

Quidquid Recipitur: My take on reality

Prologue

I've been thinking a lot in recent years about metaphysics, ontology and the ultimate nature of being but have not before now given any verbal form, written or oral, to those thoughts. The call to give them form has been getting louder lately so this, at age 83, is an initial stab at it.

Splendid Beauty, Horrific Agony and Vanity of Vanities: Three Truths

Our gifted world, so fearfully and wonderfully magnificent, so rich, so intensely beautiful and good, is shot through with grandeur and grace. Glorious in ways that can make your heart literally ache. The solidity and grandeur of living stone. The frilly flagellations of swimming archaea. Our luminescent blue marble seen from space. The terrifying majesty of heavy weather at sea and the gentle glory of a slowly emerging dawn. The peaceful ease of an evening's gloaming. The blissful fulfillment of sexual union. The majestic elegance of behemoth Redwoods. The gnarled sturdiness of Oregon's stubborn shore pines. The unimaginably grand immensity of the cosmos. The deep glory of light. The eerie impossibilities of quantum physics. Love's heartbreaking fullness. Mystery flowering into matter, as if emerging from divinity. No wonder Plotinus would describe it all as mystery made incarnate, as glory congealed into physicality, as infinity alive in root and flower, as the upwelling radiance of transcendence into form.

But also: The world's raw pain, its graceless, ugly, bone-crushing anguish. Its baffling, devastating, soul-destroying agonies, so unrelenting at times. Lamentations, griefs and horrors. The grotesque mystery of travail and affliction to which *Ecclesiastes* and *Job* and the tormented dirges of Pascal, Tolstoy and Schopenhauer give voice. The Buddha's first noble truth, *Dukkha*, that life at root is suffering in all its myriad shapes and phases.¹ All dispersed so broadly and randomly across living domain after living domain. It is Ivan's powerful speech in the "Rebellion" chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*² and the tortured mournings of grieving souls across the globe, hollowed out, desperately begging heaven for relief, comfort, consolation.

Horrific agony. Magnificent beauty. Both real, both true, both in the exact same world. Both break open your poor heart. How to possibly make sense of all this?

I truly have no earthly idea.

And yet. And yet, folly of follies, we so often experience this world as neither beauty nor travail, neither glory nor horror, but only as ordinary, as quotidian, as every-day, as oh-so-flatly commonplace, the regular old run-of-the-mill, routine world. The great nothing-at-all-special. How could *this* possibly be? And why?

One ancient axiom, so vital to the thinking of mediaeval scholastic philosophers like Aquinas and others, offers a starting point. *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*. Literally

“whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.” Applied to us humans it means simply “We receive things not as they are, but as we are.” A radically foundational principle too seldom appreciated in both academic and every-day epistemologies.

Also deeply instructive is Gabriel Marcel’s distinction between problem and mystery. For Marcel a problem is something almost tangibly understandable, explainable, something object-like set out before me which can be conceptualized, scrutinized, attacked and gotten at with tools physical or conceptual. A problem is something you can work on, unscramble, figure out, solve. A mystery not so much. A mystery is not situated outside me, in front of me, separable from me, examinable, parsable, objective. A mystery, rather, is an existential puzzlement encountered. It is part of me, at the semi-permeable boundary (if there is one) between me and the not-me. My existence is entailed in it. It calls out to me personally to be pondered, mulled, harbored, lived with. A problem, says Marcel, can be addressed, explained, its solution noted, described in detail, and set up outside me in a way that others could see it and use that solution too. A mystery, though, grows, evolves, modulates its shape, refashions itself, broadens, explores side channels, deepens. It grows richer over time, not clearer and not simpler. A problem is a thing that can be dealt with, parsed, figured out, and finally set aside. A mystery insists that you live with it, spend time with it, go over it, over it again, regularly, from multiple perspectives, investigating its various dimensions. It asks you to osmose it, absorb it, incorporate it, let it bleed through the interstices at the boundaries of your being.

And the puzzling world? The splendorous beauty, the terrifying anguish, the vanity of vanities? What is to be made of it? Is this for us a problem to be explained or a mystery to be beheld? With Marcel I say mystery. Bewildering, dumbfounding, stupefying mystery. Complete, all at-a-loss, astonished bedazzlement. Total and incomprehensible enigma. I cannot imagine ever “figuring it out.”

Even more challenging, this whole phenomenal mysterious world, thick with its agony and rich in its splendor, this world that comes streaming in through our senses, gets perceptually filtered in the process, filtered and reduced down, way down, like Procrustes on his too-short bed, into the small-capacity time and space categories of our humanly perceived world. The genuinely real world, in other words, gets re-fashioned down into our limited perceptual categories – space, time, plurality, causality, etc – so it can be recognized by a perceiving human mind. As Kant showed us, for a thing to register with us, to be recognized or perceived by us, our finite minds have to first re-jigger it, re-shape it into a format that is cognizable by our perceiving apparatus. So what we end up perceiving, i.e., our perceptual world, is just one transient manifest version of the really real. It is a highly persuasive and convincing perceptual world, to be sure, but an ultimately ephemeral one, a *maya*³ world.

Which sets the stage for this seeker’s question:

Elephants

In a friendly pub at Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco in the summer of 1979, a few of us young philosophers were gathered after attending a philosophy conference at Dominican

College up in San Rafael. The conference was titled "Philosophy, Where Are You?" and my paper had been scheduled for the conference's final day after many attendees had already left for home. Still, only a couple years out from completing my fresh PhD, I felt proud to have presented at all.

The pub's set-up had us all sitting with other pub goers around a large table joking and laughing together. When others at the table learned we were philosophers one of them shouted "Well tell us a philosophical joke then." So one guy piped up with this.

A seeker one day was distressed to realize that he did not know what was holding up the world, providing its grounding and stability. He heard of a wise sage who lived in a cave at the top of a nearby mountain; he resolved to visit the sage and put the question to him. It took him days to climb to the top where he found the sage in meditation and put the question to him: "Oh wise one, a great question has been distressing me and they've told me you will know the answer: What is it that holds the world up and provides its grounding and stability?"

An important question, my son. It is understandable why not knowing that would be so upsetting. But now you can worry no longer. The world is resting solidly on the back of an enormous tortoise which holds up the world and provides its solidity and strength and steadiness.

"Oh, thank you, Wise One," said the much-relieved seeker, who then turned and hiked back down to his town returning to his family and trade. And so he lived, much comforted and relieved, for many happy years. Until one day again it occurred to him that he did not know what held up the tortoise and his old distress returned.

So he climbed the mountain again and asked the sage. "You explained to me that the world is resting on the back of an enormous tortoise which holds up the world and provides its steadiness and solidity. But what is the tortoise resting on? What holds up the tortoise and keeps it stable?" You are a deep thinker indeed, said the sage. You are right to ask. I can now tell you that the tortoise is resting on the back of a colossally huge elephant and that elephant is what keeps the world and the tortoise strong and stable and grounded. "Oh thank you, Wise One," said the seeker who then, greatly relieved, turned and hiked down the mountain again returning to his family and trade and to many years of peace and understanding.

All in good time, though, deep thinker that he was, he began to wonder what the elephant was resting on, so again climbed the mountain and addressed the sage: "Oh wise Master, you explained to me that the world is resting on the back of an enormous tortoise and that the tortoise is resting on the strong back of a colossally huge elephant, and the elephant is what keeps the world strong and steady. But what is holding up the elephant? What is the elephant resting on?" You are indeed a deep thinker, said the sage. I can see that you will not settle for any simple and partial answers. So I will reveal to you now: It's elephants all the way down.

Our well lubricated table-mates guffawed. Some may have even wondered “Yes, but all the way down to what?”

Phenomena and noumena

I really like Kant’s insightful distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between the world of appearances, the *maya* world, i.e., the perceived world *as it innerly appears to our consciousness*, and the noumenal reality, the actual substantial reality *as it really and ultimately exists*. It’s the distinction between a thing as perceived and that thing as it really and truly is. The phenomenal is the world as we experience it, i.e., the world as displayed to our consciousness. It is our mind’s filtered and re-jiggered interpretation of sensory input. It is our daily-life experience of how the world appears to us. Our consciousness presents to us a world of plurality, of individuated items separated off from other items, all splayed out in space and occurring sequentially through time. Kant’s question (and mine) is: Yes, that’s what is displayed on the screen of our inner experience, but how is that inner display related to what is ultimately, finally and actually real at the deepest ontological level? Is what is displayed on our inner screen a simple one-to-one exact mirroring of the noumenal, of what is really real, or is it not?

If the story above were a genuine question rather than just a clever barroom joke, I would take it to be asking about the noumenal, about the really real, about what grounds, animates and underlies the quasi-substantial phenomenal layer that we experience. This question has been an intriguing and long-simmering one for me and these *Quidquid recipitur* reflections here are my current thoughts about what it’s elephants all the way down to.

To clarify, when this question occurs to me it does not come under guise of a practical matter, as if its answer would somehow improve the world or make one a better person or better able to function and work in the world. It comes instead as a metaphysical question, a *sub specie aeternitatis* question, a question about the ultimate nature of things, not as a question about how things work in the world of appearances. It’s a question about how best to understand the ultimate nature of being. It’s a question about thought rather than practice. It’s metaphysics and its goal is simply to understand. Understanding is a fully worthy goal in itself, Aristotle reminds us, even if that understanding were to have no practical effects at all in the phenomenal world. This question’s only practical value, if it has any, might be in helping a person stay oriented toward the eternal, toward what is ultimately and finally real. I suppose it could also, conceivably, make a difference ethically. A metaphysic of oneness may conduce toward an ethics of compassion, as Schopenhauer argued, while a metaphysic of plurality and separateness, he thought, could naturally lead to an ethic of selfishness.⁴ If practical consequences of that sort were to result from metaphysical reflections, that would be a plus, but they are not its purpose. As Aristotle says in the first line of *The Metaphysics*, “All men by nature desire to know.” And that desire to know is exactly what prompts these questions about ultimate reality.

So back to it. How could we ever know whether this internally experienced phenomenal display in our minds is identical to, is a carbon copy of, the actual noumenally real? Any test would

require that we compare our inner experience of phenomena with the outer world of ultimate reality. But we have access only to the phenomenal, not the noumenal, so it's literally not possible to know with any confidence. I strongly suspect, though, that noumenal reality is not at all like our world of appearances. My suspicion is that the seemingly obvious characteristics of our *experienced* world, our apparent world – characteristics like spread-outness in space, duration through time, multiplicity, etc – are not conditions of *noumenal* reality at all, but instead are conditions of our phenomenal experience only. Why? Two main reasons.

- 1 Absolutely everything we experience, our entire experienced world without exception, is replete with plurality, spread out in space and takes place sequentially over time. Every bit of our *experience* is shot through with space, time and multiplicity. Everything. All of it. All our *experience*, that is. Our entire *phenomenal* world without exception. That universality alone might suggest that these categories are categories of our experience only rather than of reality. The binary computer, for example, which can experience only ones and zeros might, because all its experience consists of ones and zeros, think that the world outside it must also consist only of ones and zeros. Everything that comes into it is in the form of ones and zeros because that's all the computer can register. Its entire experienced universe (if a computer were to have inner experience) appears as ones and zeros, just as the entirety of our experienced universe is conditioned by time, space and plurality, etc. If that computer were to conclude that the real world outside it also consists of ones and zeros, it would be forgetting that fundamental *Quidquid recipitur* principle, that we receive things not as they are, but as we are. It would be making the same epistemic mistake we would make if we concluded that the real world outside us matches the same time, space and plurality categories that shape our internal experience, our phenomenal world.

Here's a trivial example: physicists tell us that time and space are not separate things at all but are instead one thing, spacetime. And yet we experience them as separate things. As Sean Carroll, Professor of Natural Philosophy at Johns Hopkins, tells us,

In relativity, it's no longer true that space and time have separate, objective meanings. What really exists is spacetime, and our slicing it up into space and time is merely a useful human convention.⁵

And yet we do experience time and space as separate things, separate conditions. We even measure them with different devices. If we want to know a room's floorspace we measure it with a tape measure, not a clock. If we want to know how long we slept last night, we refer to a clock, not a tape measure. That's just how human consciousness categorizes the world whether or not that's how the world actually is out there. Whatever is out there in the world, when it comes into our consciousness it gets shaped into *our* categories, not *its* categories. Because we see things as *we* are, not as *they* are. *Quidquid recipitur*.

To summarize reason number one: because literally *all* our inner experience is spatially

and temporally conditioned, that universality alone should make us suspicious that space, time, plurality, etc are conditions of our inner experience rather than of the noumenal world outside us.

This is just a simple case of the *Quidquid recipitur* principle, "We receive things not as they are, but as we are." We receive and display reality according to *our* categories, not according to whatever the categories of actual reality might be.

So that's one reason I suspect that the real noumenal reality beyond us is not identical to what we phenomenally experience inside. This seems to me a simple case of epistemological humility. It avoids proudly making assumptions about the ultimate nature of reality just because that's what I and my kind experience.

- 2 A second reason that makes me suspect that our inner mental experience is not a good indicator of what noumenal reality is like is this. Not only is all our *actual* experience conditioned by our space, time and plurality categories as we saw above, but everything we *can* experience is also conditioned by those categories. If asked, for example, to imagine some situation not conditioned by time, space, causality and multiplicity, we can't. Try as we might, whatever we imagine is pictured in a world of items in space – of a certain size, for example, and located somewhere, near to or far from other items. It's also situated in time, happening at some temporal point, now perhaps, or later, slowly or quickly, before this and after that, etc. And because we can't even *imagine* something unconditioned by time, space and multiplicity, that inability to even imagine it seems to me to show, even more persuasively, that those categories are characteristics of *our* perceiving capacities rather than of reality itself.

So if all our *actual* experience (#1) and all our *possible* experience (#2) is conditioned by our human categories, then that would seem to imply that perceptions shaped into those categories are the only kinds of perceptions our minds are capable of registering.

In that way our consciousness, it seems to me, acts just like a transducer when it takes in input from whatever is outside itself. A transducer is any electrical device that translates one form of energy which it receives (its input) into a different form of energy that it puts out (its output). A simple AM/FM radio is a transducer, for example. Its antenna captures and brings in electromagnetic energy of a certain wavelength. The radio's inner components then process that input so that it comes out the other end as sound, a different kind of energy. Lightbulbs and LEDs are also transducers in that they receive electricity coming in one end through a wire or battery, then process that energy and put it out the other end as light. What comes streaming *into* the transducer is one kind of thing and what comes out the other end, after being processed, is something different. Something comes in one end, gets processed and goes out the other end transformed.

Like transducers, our consciousness receives sensory input which (if we use the biochemical model) is then transformed into electrical/chemical impulses that travel along neural pathways

to the brain where those impulses are transformed again, this time into conscious percepts which now appear to us under the conditions of space, time, plurality, causality, etc.

So as with a transducer, whatever noumenal reality comes streaming into our perceptual apparatus gets filtered first and categorized into a format that can be displayed to our consciousness as phenomenal experience. What we then perceive is displayed in a format that can register with us. Whatever we perceive is perceived in the format that fits our capacities. And *that right there* is the *Quidquid recipitur* principle. We receive things as we are, not as they are.

Still, do I think our experienced world is real in any sense at all? Yes, of course. Do I think the individuals and beings and other selves in it count and are meaningful and real? Yes. Do I think that our phenomenal world's concerns should be taken seriously and should be our concerns? Yes. Do I think this experienced world is worthy of our attention, our work and our care? Absolutely. Do I think it is a moral world which calls for us to act ethically and with moral integrity within it? Of course. Do I think it and its beings are worthy of our love and respect and enjoyment and care and concern? Absolutely. Do I think its epistemic concerns about relying on good sense, truthfulness and principles of logic are important? Absolutely. So yes, I think our experienced world is real in all these practical, moral and functional senses, in all the ways that count for how we choose to live our lives.

And yet, do I think that the phenomenal world we perceive is ultimately, finally and, at the deepest ontic level, substantially real? No, I do not.

As noted above, we don't have any way of knowing whether what we *experience* phenomenally in our inner perception matches what is actually out there in the noumenally real world. How could we ever test it? The only data we have to go on is what we experience, either through our regular inborn sensory apparatus, or through the instruments we devise to extend and enhance those senses. We have direct empirical access only to the phenomenal and there is no standard beyond that to which we could turn for comparison.

Someone might point out that our phenomenal world, the world we experience innerly and project outerly, the *maya* world we live in and experience as conditioned by space, duration, plurality, causality and so on, clearly does work for us. It does allow us to be effective agents within it, does respond to our actions, work and care. It is a functional world, they might say, and does allow us to interact with it and effect change within its contexts. So don't you think, they may ask, that this fact of the phenomenal world's responsiveness to our actions is an argument for the realness of our perceptions? "Our actions clearly affect our perceived world," they might say, "so that perceived world must be real." In the end, though, the only thing that argument really shows is that our phenomenal actions and functions are meaningful and useful within our phenomenally perceived world. It does not imply anything at all about actual noumenal reality.

I do think that *our* world, our empirical world, the world we experience and inhabit, is a world fitting and proper for us as phenomenal beings. I also think, though, that it is just a conditional world, not real in the deepest and final and most quintessentially fundamental sense. And why do I think that? Partly because of those two reasons laid out above, but also because I take this *Quidquid* principle so seriously. I take its strong claims to be truer and more radically applicable than is normally appreciated. The *Quidquid* principle is certainly a humbling one, and that simple fact, that it's unsettling to us, may account for our normal disinclination to take it seriously. And yet we could probably stand to be a bit more epistemically modest, especially when our epistemic pride wants to cry out "The way I and my people see things is how things really are. The experience of *my* species is the ruling standard for what is ultimately and really real."

My own strong suspicion, though, is that wisdom teaches otherwise, that it instead reminds us that we should never assume that "I experience" automatically means "It therefore is."

Stabs at the problem

If the ultimately and noumenally real is not identical to the spatial, temporal multiplicity given by our phenomenal perception, what is the ultimately and noumenally real like? And could we even guess?

It's certainly not as if this were a new question. It has been posed by philosophers east and west for millennia, and in the west by philosophers well before Socrates. Those pre-Socratic thinkers spoke of "the world of becoming," by which they meant the phenomenal world as we experience it, as opposed to a more real world which they called "the world of being."

Thales, for example, more than a century before Socrates, thought the real underlying substance at the root of the world of becoming was water. Anaximenes thought it was air. Heraclitus thought it was fire. Empedocles thought that earth, air, fire and water were the four root elements that were the source and ground of all things here in the world of becoming. He also thought that two elemental energies, love and strife, were the motive forces that combined and separated those four basic elements to make up all the particular things in the world of becoming. Democritus thought that the ground of all things was atoms and the void.

These thinkers were real seekers and the ideas they came up with do have a certain appeal, odd though some of their answers might feel to us today. Pythagoras thought that number was at the root of all being, for example, and Anaximander thought that "the boundless" was the source of all things.

As I see it though, the ideas these pre-Socratic thinkers proposed as the ultimate root of all things, possibly excepting Anaximander's, still belong to the phenomenal and are still conditioned by space, time and plurality. Pythagoras, with number, may have made a step toward the noumenal. It doesn't persuade me, though, since number is still within the realm of plurality. Anaximander with "the boundless" may have made a bigger step.

Diverging from these ideas by his predecessors, Plato's explanation was that there existed somewhere a Really Real world of pure being with pure essences, pure ideas. He thought that objects here in our phenomenal world, the world of becoming, were mere imperfect, shadow-like, material representations of those pure essences in the higher world. Plato thought, for example, that any particular dog here in our shadow world of appearance and becoming was just a rough material representation of the true essence of pure dogness up in the higher world of being. He thought that pure essences of all kinds pre-exist in that higher realm and that all our experienced particulars here in the world of becoming are just temporary representations of those eternal essences. This seems a stretch to me.

When Kant posed his famous question as to whether we could ever know the noumenal, he did not claim to have any answer or understanding at all of what noumenal reality might actually be. No proud pretense of high metaphysical discernment in him, that's for sure. Some thinkers who followed him, though, did claim to know exactly what the noumenal was. Hegel, for example, thought it was Spirit. Schopenhauer thought Der Wille was the ultimately real and Marx thought it was matter.

As I see it, though, these philosophers seemed to be framing this metaphysical question as a problem rather than a mystery, imagining that they could adequately *solve* the problem of the noumenal, that arguments could be made to support their answer, and that thinkers after them could therefore understand their answer and affirm it too. To me their approaches are engaging, charming* and philosophically provocative. It's enjoyable to explore them, interrogate them, and try to imagine what they might have really meant if we explored beneath their surfaces.

The Great To Be

Unlike those thinkers, though, I just don't expect to find an answer as if to a problem. Instead, I see the question, or the *quest*, more as a mystery than a problem, more as a gift to enjoy, to savor, mull, explore, attend to and perhaps incorporate. This quest of the noumenal, it seems to me, beckons us beyond the world of problem and into the realm of mystery and wonder. Metaphor, analogy and tantalizing intimations of a larger or deeper order are the most useful approaches here, because this is a realm in which our capacities are definitely stretched. It's a realm toward which we reach, in hopes of seeing beyond what we can see and discerning more widely and deeply than discernment can normally discern. It's a realm of hopeful reaching, of striving toward something simpler, something more fulsomely real, more wonderful, more awe-full than the everyday world of phenomenality.

I wish we could call in terms like "aspirational faith" or "gently supple belief" here. We really can't, though, because too often, especially here in the west, "faith" and "belief" refer only the flat mental act of assenting to some doctrinal proposition. This is an act John Henry Newman refers to as "notional assent,"⁶ the minimal act of simply affirming some intellectual assertion. It's the bare "I opt to assent to...." The noumenal quest, though, is nothing at all like that. It

* Schopenhauer's writing is sometimes criticized as being "charming," as if that were a fault in a philosopher.

instead is something much more passionate, more critically existential, more fully engaging. It's a little like exploring along the edges of a vast abyss of meaning that opens out into awe, gravitas and inconceivable majesty. It's a quest that carries risk. It asks us to live, whether comfortably or uncomfortably, with expectant uncertainty.

For my part I cannot claim to have any answer at all to the question of the noumenal. This is partially because, with Marcel I don't think mysteries are even the sort of thing that *can* have answers, that can, in other words, be figured out, explained, solved. After all, we humans too, just like everything else in the world, are contingent beings in the experiential world of appearances and to that extent our ontic status too is phenomenal. We too are a mystery, a mystery living in a mystery, a mystery confronting a mystery. For me this is something I've lived in the presence of for decades, gratefully and wonderingly.⁷

In sum, I just do not believe time is real and haven't for decades. I'm not entirely sure why I've believed that for so long, besides the reasons laid out above. Space either. Once time goes out the window, space necessarily follows. So does causality, since it is so deeply conditioned on time and space. Causality's claim, after all, in simple terms, is: This thing here, let's call it A, makes That thing there, let's call it B, do something. A, the cause, comes first in time and B, the effect, follows. So if time and space aren't real neither is causality. David Hume's powerful arguments against causality take a different tack but are also persuasive. So profoundly persuasive, in fact, that Kant announced that encountering them woke him from his dogmatic slumbers,⁸ opening the path for Kant to develop his world-changing "critical philosophy."

So once time, space and causality go out the window, all bets are off as to whether our phenomenal perceptions of the world are anything close to what is noumenally the case.

So what, after all, is noumenally the case? We should probably remind ourselves here of Wittgenstein's concluding sentence in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."⁹ I agree with him. Don't speak, at least not in prose. Perhaps a good poet might be able to point us "in the direction of" without resorting to spatial-temporal terms. Blake took some stabs at it, for example:

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.¹⁰

And

To see a World in a grain of sand
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.¹¹

These certainly do point, but even still there are limitations here. Even the gifted poet's language is built on our ways of perceiving the world and is still shot through with human categories of perception. We speak a spatial, temporal, causal language because we experience a spatial, temporal, causal phenomenal world.

So with Wittgenstein I would say yes, be silent, but still keep your faculties honed and tuned and ready for exploring. Keep your eyes open for hints, for intimations, for terms that could point, words that could stretch us, that could aim our searches in more promising directions. So I'll disobey him a little here and note a few words that I think can point us off in directions that feel promising. Words like "eternal presence" or "mysterium," for example. As a first step, though, we should probably consider the notion of "oneness."

Time, space and causality all lead to plurality and away from unity, of course. Many traditions – Plotinus, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism's non-duality, Hinduism's Brahman, etc – all conceive of an ultimacy with a heavy flavor of oneness. This does have a certain initial appeal, since it is trying to lead us out beyond plurality and the time and space that plurality implies. "Oneness" is a noun, though, with the suspicious air of something known, something understood, something that provides a fixed answer, and for that reason just does not ring quite true for me. I suspect, though, that in many of those traditions the appeal to "oneness" is just an attempt to provide some kind of verbal frame for what they see as ultimately real. "Plurality" is clearly off the table so maybe they figure "oneness" must be better. I'm OK with letting the notion of oneness pass for now, but only if we don't take it too literally or seriously.

Other words or images will have the same problem but if we listen to them only as pointers toward, rather than descriptors of, they can carry the power to evoke. Rudolph Otto's haunting *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a fearful and fascinating mystery, resonates deeply, as too does the notion of a grand abyssal chasm of being. Paul Tillich's *ground of being*¹², or "the ground of the ontological structure of being,"¹³ is particularly resonant.

"Holy" also resonates, but only as long as it points toward awe and the sanctum sanctorum rather than to mere ethical rectitude and moral piety as it so often does. Active verbs like "to be," Latin *esse*, hint at the root and ground of existence. "To be," after all, is an active verb. It means to take on the act of existing. It signifies a powerful act, rich with energy, alive. It has nothing of the dull passivity of just "being there," as in the movie. It is an act. It's doing something, it's thick with dynamism.

"Eternal" too resonates but only if it is understood to mean pure and literal timelessness. If it were taken to just mean "time without end," as it so often is, it would just be pointing us reflexively right back here to the phenomenal.

"Interiority" might be a good pointer too, partly because exteriority would almost necessarily lead us outward and suggest spatiality. Even more, though, because inwardness feels more akin to the noumenal and also, in many contemplative and theological traditions at least, suggests directions toward which we might turn in our noumenal quest.

"Divine" can point too, but only in the context of theologies that do not envision God as *an* entity, as *a* being. Painting God as a being, even as the greatest, highest, most powerful and best being, still leaves God as just *a* being. A god framed in that way would still be finite,

conditioned by space and plurality. Such a god would, of course, be a being distinct from other beings in the universe, but still a being. That kind of god seems to me way too small. Similarly, theologies which see God as a cause, even as a first cause, an uncaused cause, still situate that God in a universe, in a structure of being in which the laws of causality obtain, which, it seems to me, leaves God as part of the phenomenal world.

Other theologies, though, envision God not as *a* being but as being itself, as the ‘to be’ of all being, as pure act. Aquinas sometimes seems favorable to this kind of theology, as do Spinoza and others. I find such theologies and philosophies deeply provocative.

My own preference in this search for evocative words or expressions would favor verbs and adjectives – denoters of process and quality. I think they work much better in this realm than nouns. Verbs and adjectives can point us off “in the direction of” much better than nouns can. Nouns are too fixed, too boundaried, too defined, too static. Nouns, with their hint of fixity, give the impression that we’ve got a handle on something, that a person, place or thing has been more or less figured out and identified, that something is known. To my mind, though, when it comes to whatever the noumenal might be, all we can do is keep our consciousness, mind and senses open, wondering, hoping, exploring beyond the fixities of the known. Aristotle was certainly onto something when he said that philosophy, the search for wisdom, begins in wonder, in puzzlement, in awe and in the hunger for understanding. It begins in the openness to wonderment in the face of being. This is where the search begins and where it plays out.

The philosophies of Parmenides – who says simply that “Being is” – and Heraclitus – who reminds us that “You can’t step in the same river twice” – are often framed by philosophy professors as metaphysical opposites, as describing two opposing and irreconcilable views of reality. One argues that only *is-ness* is real, the other that only change is real. This claim of irreconcilability is certainly understandable, plausible and forgivable, especially in Intro classes where it can get students to start thinking metaphysically. I’ve used it for that purpose myself and it does make for provocative class discussions. My strong suspicion, though, is that whatever the noumenal might be, or might be like, it will somehow satisfy both the grand power of Parmenides’ concept of “to be” and the pulsing dynamism of Heraclitus’ “all is change,” ultimately showing our narrow concepts of “being” and “change” to be far too narrow, thin and incomplete.

Another possibility, I suppose, at least theoretically, could be that the noumenal is *everything-everywhere-all-at-once*, which someone once likened to seeing the full scope of an entire mountain range, with all its individual mountains, all at once, while also seeing its long entire geologic history emerging through time all at once too, all in one perfect Augenblick. This idea does try to suggest the absence of time, space and causality, though to me it doesn’t seem to pull it off. It wants to see noumenal reality as the sum of all phenomenal reality but minus time, space, plurality and causality. It wants to include absolutely *all* phenomenal reality of whatever kind, physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, etc, and of whatever size, nano, micro, macro, meta, giga, etc, and including all phenomenal perceptions of all perceiving beings of whatever kind.

This idea, though, let's call it EEAAO, does somehow feel too limiting, a bit too thing-like, too noun-ish, for my taste. It seems just another way of framing our question as if it were a problem to be solved rather than a mystery to be dwelt in. It feels as if one could now say, "Here's the answer; this is what noumenal reality is and that's that. Problem solved."

Still, when exploring the mystery, something about EEAAO does feel a bit provocative and seems worthy of continued inclusion in the mullings and explorings. Who knows, it could be one baby step forward in coming to a fuller understanding what reality ultimately is. Still, at this point something about it is ultimately unsatisfying to me.

So I continue to live with the quest, exploring it, mulling it. It's not clear to me whether the mystery lives inside me or outside me, partly because I'm not entirely sure what "me" means in this context.

Whatever the mysterious noumenal is or is like, I think that we – whatever kind of being we actually are – are already, right now (whatever "right now" means) at one with it and fully participating in whatever kind of being it has or is. Which means that our personal being too is part of the mystery. In the end we ourselves are a mystery exploring a mystery. All the more reason to recognize the noumenal as including us rather than separate from us, whatever it is that we ultimately are. This seems all the more reason, with Marcel, to recognize this quest as a mystery in which we move and dwell and have our being. We are awash in mystery.

I've long appreciated the insight of quantum physicist and astronomer Sir James Jeans that the more we learn about the physical universe, the less it looks like a great machine and the more it looks like a great thought.¹⁴ Not unlike a dream, which feels so intensely real to us while we're dreaming it but then turns out on waking to have been a thought all along.

So that, finally, is all I can say for now about my take on the quest for the really real. Except perhaps that I also believe it lives, radiates and gives existence, form and dynamism to our everyday experienced world.

Tom Kerns
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¹ (*Dukkha*): Life, by its very nature, includes suffering, dissatisfaction, impermanence, and the inherent unease of existence..

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part II, Book V, Chapter IV "Rebellion")

³ In Hindu traditions, the term "maya" means illusion, appearance, or the power that makes the changing world seem fully real.

⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, Translated by EFJ Payne, Introduction by DE Cartwright, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1995, p 210. Also:

“The egoist... i.e., the person acting only in his own self-interest, fails to recognise that we are all part of the same underlying essence, and instead believes that he is an entirely separate being, and that his interests are entirely separate from the interests of other selves who appear separated from him in time and space. The egoist sees only the phenomenal appearances of things shaped by temporality, spatiality and plurality. Other persons appear to him as completely separate beings with wants and needs entirely separate from his.’ This illusion, according to Schopenhauer, is what accounts for egoism.

“On the other hand, the person acting from compassion ‘makes less of a distinction than do the rest between himself and others ... In fact, in magnanimous deeds it [this distinction] appears to be abolished, since here the weal of another is protected and supported at the expense of the good [person], and thus another’s ego is treated as equal with his own. [Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, 1995, pp. 204–205.]

“So the egoist and the person of compassion are acting on the basis of two entirely different perceptions of reality, one considering separateness and individuation to be real, the other considering them illusory.” from Tom Kerns, “Schopenhauer’s Mitleid, environmental outrage and human rights,” in Anna Grear and Evadne Grant (eds), *Thought, Law, Rights and Action*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015, chp 8, pp 220-248.

⁵ Sean Carroll, *The Biggest Ideas in the Universe: Space, Time, and Motion*, Dutton, 2022, p139.

⁶ John Henry Newman, in the early sections of his *Grammar of Assent*.

⁷ I feel resonances with the metaphysical insights of Schopenhauer, though with a radically different flavor than his, with Spinoza’s sense of divine immanence, with the radically incarnational theology of Paul Tillich, or at least of my understanding of him, and of course, as noted above, with Plotinus’s notion of emanations of the One into matter.

⁸ “David Hume was the very thing which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber...” Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, James Ellington tr., Hackett Publishing Co, Kindle Edition, Preface, Loc 302

⁹ Proposition 7 of Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921.

¹⁰ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

¹¹ William Blake, *Auquries of Innocence*.

¹² Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (chapter 6, “Courage and transcendence,” throughout), Yale University Press, 1952. <https://antilogicalism.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/the-courage-to-be.pdf#:~:text=Page%201,by%20Hannah%20Tillich>

¹³ Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology*, vol I, University of Chicago Press, 1951, kindle edition, p 239.

¹⁴ . “The universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a machine. Mind no longer appears to be an accidental intruder into the realm of matter...we ought rather hail it as the creator and governor of the realm of matter. – Sir James Hopwood Jeans (1877–1946). *The Mysterious Universe [New Revised Edition]*”, p.125, Pickle Partners Publishing