our devotion.⁶ Exaltation of passion is the flip-side to participation in divine encounter: they are both characteristics of the courageous faithful. “It is by lives that the world will be redeemed.”⁷

Finally, one must ask, what is the purpose of life? What is worth dying for? What is worth living for? Marcel praises “truth for which we are prepared to die, which we can serve, or betray, or love.”⁸ There must be value in life, a goal and an objective. Without it, life is empty and zestless, and all of our hours are frittered away meaninglessly. But with it, life invites participation. A human must choose his aspiration and decide to live and die by it. Through this process, “The witness *is* his testimony.”⁹ That is, a life acquires meaning through choosing to uphold value. That is why Akiva’s life and Gandhi’s life and Aung San Suu Kyi’s life are valued. Not because they were persecuted and often died for their choices, but because they each chose value and testified to it with every sinew, fiber and blood vessel. That is their testimony. We discover what Heschel calls “the immanence of God in deeds.”¹⁰ Our testimony must be equally resounding. God can be present “in the house of mourning as well as the house of feasting” as long as we place ourselves in greatest probability of divine encounter.¹¹ Through our testimony we invoke the Probable God.

NOTES

1. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Dover, 2000), Book 3, chapter 12.

2. Present Discounted Value (PDV): the value today of an expected stream of future payments.

3. Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), trans. Matthew Ward, p. 57.

4. Neil Gillman, *Gabriel Marcel on Religious Knowledge* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), pp. 136–137.

5. Arthur Green, *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2003), p. 140.

6. Green, p. 142.

7. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1955), p. 296.
8. Gillman, p. 149.
9. Gillman, p. 215.
10. Heschel, p. 312.
11. Green, p. 141.

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