Recognizing Encounters with Ultimacy across Religious Boundaries

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The Illusion of Agency as a Mark of Ultimacy

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Abstract: This essay proposes that action unaccompanied by the usual feeling of conscious agency constitutes a "mark of ultimacy." Characteristically religious statements of "agentless action" find support in social psychological and cognitive scientific research that calls into question the intuitive belief that conscious thought causes action. An awareness of the limits of our powers of will lies at the the core of those limit experiences that provide the context for the meaningfulness of religious language.

Keywords: Meister Eckhart, Ramana Maharshi, Free Will, Erasmus, Luther, Wegner, New Atheism, limit-experience

1 Textual encounters with ultimacy

The topic of "recognizing encounters with ultimacy" has prompted me to reflect on my early interest in religious literature and what it was about the texts I read then that inspired – and continues to inspire – me. My interest in religion began with a book that I stumbled upon in the dusty shelves of the Providence, RI public library the year after I graduated from college. The book was *A Search in Secret India* by Paul Brunton, a kind of literary travelogue recounting the author's encounter with a colorful assortment of yogis, fakirs, pundits, and gurus in India in the 1930's. For Brunton, the high point of his wanderings was an encounter with the south Indian sage Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), a man who as a teenager had taken up the venerable path of renunciation in India. Ramana led a life of solitude and contemplation, eventually attracting, not through any ambition on his part but simply through the magnetic power of his presence, a community of disciples and an ashram. There was something about Brunton's description of the Maharshi that resonated with a recent college graduate facing an uncertain future under the paralyzing shadow of student debt. Ramana was a man with no worldly accomplishments to speak of who nevertheless realized a model of human existence. Years later, when I took my first academic position at small college in Iowa, I had an esteemed senior colleague who once mentioned to me that he had been taken to visit the Maharshi as a boy.[1] I felt that I had met someone who had heard a sermon of Saint Paul or –not a frivolous comparison for anyone who knows me – who had seen the Beatles.

A second milestone in my study of religion was my first encounter with the Christian mystical tradition. The occasion was a class entitled "The Phenomenology of Mystical Experience" taught by the Yale philosopher of religion Louis Dupré, a man who for many of us had a kind of uncanny presence and authority that was perhaps not altogether different from what I had read about Ramana. In the introduction to his coedited anthology of Christian mysticism, *Light from Light*, Dupré relates his own formative encounter with the mystics. Passages from the spiritual diary of the sixteenth century Jesuit Balthasar Alvarez, Dupré writes, "suddenly seemed to open up a wholly new, heretofore hidden perspective on life. I understood then and there that the deepest insights in human existence might well lie buried in these and

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similar writings."[2] For Dupré, the survey of Christian mysticism culminated with the spiritual writings of the great Flemish contemplative Jan van Ruusbroec, much as Brunton's wanderings to India culminated in his encounter with Ramana. For me, though, it was Ruusbroec's famous predecessor Meister Eckhart that made the most profound impression. Ramana and Eckhart, then, will serve as the starting point for my reflections on the "marks of ultimacy."

I must confess that I initially balked at the invitation to contribute an essay on this topic of "recognizing transcendent encounters with ultimacy across religious boundaries." In part this was because I am not entirely comfortable with the metaphysical overtones in the prompt. Earlier in my career – and certainly when I first read Ramana and Eckhart – I would have been more than comfortable with the language of transcendence, encounter, and ultimacy. Since then, however, I have come to realize that unlike the vast majority of religious people, including Eckhart and Ramana, I hold a physicalist worldview. That is, I cannot, if I am honest with myself, accept the idea of a non-physical substance, whether a Cartesian mind, an eternal soul, or a deathless and inactive atman, somehow ensconced in or supervening upon my physical being. Nor can I accept the idea of a non-physical order of reality that breaks in on, or reveals itself to, the natural world, at least if such language is taken literally. The curious thing, however, is that despite my benighted physicalism, texts like those of Ramana and Eckhart somehow continue to edify and inspire me. The challenge before me, then, is somehow to account for this fact. It would seem that naturalism does not exclude a kind of transcendence.

Let me begin this reminiscence on my formative "encounters with ultimacy" with Eckhart. Specifically, I return to the selections from Eckhart's writings found in Dupré and Wiseman's anthology of Christian mysticism that served as the textbook for the aforementioned course that introduced me to the subject. There I can see from my underlinings the passages that had most impressed me. The first selection is from Eckhart's famous sermon on Wisdom 5:16 ("The just will live forever, and their reward is with God."). In a short paragraph on the just man's acceptance of all things from God, I underlined the final two sentences: "If you account anything more than something else, you do wrong. You ought to go wholly out from your own will."[3] The next underlined phrase occurs a few lines down, when Eckhart writes of just men that "they have gone completely out of themselves." Unsurprisingly, I was deeply impressed by the most famous paragraph in this sermon (and indeed one of the most memorable in Eckhart's oeuvre), where he speaks of the birth of the Son in the soul in a ratcheting series of increasingly bold statements, each introduced by the dare, "Yet I say more …" To his initial statement that the Father gives his Son birth in the soul, Eckhart appends the striking statement, fittingly underscored in my text, that "He must do it whether he likes it or not."[4] Turning to the next selection in Dupré's anthology, Eckhart's German sermon 48, I underlined a similar statement: "God must pour out the whole of himself with all his might so totally into every man who has utterly abandoned himself […]."[5] This evident fascination with what for the moment I shall call the transcendence of the deliberative will continues in the final selection from Eckhart's German sermons, the justly famous Sermon 52 on Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor (…)." There Eckhart speaks of spiritual poverty with respect to willing, knowing, and having. Concerning the first of these divisions, Eckhart remarks that the person who wishes to fulfill God's will has still yet to attain the poverty of will of which he speaks, inasmuch as he or she still has "a will with which he wants to fulfill God's will." "If such a person wants really to have poverty," Eckhart adds in an underlined statement, "he ought to be as free of his own created will as he was when he did not exist."[6]

The theme of the transcendence of the deliberative will obviously reflects a selective reading of Eckhart. Needless to say there is much else in those writings that is equally worthy of attention, not the least of which are his concepts of "flowing out" from God – with God and in God – and the complementary concept of "breaking through" to the simple ground of the Godhead, the God beyond God. And yet it is this idea

2 Dupré and Wiseman, eds., *Light from Light*, 3.
3 Ibid., 157.
4 Ibid., 158.
5 Ibid., 160.
6 Ibid., 163.

of transcending the deliberative will that I would like to focus on here. In preparing this essay, I was somewhat surprised to discover – for some reason I had not read Ramana's teachings in quite some time – that it also forms a prominent theme in Ramana's teachings as well. It appears, first of all, in a poignant episode in Ramana's biography. Several years after he had left home, his followers prevailed upon him to give a response to his mother's desperate entreaties that he abandon his renunciation and return home. On a piece of paper – Ramana had taken a self-imposed vow of silence – he wrote his impersonal and austere response: "What is not meant to happen will not happen, however much you wish it. What is meant to happen will happen, no matter what you do to prevent it."[7] Later on, he will echo this sentiment in his reply to a disciple's question of whether he should renounce his home. "If that had been your destiny," Ramana remarks, "the question would not have arisen."[8] Alluding to Krishna's teaching in the Bhagavad-Gita, Ramana repeatedly insists that action does not depend on a sense of being a doer; action will be get done even without the sense of being a willful agent.[9] I recall being impressed with a memorable image that Ramana uses to illustrate this idea of agentless action: To worry oneself with thoughts as to what is to be done and how is like a train passenger who insists on carrying his luggage on his head instead of putting it down on the floor of the train.[10]

2 The myth of conscious will

This desultory assemblage of passages largely shorn of context is obviously selective and idiosyncratic. It is clear that they have been selected with a hypothesis of a "mark of ultimacy" already in mind. I do not wish to create the misleading impression that I am developing a theory inductively on the basis of a fair and dispassionate sampling of textual evidence, although I do find it curious that my current theoretical interests have directed me to precisely those passages that I had underlined over twenty years ago, at a time when I had quite different interests and philosophical allegiances.

The hypothesis I have in mind concerns the theory of "apparent mental causation" articulated by the late Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner. Wegner, summing up a long trajectory in social psychology beginning with Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance and Bem's self-perception theory and leading to Nisbett and Wilson's studies on confabulation, proposed that the link between conscious intention and voluntary action is a contingent one. The intuitive idea that thought causes action is only a kind of convenient shorthand for an underlying process that is considerably more involved and inaccessible to consciousness. Wegner was particularly interested in phenomena in which the normal coupling of conscious intentionality and self-produced action comes undone. These phenomena fall into two basic categories. The first of these is what he calls automatisms, otherwise voluntary actions that are not accompanied by a feeling of conscious agency. Examples include alien hand syndrome, a neuropsychological disorder in which one hand is experienced as acting with a mind of its own; the experience of acting under hypnosis; glossolalia; spirit possession; and the phenomenon of "table turning," a curious preoccupation of the nineteenth century spiritualist movement. The second category of anomalous action phenomena consists of illusions of control. Here the feeling of causing an action attaches itself to actions whose causes are external to the individual in question. Examples include phenomena like sympathetic magic and the belief in the efficaciousness of ritual action.[11]

The theory of apparent mental causation accounts for both sets of phenomena by postulating that the feeling of willing an action, no less than the action itself, is caused by underlying mental events that are not themselves present to consciousness. Put differently, the theory maintains that conscious thought does not directly cause an action but is itself a product of underlying mental processes that are possibly linked with those that do. The conscious mind, in default of any access to those underlying mental processes, draws

7 Ramana, *Spiritual Teaching*, xiv.
8 Ibid., 41.
9 See, e.g. ibid., 28, 51.
10 Ibid., 9.
11 Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, 9-10 and passim.

a *post hoc, propter hoc* inference of a causal link between two items of information that are available to it, namely, the conscious thought and the observed action.[12]

As a student of religion, what intrigues me about Wegner's analysis is the prevalence of characteristically religious phenomena in his two categories of anomalous action phenomena. Indeed, of the examples mentioned above, only alien hand syndrome, clearly a pathological condition, and hypnosis are devoid of religious coloring. It would seem, then, that a good place to look for characteristically religious phenomena would be at the fringes of voluntary action, where what we might call the myth of conscious will – the idea that conscious thought causes action – breaks down.

What makes the statements from Eckhart and Ramana cited above so striking is precisely their break from the normal paradigm of intentional action. They constitute explicit challenges to the myth of conscious will. In defiance of orthodox doctrine, Eckhart speaks of God occupying the annihilated soul with the necessity of water flowing into an empty container. The just soul mirrors this mode of choiceless action – "living without a why," as Eckhart puts it elsewhere. The theme of agentless action, although worked out in an entirely different religious and cultural context, is central to Ramana's teaching. As if re-stating the conclusion Wegner draws from the phenomenon of automatisms, Ramana declares that "there is no rule that action should depend upon a sense of being the doer."[13] Renunciation might be regarded as the paradigmatic example of agentless action for Ramana. And renunciation, contrary to outward appearances, is not for him a matter of conscious choice. I propose, then, that a break from the conventional paradigm of intentional action constitutes a mark of ultimacy.

3 Erasmus and Luther on free will

One might object that a break from the conventional action paradigm functions as a mark of ultimacy only for contemplative or "mystical" writings like those of Ramana and Eckhart. I think it is much broader than that, as evinced by arguably one of the least mystical writers in the history of Christianity, Martin Luther.

Luther's famous debate with Erasmus of Rotterdam on the topic of free will can be understood as a clash between two action paradigms. In his *Diatribe Concerning Free Will* (1524), Erasmus spelled out what he regarded as the worrisome implications of Luther's denial of free will, as expressed in the latter's *Assertion* of 1520. Erasmus feared that Luther's doctrine would undermine all human striving and provide, albeit unintentionally, depraved individuals with a convenient theological rationale for an evasion of responsibility. In support of his position, Erasmus cites a multitude of hortatory scriptural passages that presuppose at least a minimal concept of free will. To deny even a modicum of free will, Erasmus reasons, makes God into a kind of monster who punishes those who fail to do what does not lie in their power to do, rather like someone inclined to torture the family cat for scratching the sofa.[14] Throughout his treatise Erasmus speaks the language of common sense. And from this common sense perspective Luther's position appears unnecessarily doctrinaire and extreme.

When one turns to Luther's response, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), one finds oneself thinking within another theological paradigm, one governed by a different logic. Any ostensibly good work coming from our own initiative can be grounds for human pride and presumption, and, to that extent, constitutes an affront to God. Erasmus' allowance for even a modest contribution from human will implies that we can contribute to our salvation, albeit to a small extent, without the need for divine assistance. And just as a

12 Wegner, *Illusion*, 67. A complete explanation for the sense of agency would need to relate Wegner's inferential account, described here, with a predictive account that postulates a mechanism internal to the motor system that compares the predicted sensory consequences of an action with its actual sensory consequences. To the extent that these predictions are fulfilled, the sensory feedback is attenuated and a judgment that the action is self-produced is generated (for this general account see, e.g., Hohwy and Frith, "Can Neuroscience Explain Consciousness?"). On the relation between inferential and predictive accounts of the sense of agency, see Moore et al. "Modulating the Sense of Agency," 1063; Moore and Fletcher, "Sense of Agency in Health and Disease"; and Synofzik et al., "Beyond the Comparator Model."

13 Ramana, *Spiritual Teachings*, 28.

14 *Erasmus and Luther: Discourse on Free Will*, 82-83 and passim.

dash of arsenic is enough to ruin a meal, so too is Erasmus' allowance for even a modest human contribution to the work of salvation enough to undermine the doctrine of divine grace. "Christians," Luther concludes, "are not led by a free will, but are driven by the spirit of God, as Romans 8:14 tell us. To be driven is not to act or do oneself. But we are so seized as a saw or an ax is handled by a carpenter [...]."[15]

Luther's image of God acting in and through the faithful Christian, whose will suffers passively "like a tool of the divine spirit,"[16] would seem to suggest that the latter's actions are unaccompanied by a feeling of consciously willing the action. In other words, Luther's doctrine of prevenient grace, if taken literally, suggests an experience of action resembling Wegner's automatisms. I suspect, however, that for most Christians the operation of prevenient grace is discerned only retrospectively. It is typically not something of which one is focally aware in "real time," as it were, like the unintended movement of an "alien hand." Luther's argument against free will is doctrinal, not phenomenological. Still, his radical notion of an external power acting in and through the actions of a human agent challenges the intuitive paradigm of voluntary action.

Luther's doctrine of grace can be fruitfully understood in terms of the philosopher of religion Ian Ramsey's venerable theory of models and qualifiers. According to this account of religious language, the conventional description of a situation – what Ramsey calls the model – is qualified to the point where it becomes "odd"; past a certain critical threshold the qualifications performatively enact a new situation.[17] Luther's doctrine of prevenient grace effectively qualifies the intuitive model of a human agent consciously willing an action. In so doing, it discloses a characteristically theological situation, thereby revealing a depth dimension to human experience.

4 Turning the New Atheism inside-out

The theory of apparent mental causation accounts for not only religious phenomena like spirit possession and putatively efficacious ritual action but also the experiences corresponding to lofty theological concepts like Eckhart's "living without a why" and Luther's prevenient grace. It is because the linkage between action and the feeling of causing an action is contingent that such theological concepts are possible. Now I can imagine the reader objecting – assuming he or she has made it this far! – that what I have given is a theologically irrelevant etic account of some religious statements. For this reason they may regard it as somehow inappropriate for a theology journal. An appeal to etic concepts of analysis breaks the tacit rules of the theological "game," like picking up the soccer ball with one's hands or, changing the simile, explaining character development in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in terms of the political history of eleventh-century Scotland. Furthermore, it could be argued that a naturalistic, etic account of religious experience and understanding constitutes a tacit critique of religion. For if one can account for a religious phenomenon naturalistically, one can discount the ontology of the emic-religious worldview on the principle of parsimony.

Not only is Wegner's theory theologically inappropriate, our hypothetical critic might continue, but it is also even controversial from a naturalistic-scientific perspective. Some have argued that the theory rests on an unjustified inference from the "double dissociation" of conscious will and self-produced action. Perhaps automatisms and illusions of control are striking not because they are diagnostic of an underlying "authorship processing mechanism" only loosely connected to the processes that actually cause the action, but simply because they are exceptional.[18] Given the threat it presents to our sense of moral responsibility, the critic might argue, such a theory must pass a high evidential bar, which, as evident in its failure to win unanimity in the scientific community, it does not pass.

I believe that one can rebut this line of criticism on the grounds that it rests on the mistaken assumption that Wegner is arguing that conscious will is epiphenomenal, a misunderstanding perpetuated in part by

15 *Discourse on Free Will*, 127.

16 Ibid., 87.

17 Ramsey, *Religious Language*, 55-102 and passim.

18 E.g. Levy, *Consciousness and Moral Responsibility*, 18-19; Nahmias, "When Consciousness Matters," 532-534. See Wegner's response to this objection in "Author's Response," 682-683.

Wegner himself with the attention-grabbing but misleadingly hyperbolic book title, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*. I prefer to follow Daniel Dennett in interpreting Wegner as arguing that the will is illusory, not in the strong sense that it does not exist, but illusory in the weaker (and more defensible) sense that the will is real but not what we intuitively think it is.[19] An evaluation of the theory of apparent mental causation deserves more discussion than this, but for the purposes of this essay it will have to suffice. What I would like to do instead is to explore how the thesis that free will is illusory – even in the weaker sense – can turn an etic-naturalistic critique of religion on its head.

The scientific critique of free will leads to some delicious ironies. Consider, first of all, Dennett's take on the Erasmus-Luther debate. Dennett is a compatibilist, that is, he defends the idea that a modest concept of free will is compatible with naturalism. Not surprisingly, he identifies with the moderate, reasonable, and nuanced position of Erasmus over against the uncompromising dogmatic position of Luther. In doing so, however, Dennett places his opponents in the contemporary reiteration of the perennial free-will debate – hard-nosed scientific deniers of free will like Steven Pinker, Sam Harris, and Marvin Minsky – on the side of Luther. There is, of course, considerable irony in the suggestion, implicit in this awkward association, that his scientific colleagues' denial of free will is more dogmatic than scientific.[20]

Irony abounds in the critique of Dennett's compatibilist position offered by Harris, one of Dennett's fellow "New Atheists." Harris draws an analogy between compatibilism and liberal theology. Both the liberal theologian and the compatibilist philosopher, he argues, avoid a conflict with scientific naturalism by redefining the respective concepts – the concept of God for the one, the concept of free will for the other – they wish to salvage.[21] Both positions share the aim, Harris observes, of "not allowing the laws of nature to strip us of a cherished illusion."[22] Dennett is well known, of course, for his charge that liberal theology represents an inconsistent – and ultimately hypocritical – attempt to have it both ways.[23] Here Harris presumes a basic kinship between atheism and the denial of free will, and he represents Dennett's compatibilist effort to salvage free will as a kind of failure of nerve in pressing the scientific critique of human illusion to its logical conclusion.

I would like to suggest an alternative line of critique. The denial of free will – or, more accurately, the thesis that conscious will is a kind of myth – acts as a corrosive on the atheist position of people like Dennett and Harris.

At the heart of the New Atheists' critique is the thesis that the defining feature of religion, the belief in supernatural agents, is a kind of evolutionary byproduct of our inveterate tendency to project intentionality onto the world, what is often referred to as "theory of mind." Or, as Steven Pinker states this thesis, the belief in supernatural agents of various kinds consists "of our intuitive psychology running amok."[24] The New Atheists add to this analysis the judgment that while theory of mind is obviously adaptive in its evolutionarily "proper" sphere, namely, enabling human beings to live in large communities, it can become maladaptive when operating outside that sphere. This analysis presumes that when our mindreading tendency is applied within its proper domain it is not only useful but also true, inasmuch as there actually are human minds answering to our projections.

The thesis that human intentionality constitutes a kind of myth or user illusion blurs this distinction between the attribution of mental states to others and religious belief. The New Atheist critique of religious projection, like the cognate critiques of Freud and Feuerbach that came before it, derives its critical force from the commonsense notion that there is a mode of intentionality that is not projective in nature. To be sure, we routinely project mental states – beliefs and desires – onto other people to account for their

19 See Daniel Dennett's remarks to the effect that the content of Wegner's book supports the thesis that free will is real but not what people think it is, while its title suggests that free will is simply unreal (Dennett, "Some Observations on the Psychology of Thinking About Free Will," 252).

20 Dennett remarks that his opponents' denial of free will might not be quite as absolute and "theological" as their explicit statements might suggest, however. See Dennett, *Elbow Room*, 199-200.

21 Harris, *Free Will*, 16-26.

22 Ibid., 18.

23 See, e.g., Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 210-217.

24 Pinker, "The Evolutionary Psychology of Religion," 8.

behavior. But those attributions correspond to the actual thoughts of other people who, after all, are like us. The theory of apparent mental causation does not challenge this correspondence. But it does challenge the assumption, implicit in mental state attribution, that those mental states are the direct, efficient causes of the observed behavior. And to the extent that mental states are not causally efficacious, theory of mind attributions are projective in nature. Thus some measure of projection goes all the way down. As mentioned above, the intuitive belief that our conscious thought directly cause our actions results from a *post hoc, propter hoc* inference on the basis of the contiguity between conscious thought and a perceived action. As Wegner observes, this kind of magic that we perceive in ourselves is continuous with various forms of religious belief.[25] This idea that everyday mental attribution stands in continuity with religious belief turns the New Atheist critique of religion inside-out.

Some years ago the sociologist Peter Berger used a similar argument against those critics who seek to relativize religious belief by pointing to the social and historical conditioning factors on which such belief depends.[26] He argued that the social-historical critique of religious supernaturalism rests on a kind of double standard whereby the modern scientific worldview is somehow exempted from the principle of the sociology of knowledge. The modern critique of religion, Berger insisted, is no less socially conditioned than the religious beliefs it criticizes. Thus Berger used the sociology of knowledge to "relativize the relativizers." In a similar way, I am suggesting, an exposure of the myth of conscious will can relativize the New Atheist critique of religious projection.

In fact, the argument is stronger in this case inasmuch as the critique of free will, unlike the principle of the sociology of knowledge, is explicit in various religious traditions, as the examples from Eckhart, Ramana, and Luther show. Modern scholars have often been tempted to see reassuring support for their own rejection of the supernatural in indigenous "theological" critiques of popular religious superstitions – for example, Eckhart's critique of instrumental attitudes in popular piety or Theravada Buddhist critiques of indigenous spirit cults in places like Sri Lanka and Burma. And yet, if such critiques can in fact be construed as critiques or relativizations of indigenous folk psychologies that happen to include beliefs in supernatural agencies, they often apply just as easily to the particular modality of folk psychology – one that does not include references to the supernatural – that is operative in modern Western societies.[27]

5 The breakdown of the illusion of free will as a theological limit-situation

To suggest, as I have in the previous section, that the theory of apparent mental causation turns the New Atheist critique of religion on its head obviously does not constitute a vindication of a theological approach. What I would like to do in this final section, then, is to reflect briefly on the implications of this paper's thesis – namely, that the breakdown of the myth of conscious will represents a mark of ultimacy – for theological method. Specifically, I shall relate this thesis to the venerable theological analyses of "limit experiences" or existential "boundary situations" by theologians such as David Tracy and Gordon Kaufman.

Let me begin with Tracy. Tracy is concerned with identifying "a certain basic horizon or dimension of our common human experience that can justly be described as religious."[28] We become aware of such a dimension whenever we run up against the limits of human knowledge and experience. According to Tracy, we encounter such a limit whenever we press any human endeavor or inquiry – scientific, moral, or aesthetic – far enough. It is when we are forced up against the existential boundaries of our everyday existence, however, that this religious dimension to common human experience is experienced most urgently and profoundly. In those situations in which we forced to confront the fact of our mortality – for

25 Wegner, "Self is Magic," 231 and passim.
26 Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 28-48.
27 Cf. Angeline Lillard's thesis that there is considerable cultural variation in the way people interpret other minds and behavior. See, e.g., her "Ethnopsychologies: Cultural variations in theories of mind."
28 Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 93.

example, the death of someone close to us or the diagnosis of a serious illness – questions of meaning come strongly to the fore. In those situations we become acutely aware of the inadequacy – the banality and inappropriateness – of language, particularly ordinary, non-religious language, to express the experience.[29] Perhaps the most salient characteristic of such experiences of human finitude is an utter loss of control. This absence of control characterizes both "sides" of the limit situation, the experienced 'limit-to' and the transcendent 'limit-of'. As Tracy puts it, "the final dimension or horizon of our own situation is neither one of our own making nor one under our control."[30]

This absence of control is, if anything, even more prominent in Gordon Kaufman's somewhat earlier theological analysis of limit situations. In his essay "Transcendence without Mythology," Kaufman is concerned with identifying the situation in which speech about God is meaningful.[31] Like Tracy, he sees the experiential context of religious language in those existential limit situations in which people are "hemmed in on all sides and determined by their particular aptitudes, temperaments, and interests, by the position in society and history into which they have been born, by circumstances of all sorts completely out of their control."[32] Generalizing from any number of immediate, concrete experiences of limitation, the reflective self becomes aware of its radical contingency – that it is "finite, master of neither itself nor of its world."[33] And the awareness of our finitude as such is the experiential context in which religious language arises and has meaning. Particular conceptions of religious ultimacy – whether personal, impersonal, or whatever – depend on which specific types of limit-experiences, or combinations thereof, are taken to be paradigmatic in a particular historical context.[34]

It would be easy enough to incorporate those peculiar experiences, identified by Wegner, in which will and action come apart into this style of existential theological analysis. Such experiences would count as potentially revelatory limit experiences of human finitude, specifically, of the limits of the human will. To the extent, however, that those experiences are not simply exceptions to the general state of affairs – to the extent, that is, that they are diagnostic of the illusoriness of our intuitive libertarian conception of the self as an unconditioned font of spontaneous volition – they represent limit experiences in more radical sense than even the existentialist analyses of finitude on which theologians like Tracy and Kaufman depend. It is not that the self's freedom is restricted to a particular domain the way a prisoner's movements, say, are restricted by the walls of his cell. Even within its restricted patch of apparent freedom, the conscious self is itself conditioned by underlying processes of which it is only dimly – if at all – aware. Of all the major religious traditions, it is Buddhism that has taken this reflection on the self's powerlessness its most radical conclusion. In the Pali literature, the fact that none of the constituents of the personality are under one's control – one cannot change the physical body, for example, at will – is taken as evidence for the truth of nonself.[35]

We come, finally, to the question of what concept of ultimacy corresponds to this experience of the self's radical contingency. As mentioned above, Kaufman argues that particular concepts of ultimacy derive from whatever concrete experience of human limitation is taken to be paradigmatic in the theological context in question. The concept of a personal God, for example, arises when the ultimate limit is understood on analogy with the experience having one's purposes impeded or deflected by the willful actions of other selves.[36] The particular limit experience foregrounded in this essay – namely, the experience of the illusory character of one's sense of agency – not surprisingly favors another conception of ultimacy, one that is decidedly impersonal, as the examples of Eckhart and Ramana show.

At the same time, however, both examples evince another important point made by Kaufman, namely, that any particular concept of ultimacy is complex, informed by multiple experiences of human finitude,

29 Ibid., 105-107, 117n80.
30 Ibid., 107.
31 Kaufman, "Transcendence without Mythology," 46, 49, 51 and passim.
32 Ibid., 46-47.
33 Ibid., 53.
34 Ibid., 57-60.
35 See Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 97.
36 Kaufman, "Transcendence without Mythology," 60, cf. 56.

even if one of them provides the "master metaphor" for the concept of ultimacy in question. Thus Eckhart's radically apophatic "mysticism of the ground" rests on a theistic foundation, "on the simple Christian belief in God," as Rudolf Otto put it.[37] And even the Non-dualist Vedanta that informs Ramana's spiritual experience has theistic undertones, as evinced by the unexpectedly exalted place of the personal Isvara in the tradition's root text, Sankara's *Commentary on the Brahma Sutra*, to say nothing of the devotional hymns attributed, albeit improbably, to Sankara.[38]

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37 Otto, *Mysticism East and West*, 136.

38 On the use of Isvara in Sankara's *Brahma-sutra Commentary* (*Brahma-sutra Bhasya*), see, e.g., the seminal article of Paul Hacker, "Distinctive Features of the Doctrine and Terminology of Sankara."