



BOOKS

Cosmic self-renunciation

On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics.

By Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis. Fortress, 272 pp., \$20.00 paperback.

EVERY CHRISTIAN would like to believe that the world makes sense within the framework of the classic faith and that moral earnestness not only makes sense but also makes a difference. This belief is at the center of Nancey Murphy and George Ellis's book. **When they look out on the cosmos, history and the personal quest for goodness, it all makes sense to them as the work of the self-emptying God described in Philippians 2:5-11,** who is

creating "God-relating beings out of recalcitrant 'matter.'" This God reveals to us and models for us the ethic of self-renunciation as the normative way of living.

The book consists of a complex, comprehensive, highly technical and immensely creative argument that explains why the authors can hold this belief and why it can be defended as a rational proposition that provides true knowledge of the world.

Murphy and Ellis's world is a large one—it embraces vast cosmic reaches, rich personal and social existence, painful suffering and death, coura-

Reviewed by Philip Hefner, professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

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geous struggle for justice and peace—and they approach it with uncommon learning, intelligence and energy. Very few 20th-century Christian thinkers have attempted to link faith and the natural sciences in such an explicit way, for obvious reasons: it requires comprehensive knowledge, scientific understanding, philosophical acuity and theological depth. Moreover, most mainstream Christian thinkers think it is futile or even wrong to try to move directly from the natural world and social existence to God and morality. The ghost of Immanuel Kant hovers over us. For Kant, reason cannot penetrate to the ultimate meaning of things; only the heart and the moral sense can do that.

Murphy and Ellis want to reinstate a pre-Kantian tradition of theology. They aim to relate theology and the natural sciences and to provide “an objective grounding for morality”; to argue that the “generally accepted body of scientific knowledge is incomplete” and that this incompleteness

calls for metaphysical and theological explanations; and to show that “ethics should have a major role in the theology-science dialogue.”

Their book includes 1) an innovative theory of how all of the sciences and intellectual disciplines are related, one involving a hierarchy that moves from physics and cosmology through the social sciences, ethics, metaphysics and theology; 2) an argument for how this hierarchy works in the context of history, economics and society; 3) a philosophy of science (based on the work of Imre Lakatos) that enables them to argue for the rationality of their ideas; 4) a theory of how ethics relates to the hierarchy of knowledge; 5) a theological theory that completes the hierarchy by answering questions that arise in both the natural and social sciences, and which also provides the ground for ethics; and 6) a defense of their position against some alternative views.

At the core of their presentation is a theology and ethics of kenosis, which

the authors identify as an Anabaptist theology (Ellis is a Quaker; Murphy, a member of the Church of the Brethren). The *kenosis* theme serves best to answer the questions raised by the sciences’ incompleteness and also provides the best foundation for ethics. One of the most important features of this proposal is that it extends the anthropic principle—the notion that the universe is fine-tuned for the appearance of intelligent human life—to suggest that the universe is fine-tuned for morality and for a morality that takes the shape of self-renunciation. “Self-renunciation for the sake of the other is humankind’s highest good.”

This interpretation of *kenosis* owes a good deal to the thought of James McClendon and John Howard Yoder. Self-renunciation is presented as a social ethic, and the authors illustrate it with reference to law, economics, politics and nonviolence. *Kenosis* also serves to provide a concept of God that explains the evolutionary process and theodicy. Social change in South Africa is analyzed as a case study in the efficacy of self-renunciation.

Impressive as this work is, some of its claims are problematic. First, the argument of the book is totally dependent on the success of its complex philosophical scaffolding. If the sciences are not ordered in the hierarchy they propose, if the anthropic principle is not as valid as they argue, if relativism and postfoundationalist trends of thought are more substantial than the authors admit, then the Murphy-Ellis proposal will sag, perhaps collapse.

The authors insist that they are not simply weaving a construct of meaning; they will settle for nothing less than “knowledge” and “truth,” approximating as closely as they can the rationality of science. They seem to pose a sharp dichotomy between knowledge and truth on the one hand and constructing creative frameworks of meaning on the other. Is such a dichotomy tenable? Is it not possible to assert that while we do not create the reality of God and the world, we have no knowledge of them except, as Wallace Stevens says in his famous poem “The Idea of Order at Key West,” in the form of the songs we ourselves sing in response to the sounds of the

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sea we hear? The very care with which Murphy and Ellis erect their conceptual scaffolding is a testimony to the "constructed" character of their proposals. I read Lakatos's philosophy as itself a set of recipes for constructing meaning. The Murphy-Ellis proposals are stunning and useful. Why make a quasi-scientific claim for them?

A second concern is whether kenosis is best interpreted as self-renunciation. Murphy and Ellis argue that the long time scale of the universe and its evolution can be explained as God's patient refusal to intervene in the long and complex processes that are necessary if life and freedom are to emerge. Why would God choose such a way to create life and freedom? The authors ground their proposals in God's noncoercive and nonviolent will. The processes of nature and history reveal God's "painstaking love all the way from the beginning to the end." The divine refusal to intervene coercively is grounded in God's "greater knowledge, power, and foresight." They also write that God "might have chosen to produce all possible worlds with the intention that by chance one or more would turn out to be anthropic."

Does this really explain anything? At some point God's painstaking and patient noncoercive love would seem to be not much different from a God who is patient to the point of irrelevance. This same divine self-renunciation is said to be a response to the theodicy problem. God works in a slow, indirect and painful process. Evil and suffering, therefore, are part of God's work, and our identification with Christ's suffering is

the way we share in God's will. For the authors, evil and suffering are an "anomaly" which they claim to have turned "into dramatic confirmation" of their program.

Is this an adequate response to the evil of human suffering, torture and death in human history? Can one really say to the suffering ones of the world that their woes dramatically confirm that God is a self-renouncing agent? What greater knowledge, power and foresight could possibly explain the plight of Jews under Hitler, Native Americans under the European immigrants to North America, the relations of Tutsi and Hutu—and explain it particularly to the victims in each case? Self-renunciation is a way of working in the world, but it must be shown to make a difference, and this the authors do not convincingly demonstrate.

I have always understood the hymn in Philippians to be describing how

Christ actively works in this world, not how he refrains from working. St. Paul offers this passage as a paradigm of looking not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others (2:4). The authors seem to agree, but their commitment to the notion of self-renunciation derails the momentum of their own thought. Christ's emptying of himself was not the renunciation of himself but the taking of a different form in which he could be active. The kenotic Christ is alive with active energy for redeeming the world—just as, readers will note, George Ellis and Nancey Murphy are.

Simply to rehearse the breadth and complexity of this book's argument boggles the mind. As has been said elsewhere, this book is about creation, and it also *is* a creation. Taking up this book is a real adventure. And there is no adventure more important than the one that this book has embarked upon.




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