

WHITEHEAD AND THE AXIANOETIC TRADITION  
*A SPECULATIVE RELATIONAL SYNTHESIS OF AXIARCHISM,  
IDEALISM, AND THEISM*

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**Abstract.** It is underappreciated that the history of philosophical idealism, with its various affirmations of primordial mind, is also a history of axiarchism, the position that all existence is also founded on value. (Lossky, 1935; Leslie, 1979; Leslie 2001; MacDonald, 1991; Ferré 1996) The intimate coupling of idealism and axiarchism constitutes the heart of what I have recently termed the “axianoetic” tradition of philosophical theology (Gr. *axia*: “worth” or “value,” + *noētikos*: “mind” or “mental activity”). (Davis, 2020) For this tradition, both value and mind are constitutive of divine and worldly reality, albeit with different emphases and priorities available, and various forms of theism, pantheism, and panentheism defensible. (Buckareff, Nagasawa 2016; Davis, 2020; Loughheed, 2024) The origins of the axianoetic tradition date back to Plato and Aristotle and are differently inherited by key figures throughout western philosophical and theological history, including Plotinus, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hegel, Whitehead, A.C. Ewing, and a variety of contemporary voices including, Keith Ward, John Leslie, and Peter Forrest (among others). Readings of the axianoetic tradition are diverse. Some thinkers prioritize abstract value as the condition of concrete mind, while others prioritize concrete mind as conditioning all abstract value. Still others suggest a deep mutuality between value and mind, such that each reciprocally sustains the other. The present article aims to express these respective priorities through the meeting of John Leslie’s axiarchism, Keith Ward’s personal idealism, and Alfred North Whitehead’s axianoetic philosophical theology. In dialogue with these figures, I seek to demonstrate how Whitehead might inspire a synthesis of axiarchism, idealism, and theism through a relational affirmation of value and mind for each other. What this involves is an axianoetic justification of abstract value by virtue of its relationship to concrete mind, and concrete mind by virtue of its relationship to abstract value. This reciprocity may be conceived in terms of the kind of relationality that Whitehead terms “mutual immanence,” where value lends to mind what mind cannot lend itself, just as mind lends to value what value cannot lend itself. In so doing, each reasons and explains the other. Although Whitehead does not state it in precisely this way, I will show that A.C. Ewing has done so explicitly, and in ways that not only resonate with Whitehead’s own expressions of mutual immanence, but also include and relativize the respective priorities of Leslie and Ward. I will conclude by suggesting

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that what is gained in the meeting of Leslie, Ward, Whitehead, and Ewing is speculative insight into the nature of divine necessity as beholden to the axianoetic tradition, and a particular interpretation of this tradition that prioritizes the mutual immanence of value and mind in God.

**Keywords:** Axianoetic, Axiarchism, Idealism, Keith Ward, John Leslie, A.C. Ewing, Alfred North Whitehead.

### **JOHN LESLIE’S AXIARCHISM: THE PRIORITY OF ABSTRACT VALUE**

John Leslie’s principal contribution to philosophical theology has been a robust argument for the notion that abstract Platonic “Value,” “Goodness,” or “ethical needs” and “requirements” might themselves be effectual in “creating” the entirety of things: those diversely terrestrial, those cosmic and multiversal, and those noetically divine. This position he terms “axiarchism” (Leslie, 1979, 6).

Leslie asks us to consider deeply whether “good” and “bad” transcend subjective matters of individual taste. Could it be that these are not simply clever inventions in a world otherwise devoid of objective values and ideals, but that they instead signal something metaphysically preeminent in the nature of things? Put differently, could the fact of “importance” and the attendant fact of “grades of importance and types of importance” really involve what Whitehead describes as “ultimate notions as they occur in daily life?” (Whitehead, 1938, 1) If so, this is not insignificant for attempts to pierce the mystery of existence. Indeed, Leslie reasons that it could truly be a reality that “a thing, if it were to exist all by itself, could in some cases be *absolutely better than a blank*: than an absence of all things...”. Whether something existed or not, “the need for one or more good things – the need for a divine mind, perhaps, or the need for a good cosmos – might then always be ‘there,’ eternally and unconditionally real,” he states (Leslie, Kuhn 2013, 101). Still, can “ethical needs” or abstract notions like “Goodness” or “Value” really be *creatively responsible* either for the necessity of “God,” or the Universe, or both? Such things, according to Leslie, could exist simply because it is supremely good that they should – the *need* itself eternally procuring the reality needed. In this way, the ultimate reason for something to exist may be grounded in the fact that it is “intrinsically valuable that it should exist”, as Ward has stated (Ward, 1996, 195), or because it is metaphysically “best,” as Nicholas Rescher has maintained (Rescher, 2010, 36).

Leslie argues compellingly for axiarchism’s longstanding place within western philosophical and theological thought. The supremacy of value, he rightly claims, is “unoriginal” and far from new. In detailing the “huge influence which the doctrine of a Reign of Value” has exerted both in previous centuries and in modern developments, he insists that axiarchism “has immensely influenced both religion and philosophy,” yet “nobody stands out as having done special justice to it”

(Leslie, 1979, 195)<sup>1</sup>. In particular, Leslie emphasizes that axiarchism might render plausible a long tradition insisting that the necessity of divine existence consists, in some way, in God having the eternally sufficient ground for divine existence *within* the divine Self. In this case, God's existence is required ethically because the divine nature *is what it is* (Leslie 1979, 6). Put differently, this ethical requiredness "would have its source *in* that mind's own tremendously rich nature," so that it would be misleading to say that something outside or exterior to God, rendered God existent (Leslie, 2001, 156; emphasis mine). Leslie's own proposal is lavish and plenitudinous to the extreme, consisting in an axiologically dictated idealism inspired principally by Plato, Plotinus, and Spinoza. He pictures not simply one divine mind, but infinite divine minds thinking infinite worlds into being because of their *worth*. According to Leslie, these infinite worlds are solely the result of intricate oceans of divine thought and are completely identical to them. Thus, Leslie's axiarchism engenders a radically pluralistic idealism and pantheism. (Leslie 2001; Leslie 2007)

This proposal remains speculative, bold, and challenging. As Leslie presents it, axiarchism banks not only upon the notion that there *are* abstract value requirements undergirding all existence and experience, but also that some of them are *creatively effectual* in actually bringing things about. These notions, of course, remain hotly debated. On the one hand, objective values have long been dismissed on both ontological and epistemological levels as far to "queer" to exist, let alone be grasped by purely physical human creatures. On the other hand, even if they did exist, one struggles to see how something as abstract as "Goodness" or "Value" can *do* anything at all, such that reasons or explanations might plausibly be attached to them. These critiques have been raised by a variety of thinkers in their own way, not least Ward, Whitehead, and Ewing.

Indeed, for many philosophers, it is not at all obvious that "ethical needs," "the best," or other abstract axiological requirements can be creatively effective *on their own*. Nevertheless, Leslie insists that although "logic could never prove it, the [ethical] requirement has a creative success that is necessary in an absolute fashion." To the question: "What gives it success?" he answers: "Nothing" – no mind and nothing actual at all. (Leslie 2007, 87) Again, however, one wonders whether ethical abstractions are any more liable to act creatively than mathematical abstractions. To recall Steven Hawking's famous question: Does not fire need to be breathed into them as well? Responding to Leslie's axiarchism, Paul Davies queries: "The idea seems strange. How can an 'ethical requirement' create a universe?" (Davies 1992, 171)

However strange, Leslie persists in arguing that the creative supremacy of abstract Value remains a longstanding and venerable tradition. He is right about

<sup>1</sup> Despite having the same title, Leslie appears unaware of Lossky's earlier work in *Value and Existence*.

this, but a fuller story can and should be told. As I've demonstrated elsewhere, his interpretation of the tradition not only *subjugates* concrete Mind to abstract Value in a way that may not be warranted, but also in a way that (arguably) renders the creative efficacy of value unintelligible. (Davis 2020, part II) My concern is that Leslie (along with certain dimensions of the tradition) risks speaking of Value in *abstraction* from Mind such that Value effects a *unidirectional* as opposed to relational determination of Mind. Although he recognizes an essential place for Mind in the tradition, and especially in his own contribution to it, his priority remains thoroughly axiarchic such that Mind appears to add *nothing* to Value at all. Turning now to Keith Ward, we will see that his philosophical idealism tends to prioritize concrete Mind as the *context* in which abstract Value is rendered coherent.

#### **KEITH WARD'S IDEALISM: THE PRIORITY OF CONCRETE MIND**

For decades Keith Ward has advocated an "idealist view of life" over and against "materialism and its discontents" (Ward, 2010, 182; Ward, 2009, 130). According to Ward, philosophical idealism generally "holds that mind is the only primordial reality and that the whole material universe is a product of mind". The physical universe he states, "would not exist without mind, and the true nature of the universe is that it is an expression or appearance of a basically mental reality" (Ward, 2017, 9). Ward's advocacy of "personal idealism" in particular, holds that this one supreme Mentality is "personal" in the sense of knowing, thinking, feeling, and intending<sup>2</sup> (Ward, 2017, 1).

For Ward, one of the philosophical advantages of holding to the primordially of concrete Mind, is the ability to offer not simply a *nomological* explanation of the universe in terms of the physical or law-like domains of natural science, but also an *axiological* explanation in which intentional, purposive, and evaluative dimensions of the universe actually have a place. In ways similar to Leslie, Ward stresses that such a "principle of axiology" could apply to the entire universe such that a purposeful explanation in terms of value "would provide an explanation of why [the universe] exists in the way it does." (Ward, 2014, 72; 51) Supposing there is a necessary "array of possible states, with the values they necessarily have," then "there would be an intrinsic reason for the existence of any universe – namely, the goodness that it would exhibit." Its intrinsic worth, Ward argues, would give it a "wholly satisfactory" axiological explanation. (Ward, 2017, 97)

<sup>2</sup> For Ward's discussion of distinctions between absolute and personal idealism, see Ward, 2013, ch. 14.

Still, for Ward an objective framework of Value in the universe requires embedding within some kind of Primordial Mentality or Consciousness.<sup>3</sup> The “addition of Mind to the Good,” he states, “provides a principle for selecting actual goods (that is, for creating a cosmos)...that a purely conceptual ‘Ideal’ cannot.” (Ward 2013, xiii) This divine Mind, moreover, would *know* itself such that its own existence is explained not only in terms of its *Goodness alone*, but in terms of its *Knowledge of its Goodness*. A necessary Mind, supreme in Goodness, would be ultimately explanatory, Ward insists, “in that it necessarily desires its own existence as that which is most worthy of existence, and does not derive it from any other being.” (Ward, 1996, 196)

Ward insists such a view is not at all foreign but has been expounded by the “best-known philosophers” of the tradition. Plato, Aristotle, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel and many others, all shared the “general view” that “ultimate reality has the nature of mind or consciousness, and that the material universe is the appearance or creation of that ultimate mind.” (Ward 2009, 1; 130) As such, they saw philosophy “as an inquiry into the nature and purpose of the intelligible mind which underlies the physical universe.” Although their views were by no means identical, Ward maintains that they “all thought that the most acute human enquiry would show that the heart of reality lay in something akin to intelligence and intellectual beauty – something hard to define and describe, but hard only because it was greater than, not less than, the human mind and the limits of human language.” (Ward 2017, 8)

What we see in Ward, therefore, is a thoroughly idealistic interpretation of the tradition, wherein, despite also recognizing an essential place for abstract Value, he has prioritized the ultimacy of concrete Mind. In many places, however, Ward also appears to recognize a kind of *internal relationality* between Mind and Value in God that is not so obvious in Leslie. Although it is perhaps implicit in their contributions, explicit treatment of this relationality in both thinkers is lacking. While Leslie stresses the abstractness of “ethical requirements” for the existence of divine Mind(s), Ward stresses the actuality of Mind as the proper context in which Creative Value is rendered intelligible. Some clear differences between them notwithstanding, they have nevertheless arrived at very similar conclusions from their respective axiarchic and idealistic priorities. Both these “readings” of the tradition, I want to emphasize, can be seen as *valid*, and my own reference to this

<sup>3</sup> Ward states: “It is a plausible view that the existence of any good depends upon the existence of some consciousness which values it as good. It is not very plausible to think that one state of the universe would be better than another if no being was conscious of the difference. It is hard to see what ‘betterness’ would come to in such a case. The philosopher G.E. Moor once held that a beautiful universe, unseen by anyone, was better than an ugly universe. But it seems to me that without being appreciated or disliked, no state of the universe would really be of greater value than any other. If that is so, value must consist in appreciation by some consciousness” (Ward, 1996, 183).

tradition as *axianoetic* aims to recognize this more explicitly. Still, I think more should be said about the *relationship* between Value and Mind *in* God that does justice not only to fundamental insights of Leslie and Ward, but also illuminates ambiguities of the axianoetic tradition anew. To this end, I turn now to the relational insights of Whitehead, who I believe offers much when considering this question.

### A.N. WHITEHEAD'S MUTUAL IMMANENCE: THE PRIORITY OF RELATIONALITY

For Whitehead, God is best conceived as a divine Mind with both a “primordial” and “consequent” nature. Taken in abstraction, God’s “primordial nature” is permanent conceptual Mentality; it is the eternal and necessary foundation of Divinity (and the World) understood as unconscious, non-actual, and complete within itself. Here, God is the “unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality.” (*PR*, 343) By contrast, the consequent nature is fully aware Intellect, actual, and in receptive relationality with the world process. Here, God is the conscious and everlasting “realization of the actual world in the unity of [the divine] nature, and through the transformation of [divine] wisdom.” (*PR*, 46; 345) God as a divine Mind is thus a *relational* and *dipolar fusion* of abstract and concrete, independent and related, permanent and transient domains. “I think the universe has a side which is mental and permanent,” Whitehead states; “This side is that prime conceptual drive which I call the primordial nature of God.” On the other hand, Whitehead holds that “this permanent actuality *passes into* and is *immanent* in the transient side” – the consequent nature of God. (*SP*, 126; emphasis mine) As A.H. Jonson rightly reports: “God as primordial is not a distinct actuality; only the *union* of primordial and consequent natures forms a distinct actuality.” (Johnson, 1983, 5–6; emphasis mine) This relational “union” can be stated in terms of what Whitehead calls “mutual immanence” as a relationship in God where “each side lend[s] to the other a factor necessary for its reality”<sup>4</sup> (*SP*, 126).

Whitehead traces the origins of mutual immanence to a “metaphysical discovery” of early Christian theology in its struggle to clarify trinitarian controversies concerning multiplicity in the divine nature, and in God’s relationship to the world

<sup>4</sup> Although my primary focus in this discussion is God *en se*, it must be stated that it remains difficult – impossible – to consider God in abstraction from the World in Whitehead’s scheme of thought. Mutual immanence is not just an intra-divine mode of relationality, but also the proper mode of relationality between God and the World and, indeed, between all worldly entities. For example: “It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World,” Whitehead tells us (*PR*, 348); and “The general common function exhibited by any group of actual occasions is that of mutual immanence” (*AI*, 201).

more generally (*AI* 168–169)<sup>5</sup>. We find him making strong claims for mutual immanence. He stresses that this mode of relationality is “the key to metaphysics” and indeed, a “fundamental philosophical doctrine” not only with respect to God *in se* (arguably), but also in terms of God’s relationship with the World. (*SP*, 126; 91) It is in this sense that Roland Faber is justified in saying that over and above all formative elements in Whitehead’s metaphysics, “mutual immanence” – as the fundamental *way* in which various modes of existence are entangled and reciprocally supportive – is “*the* ultimate reality in Whitehead’s thought” (Faber, 2017, 97). God too is an expression of this relationality conceived as Permanent Mentality with unconscious and conscious domains, those *abstract* and *axiological* on the one hand, and those *concrete* and *evaluational* on the other. Only in the mutually immanent union of these domains can one speak of God as fully actual Mind.

What about the status of value in Whitehead’s philosophical theology? That the “reason,” “purpose,” or “foundation” of God is to be found in the supremacy of divine value is at the heart of Whitehead’s vision. As Leslie has put it: “Whitehead supports axiarchism with vigor” (Leslie, 1979, 214). In quoting a medley of Whitehead’s key statements – that “existence is the upholding of value intensity” for example – axiarchism requires that this statement also apply to *God’s existence*. (*MT*, 111) Is value God’s “reason” or “explanation” for Whitehead? It is noteworthy that in his early statements about God, Whitehead provocatively spoke of God’s “existence” as the “ultimate irrationality,” saying that “no reason can be given for the nature of God, because that nature is the ground of rationality.” The limits of rationality are reached; there must be a divine “categorical limitation” operative in the nature of things “which does not spring from any metaphysical reason.” While there is a “metaphysical need” for a divine “principle of determination,” Whitehead insists that “no metaphysical reason” can be given “for what is determined.” (*SMW*, 178)

At this point, one may be tempted to point to a common objection raised by Leslie, Ward, and Ewing, and perhaps interpret these statements as an appeal to God’s “brute,” or “reasonless” existence. Indeed, each thinker has argued unwaveringly against the conclusion that the existence of the world can be explained by appealing to a divine mind whose own existence and attributes *have no reason or explanation at all* (Leslie, 2007, 83; Ward, 1996, 195; Ewing, 1973 157; 163). One might even recall Whitehead’s own injunction that “the easy

<sup>5</sup> “The accepted solution of a multiplicity in the nature of God, each component being unqualifiedly Divine, involves a doctrine of mutual immanence in the divine nature. I am not in any way venturing upon a decision upon the correctness of the original assumption of this multiplicity. The point is the recourse to a doctrine of mutual immanence” (*AI*, 168). As Faber clarifies: “Whitehead paints mutual immanence as inevitable breakthrough of the maybe most profound divine truth (given its eminent importance, this is not necessarily a hyperbole), not only in theory, but also as active realization of existence in the face of God, in the history of ‘rational’ religion, exemplified in the intersection of western philosophy, Plato, and occidental religion, the Christ event and its theological interpretations” (Faber, 2017, p. 122).

assumption that there is an ultimate reality which, in some unexplained way, is to be appealed to for the removal of perplexity, constitutes the great refusal of rationality to assert its rights" (*SMW*, 92). Has Whitehead backed himself into a metaphysical corner?

Arguably, it is here that a deeper exploration of his axiarchism is of service. Prior to Whitehead's above statements as to the reasonless nature of God, he in fact already insisted that the "limitation" or "determination" in the "envisaging mode of [divine] activity" is the "price of value," and that there "cannot be value without antecedent standards of value." From where, however, do these antecedent standards of value derive? Whitehead reasons that it must stand in "God's nature to divide the Good from the Evil...". (*SMW*, 179) Here, according to critic, Stephen Lee Ely, is Whitehead's early assertion "without explanation, that God is good."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this statement seems to be an overt association of goodness with the divine nature, suggesting that the foundations – perhaps even the "reason" – of divinity has direct recourse to the creative efficacy of Goodness or Value<sup>7</sup>.

This becomes far more explicit as Whitehead's thought on God develops. God becomes an "actual entity" whose "conceptual" or "perceptual" activity axiologically conditions the process of the world. It is God who is "the measure of the aesthetic consistency of the world," Whitehead insists, and whose creative purpose is "the attainment of value in the temporal world" (*RM*, 86–87; 90). This value derives from God as the limiting "ground antecedent to transition", including in the divine vision "all possibilities of value conceptually". "The limitation of God is his goodness," Whitehead states, and God "gains his depth of actuality by his harmony of valuation" such that the "transmutation of evil into good enters into the actual world by reason of the inclusion of the nature of God..." The very "power by which God sustains the world is the power of himself as the ideal," such that the very world lives through its incarnation of divine Value. (*RM*, 137–140).

These statements seem clear: the divine "purpose" and "the depth of actuality" which is divine existence, are *axiologically grounded*. Not only does Value sustain the existence and reason for the world, it can be argued that God *in se* is sustained and reasoned by the necessity of the Divine Value. This has been recognized recently by Faber who, in responding to Leslie's proposal, namely, "That there is something (at all)...because it *ought* to be," points to Whitehead, saying: "[This] is a marvelous argument and one could even read Whitehead's claim that God is limited by goodness in this way, namely, that it is goodness through which God exists." (Faber, 2018, 204–205)

If one should be skeptical of such a reading, Whitehead makes even stronger statements to this end in his mature works. In discussing the interplay of the

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Lee Ely, "The Religious Availability of Whitehead's God: A Critical Analysis," in Ford and Kline 1983, p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> For my deeper defense of this point in dialogue with Pierfrancesco Basile and Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes, see Davis 2024, pp. 192–212.

primordial and consequent natures, for example, he insists that “the necessary goodness” of the primordial nature “expresses the determination of his consequent nature.” (*PR*, 345) He associates God directly with “the World of Value” where Value represents the infinity of values in their timeless eternity. The “concept of God” in terms of the “World of Value” concerns “the essential unification of the Universe,” he states<sup>8</sup> (*SP*, 97). What is more, the necessity of the divine existence itself is fundamentally axiological such that Whitehead insists unambiguously that God’s existence “is founded in Value” and is to be conceived as persuasive toward “ideal co-ordination.” The “nature of God” is “founded on ideals of perfection, moral and aesthetic,” he states. God receives into the unity of the divine nature “the scattered effectiveness of realized activities,” but they are “transformed by the supremacy of [divine] ideals.” What results, Whitehead imagines, is *tragedy* in God, which takes realistic precedence over “profane” ascriptions of “mere happiness,” let alone visions of blissful perfection (*SP*, 98; 101–102). Elsewhere, in fact, Whitehead insists that “God is tragic and noble, not perfect.” As A.H. Johnson clarifies, in contrast to “Absolute Idealism,” evil is not “ultimately a neutral element in an all-inclusive perfection” for Whitehead, but is rather experienced as tragic in comparison to the ideals of the divine nature. (Johnson 1983, 7) Nevertheless, a mode of perfection *does* remain in “God’s subjective aim”, for Whitehead – an aim that is derived from the axiological completeness of the primordial nature and issues forth into the character of the consequent nature (*PR*, 345–346).

Whitehead has stated clearly that value conditions all ultimate explanations – that “all ultimate reasons are in terms of an aim at value” (*MT*, 135). According to his ontological principle, all reasons are *also* in terms of *Actuality*. Value and Actuality come together in Mental Activity – the conceptual workings of Mind as the “organ of novelty” and the “urge of appetite.” In Whitehead’s universe, this is the case for finite worldly entities (to limited degrees) and for the eternal and everlasting Actual Entity, which is God (to upmost degrees)<sup>9</sup>. As an Actual Entity, God grounds order, value, and novelty by virtue of God’s primordial Mental Appetition. In quest for a *reason* or *explanation* of God, therefore, we find these two insights wedding abstract Value and concrete Mind through mutual immanence. At

<sup>8</sup> “The World of Value exhibits the essential unification of the Universe. Thus while it exhibits the immortal side of the many persons, it also involves the unification of the personality. This is the concept of God...He is the intangible fact at the base of finite existence” (*SMW*, 97–98). Faber clarifies that the world of value, “contains all the world’s potentiality, structurality, and determination of content in its abstract quality as *valuation*; its foundation is God, the occurrence of value as such that provides meaning” (Faber, 2008, p. 142).

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, not only does Whitehead insist that “mental experience is the organ of novelty, the urge beyond” in all finite events as they “vivify the massive physical fact, which is repetitive, with the novelties which become”, he also insists that “God is the organ of novelty, aiming at intensification” (*FR*, 26–27; *PR*, 67; cf. *MT*, 26).

the base of the Primordial Actuality of Mind is the Creative Supremacy of Value, each offering the other what in isolated abstraction, each would lack.

Although Whitehead does not explicitly put it this way, I believe it is consistent with his (and also Ward's and Leslie's thought) to say that it is *Value* which gives God an ultimate reason or explanation, and *Mind* which is the *only context* in which axiological reasons can be given. In fact, we will soon find A.C. Ewing saying precisely this. In God, both Value and Mind *coincide* in the kind of relationality Whitehead terms "mutual immanence". The divine Mind, therefore, *requires* Value just as Value *requires* the divine Mind; each reciprocally procures the existence of the other. In doing so, each also transcends the other in providing what the other cannot provide for itself. What is suggested here is that divine necessity concerns the mystery of the mutual immanence and transcendence of Mind and Value for each other. I will now point to the ways in which this relational vision is expressed by A.C. Ewing as one of the most significant axianoetic thinkers of the twentieth century.

#### **A.C. EWING'S INSISTENCE: THE MUTUAL IMMANENCE OF MIND AND VALUE**

Leslie has often expressed his admiration and indebtedness to A.C. Ewing "for showing that an expert at philosophical analysis really can defend Platonism's creation story which he applied to explaining God's necessary existence". Ewing, Leslie claims, was "possibly the greatest idealist philosopher of the twentieth century," holding that the "existence of a divine person could be due *directly* to the ethical need for such a person to exist" (Leslie, 2001, viii; emphasis mine). As I aim to show below, however, this is only *partly true in abstraction* for Ewing. Leslie again wants to *prioritize* the place of abstract Value in Ewing as a premiere axiarchist. This is not false, but it does miss the fact that Value for Ewing is *not* simply unilateral or even "directly" responsible for the existence of God. Rather, Ewing points to a *wider relationality* between Value and Mind, and with a clarity only rivaled by statements Whitehead himself makes about the mutual immanence of God and the World.

Ewing has argued compellingly that God's necessity is *not* to be conceived in terms of logical necessity. In part, he is agreeing with, and responding to, Kant's "fatal objection" on this point<sup>10</sup> (Ewing, 1973, 147). Need divine necessity be

<sup>10</sup> "[N]othing has been done to overcome Kant's strongest objection to the proof of a necessary being, namely that there could not be any contradiction in something not existing, because you must ascribe conflicting attributes to something if you are to contradict yourself, but if you merely deny the existence of something you are not ascribing any attributes to anything, so there are no attributes to conflict. This seems to me a fatal objection to the view that the existence of God is logically necessary". (Ewing, 1973, 147)

conceived in terms of *logical necessity* after all? “Might not God be necessary in some sense other than that in which his necessity would mean that there was an internal contraction in denying his existence?” (Ewing, 1973, 155). Providing a plausible “explanation” for God is central to the philosophical task for Ewing. Akin to Leslie’s, Ward’s and Whitehead’s own statements, he too holds that, “an explanation of why something is true by reference to something else *which itself is unexplained* is not a satisfying explanation...”. Indeed, “[w]ithout an answer on this point the child’s question – What is the cause of God? – is sufficient to make the argument collapse.” (Ewing, 1973, 163; 157; emphasis mine). It remains a truism for Ewing that “an affirmative existential proposition cannot be logically necessary,” meaning that “an explanation in terms of logical argument is not possible”. What ultimate explanation can be offered then for the existence of God? Ewing arrives at Value as the only plausible alternative.

If we are to meet the demand of the human intellect that there should be a reason, we seem to need a reason of such a kind as will give an explanation of existence without making the non-existence of anything logically self-contradictory. There remains only one alternative, as far as can be seen, which might do this, namely an explanation in terms of values. In that case, God’s existence will be necessary not because there would be any internal self-contradiction in denying it but because it was supremely good that God should exist. It is not indeed evident to us a priori that the best possible being must exist, but a universe determined by values would certainly be rational in a very important sense in which a universe not determined by values would quite fail to be so, and the hypothesis that a complete perfection does constitute an adequate ground for existence does seem to be the only one which could make a universe intelligible and give an ultimate explanation of anything... (Ewing, 1973, 157).

These statements are compelling. If the existence of God is axiologically determined then, Ewing claims, “the existence of everything is”. Put differently, “If any being exists on account of its value, the most perfect possible being must”, so that “God’s existence is not contingent”, but “made necessary by his perfection” (Ewing, 1973, 158). The “determination” by Value, moreover, is not “outside” God; nor is it properly conceived as “prior” or unilateral in nature. (Ewing 1973, 164–165). Ewing now explicitly expresses this relationship in terms of mutual immanence saying, “It would be as true to say that the [value] principle could not be true without God existing as to say that God could not exist without the principle being true” (Ewing, 1973, 203).

Readers of Whitehead will immediately recognize the resonance of Ewing’s language with Whitehead’s own when he expresses the mutual immanence of God and the World for each other: “It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World. It is as true to say that God transcends

the World, as that the World transcends God.” (PR, 348). We are not focused on the status of the world in this discussion, but Ewing’s statement is arguably consistent with Whitehead’s vision of God as a divine Mind whose “existence is founded in Value,” on “ideals of perfection, moral and aesthetic” (SP, 98; 101–102).

Perhaps more than any other modern philosopher, Ewing recognizes clearly the *mutuality* between Value and Mind in God such that each *lives through what the other provides*. There is a sense of both immanence and transcendence in this mutuality. What is more, it is significant that Ewing fully grants that one could emphasize (as Leslie and Ward have done) one or the other, but that this would, in fact, only be *abstracting* them from their mutually immanent relationality. “These [value] principles and God would be inseparably linked,” he states, “though in some respect or sense one might regard God as prior and in another sense the [value] principles. The latter would be prior in the sense that they gave the *reason* why God existed, and God in that the principles could only be realized in being, have objectivity through God.” (Ewing, 1973, 203)

This is a remarkable statement as to the mutually immanent roles that Value and Mind play for each other in grounding God’s necessary existence. As Whitehead puts it, “each side lend[s] to the other a factor necessary for its reality” (SP, 126). Although it may only be implicit in their proposals, it is this *kind of relationship* which arguably integrates the respective priorities of abstract Value by Leslie, and concrete Mind by Ward. To conclude, I want to briefly comment on the place for mutual immanence in Ward and Leslie’s proposals, as well as suggest that mutual immanence may provide a speculative lens for interpreting ambiguous statements of the axioanoetic tradition anew.

### **CONCLUSION: MUTUAL IMMANENCE AND THE AXIANOETIC TRADITION**

I mentioned above that while Ward tends to emphasize the concrete priority of Mind, he nevertheless vaguely recognizes some manner of *inherent relationality* between concrete Mind and abstract Value. This is seen in his comments agreeing that supreme Value or Goodness is a defensible axiological reason for God. The best explanation for God is that God is “supremely desirable, not least to [the divine] self” (Ward, 1996, 195–196). There is an implicit recognition here of a *relationality* between Value and Mind such that God’s existence is explained not only in terms of *abstract Goodness*, but also in terms of *divine Knowledge* of this Goodness. There are two relations here: *from Value to Mind* and *from Mind to Value*; they can be distinguished, but not fully isolated from the other.

Ward conceives Goodness as “a necessary part of the being of God” that “could not exist as necessary in isolation from the totality of the Divine nature”. From one direction, the “addition of the Mind to the Good” offers the “Good” what

it cannot (as “conceptual ‘ideal’”) offer itself; namely, its *creative efficacy* in sustaining Mind and any worlds Mind produces. (Ward, 2013, xiii) From the other direction, the Good offers Mind what Mind devoid of the Good would lack; namely a coherent explanation (or reason) and criterion for adjudicating worlds. Although he has not put it in this way, the mutual immanence and transcendence of Value and Mind appears straightforward, albeit unstated, in Ward. Indeed, one could even read it directly into his further insistence that “God is the self-existent Ideal – not just an ideal without being, and not just the source of all derived being, without value; but *the congruence of ultimate value and reality in one transcending infinity.*” (Ward, 2017, 151–152; emphasis mine)

This kind of relationality is admittedly less apparent in Leslie, but not wholly absent. Neither has he recognized this, however. On his vision, Value *unilaterally* procures and explains the necessity of infinite Mind(s) as *supremely needful*, and with eternal creative success. He readily grants that such a Mind could have an “ethical side to it,” an “ethical requiredness” with sources internal to that mind’s own nature (Leslie, 2001, 156). What is arguably underemphasized in Leslie’s proposal is what Mind *offers to* Value in return. In holding that an abstract ethical requirement *for the existence of this Mind* is not ultimately separable from the *actuality of this Mind really existing*, Leslie does seem to open himself to conceiving a mode of relationality between Value and Mind that is not just unilateral.

What does the existence of Mind consist in for Leslie? He insists that the divine Mind contemplates *everything of utmost value*. This is a knowledge of absolutely everything *worth* knowing, one which, of necessity, must contemplate not only *all worthwhile worlds*, but also *Itself* as eternally required by Value. If it is “worth knowing that ethical requirements are what are responsible” for the divine Mind’s existence, Leslie states, then the divine Mind “automatically knows these things” (Leslie, 2001, 165). It is through the *inclusion* of this Mind’s *own* Value in its *own* Contemplation, I claim, that we arrive at a relationship of mutual immanence. This very *awareness* of divine Value *is* the *creative gift* of Mind to Value. As with Ward and Leslie, moreover, the mutual immanence of Value and Mind is the overt relational undercurrent found in Ewing’s affirmation of God. In ways resonant to Whitehead, he points directly to the mutual immanence of Value and Mind for each other.

It must be emphasized that the axianoetic tradition is not without deep ambiguity as to the status of, and relationship between, Mind and Value. These divine matters remain utterly shrouded in mystery, and there is scarcely a simple way of uniting such a diverse tradition under a single notion. My claim is far more modest, however. At a minimum, the relationality of Mind and Value in terms of mutual immanence offers a clue into the mystery of divine necessity and might very well illuminate ambiguities of the axianoetic tradition anew. To conclude, I offer a few select examples as lures for further consideration.

What can it mean when Aristotle expresses something of the relationship between Mind and Value in God as *noesis noeseos*, “a thinking of thinking?” (Ward, 1982, 212). What can it mean when Plotinus ambiguously states that “in turning toward itself” the One or Good “sees”, and that this “seeing which is Intellect”, is also that through which the One “acts” and “does” – being both “word and deed” of the ineffable One? (Ward, 1982, 59). What can it mean when Anselm suggests that God is “the beautiful as well as its contemplator,” or when Hegel speaks of the Absolute as “the Idea that thinks itself?” (Ward, 1982, 136; Leslie, Kuhn 2013, 106). What can it mean when many in the axianoetic tradition speak to the mystery of divine existence in terms of the equation of Essence and Existence, Cause and Effect, the Abstract and the Concrete? When considered in light of the mutual immanence of Mind and Value, these statements, blurry as they are, might begin to admit some manner of novel clarity. At the very least, this discussion has been a speculative exercise that is uniquely expressive of Whitehead’s conviction that “the task of philosophy is the understanding of the interfusion of modes of existence” (*MT*, 71).

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