

# THE DIVINE TEMPLATE

## My Slow Ascent from the Icy Plain of Deism

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### *A Personal Metaphysical Journey*

By Jay B. Gaskill



Our most central beliefs are arrived at through experience and deep reflection. This will be my personal take on “Life, The Universe and Everything”. That “take” is an alloy forged of several elements: love and respect for the sciences and the arts; the conviction that the esthetic, the ethical and the spiritual facets of the our experiences represent a cognitive link between personal being and the ultimate; a confidence that our personal apprehension of the numinous level of experience is an apperception of the numinous level of reality; the conviction that all reality, whether manifested within one’s personal conscious field or ‘outside’, is deeply and perfectly integrated; and the insight that the animating faith of the physical sciences – that we can discover and reveal the underlying unities, integrations and relationships of the physical world - is also the essential animating faith of all theologies – that we are called to discover and reveal the underlying, unities, integrations and relationships that link the numinous and the mundane. The thoughts, insights and observations in this piece are offered as reflection, personal witness, and as an invitation to dialogue and discovery.

### MY RECOVERY FROM DEISM

As an early teenager, my belief in deity was more intellectual than experiential. I read Einstein’s “Out of My Later Years” at the age thirteen. In high school, I wrote an essay about Einstein’s belief in God. My teacher suspected I had somehow copied the essay, but it was not so, just a part of my own journey. Much later, I encountered a letter Einstein had written to a friend.

“You find it surprising that I think of the comprehensibility of the world (insofar as we are entitled to speak of such world) as a miracle or an eternal mystery. But, surely, a priori, one should expect the world to be chaotic, not to be grasped by thought in any way. One might expect that the world evidenced itself as lawful only so far as we grasp it in an orderly fashion. This would be a sort of order like the alphabetical order of words.

On the other hand, the kind of order created, for example, by Newton's gravitational theory is of a very different character. Even if the axioms of the theory are posited by man, the success of such a procedure supposes in the objective world a high degree of order, which we are in no way entitled to expect a priori."<sup>1</sup>

Most working scientists I have met are prone to acknowledge that, in the beautiful handwork of nature, one discovers the "mind of God", even while a subset of the same group might resist the implications of that thought. But God, even as a metaphor, has the power to increase understanding.

I don't remember when I first learned the term "deism" as something distinct with "theism," but while in high school I was aware of the issues, and was able to detect that still small voice, that sense of Presence.

At some point I understood that Albert Einstein was a "deist", as distinguished from a "theist." It was the remote designer deity model in the first instance and the active, present and involved deity model in the second. Einstein saw what other scientists have called the "mind of God" in the order of nature and its rational accessibility and organization. Einstein saw nature as a masterwork of brilliant predetermination, a vast clockwork mechanism to which science was the key.

The theistic idea of a *personal* deity, a being to whom we might turn for solace (and even intervention), was simply ruled out by Einstein's deterministic world view. His impersonal view of deity probably originated with Spinoza. Einstein and Baruch Spinoza shared the world-view that what we call God is revealed in nature's intelligible order. But there was always an over-the-top materialism lurking within this perspective that I always rejected.<sup>2</sup> Its implication is that all of us who must live in the "real" world of matter and energy can admire the grand *design* but extract no moral information from its designer, much less any help or solace.

I knew intuitively that materialism is not the final, complete model of "all that is, seen and unseen." I am certain that the current century will chronicle the demise of arch materialism.

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<sup>1</sup>A. Einstein, "Lettres a Maurice Solovine" (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1956)

<sup>2</sup> Materialism, the mental disease of the intelligentsia in the current age, holds – in its extreme form – that everything, absolutely everything, is matter and energy and the space-time regime within which matter and energy operate to cause events. There is no real room in this account for moral judgment, a human soul, nor – really – any basis for valuing life itself (except as one's own inclinations to want to live lead to pro-life coping strategies based on a calculation of advantage).

So I was a closet theist before I acquired any theology. In classic deism, the watchmaker God, who set things in motion, becomes essentially non-involved and therefore irrelevant. In this view, it is as if the realm of “heaven”, i.e., of pure being, exists as if behind a barrier of translucent ice, in a pond we can remotely study but never swim in nor taste. Trapped in this vision, all of us who must live in the “real” world of matter and energy can admire the grand *design* but extract no moral information from its designer, much less any help or solace. Ineligibility is not enough.

And I discovered that no one is going to be able to demonstrate the existence of God (however described or named) in mere words. No argument, however structured, can substitute for authentic experience. Which brings me to my personal epiphany: *We are not without data on this most important of all questions.*

A compelling sense or experience of contact with a benign meta-personality occupying a deep, ultimate level of existence is so common to the human condition that reports of the encounter fill an entire library. The reports (which share a remarkably similar signature, once the cultural differences are accounted for) go back to the very earliest of all recorded human experiences. These are not reports of an abstraction, or a purely intellectual inspiration. They are chronicles of individual *encounters* with a being (sometimes described as a state of being) worthy of worship, *one with the unmistakable signature of a caring persona.*

These are not described as casual “buddy” or “guardian angel” encounters. The witnesses tend not to describe a visible person or being. These encounters tend to be life altering moments. The witnesses encounter a presence, begin to apprehend the nature of the occasion, then a sense of awe and wonder follow. When doubts don’t intervene to cloud someone’s ability to apprehend the experience, witnesses find themselves flooded by a benign, piercing illumination.

Let me return to the image of a scientist peering through the milky layer of ice, trying to see the outlines of the “fossil God” inside. That face under the ice was me. The face is **you**. It is God who is trying to break through.

## **THE WITNESS OF CREATION**

From a sufficient distance, we humans have been privileged to see the universe unfolding according to a general template, one that ultimately favors the emergence of life, creative innovation and conscious intelligence (as thinking beings we in turn generate morally

founded civilizations), and in which our civilizations become a new venue for the valuing, promotion and perpetuation of these deepest of values. These are the Three Ur-values (loving life, conscious intelligence and creation); they were embedded in the warp and woof of reality as favored potentialities; they form the normative foundation of all other values; when mutually integrated, they make up the “normative infrastructure” of human ethics; and they are the foundation stones of moral civilization.

Eventually this vision of a universe suffused with emergent design and value took me beyond the deist’s disembodied, eternal architect, the “watchmaker God”. I sensed I had recognized an active, leavening *presence* among us. I wanted to reject the claims of the Freudian atheists for whom any brush with the Eternal is dismissed as a psychological problem. Then I discovered the encoded clues. We can follow the track of the decoding process from Plato to C.S. Lewis, from Moses to Aquinas, from Heraclitus to Meister Eckhart, Aristotle to Buber, from Spinoza to Teilhard... I believe this decoding process is open to all conscious morally aware agents. The history of the moral development of the human species tracks that decoding process as it unfolded here on the third planet rotating a Type G Star in a solar system on the spiral arm of the pinwheel galaxy we humans call the Milky Way.

I began to visualize a message that was unpacking itself in my mind over the years, conscious that the emerging picture was not entirely of my own making. At the Beginning of Beginnings, there was a first decision. That First Election was the choice of “Being” over non-being. Was this *really* an absolutely random flip of the coin?

Had it gone in favor of non-being, we’d not be communicating. All else follows, from Big Bang, to the eventual emergence of thinking animals, of valuing persons, of morally founded civilizations composed of morally aware animals.

Did *value* really emerge *ex nihilo*? My mind told me that value naturally emerges only from the *capacity* to value, ultimately from *personality*. I found this a much stronger inference than the “design implies a designer” insight. But I also noted that the so-called “argument from design” is still a reasonable inference. The notion becomes compelling once we understand that the processes of design emergence in the universe, though incremental and stochastic, become *virtually inevitable* given sufficient time scales.

This universe came into being with extraordinarily fine-tuned, life friendly and “consciousness-emergence friendly” parameters; and it has come equipped with such extraordinary resources of time and space that our “accidental” development wasn’t so much accidental as just slow in arrival.

Yes, the course of this universe was not absolutely predetermined. That hardly means that it is governed on its largest scale by random, meaningless events and processes. Trillions of births and deaths are foreordained on the large-grained scale, but the small-grained playing out of individual lives and fates depends in large measure on how all the thinking, feeling players have come to understand and decode the larger scale events, i.e., by our growing moral sensibilities. And the emergence *and eventual strengthening* of these capabilities among thinking, feeling beings (and greater clarity about the deeper moral referents to which they point us) is also virtually assured over time.

This is why I am personally persuaded that the meta-narrative of the universe encodes a message to us: Think of the development paths from the pre-Big Bang singularity to a realm of vast, stunning, variegated beauty, and widely distributed points of conscious intelligence equipped *with an esthetic sense to appreciate that beauty*: The conclusion leaps out of the pattern: These paths were ultimately purposeful; and our universe has been responding to an agency – embedded but revealed in its very operational design – an agency that has evidenced a purpose to stimulate parts of its-self to wake up, to love, to live and to self-perpetuate. That originating agency – and the conclusion is inescapable to me – *must have enjoyed the capacity to think, feel and value from the very Beginning*.

I believe that the origin, continued emergence, and ongoing existence of goodness in the universe must be and therefore is deeply correlated with *personality* at the point of origin. This insight has propelled my personal journey down from the icy plain of deism into the stormy, wonderful jungle of theism.

And within that jungle I have come to understand through observation and reflection that hope is an actual force in the unfinished universe. It moves mountains because it moves mortal beings to move mountains. What we call “accident” is the handmaiden of creation; it simply opens up the otherwise rigid structure of reality and allows the creative potential planted in the warp and woof of things by a latent goodness, releasing the embedded benign creation that has always has been waiting for the opportunity to emerge.

## **THE RISK OF CREATION**

But once, a few years ago, I was increasingly drawn to behold (and *frightened* by) the idea that our Reality originated when the Creator (author and product of the First Election – “To Be”) took a Supreme Risk. By willing-into-Being an unfolding universe that could contain thinking, feeling creatures capable of recognizing and returning the Creator’s

love for them, I sensed that a dangerous and possibly irrevocable step was taken. *But what risk?* I thought. *Surely not a risk to God?*

In an epiphany, I realized that, when done by a truly moral agent, the act of creation necessarily contains a trap, because the created being must then be true to its own, limited self. So there can be no cost-free creation in this universe, not even for the Holy One. The snare is inherent in the moral restraint of a moral Creator. The problem was undoubtedly foreseen. The very act of setting the current universe on its path placed Creator's very being and nature at the ongoing risk that we children could betray our Creator, even as we could betray ourselves and the very value of Creation.

I imagined/sensed our Creator as the essence of Being: the One who knows, thinks, feels and lives perfect moral integrity. Note that the very notion of morality is relational, not solipsistic; it calls for – indeed presupposes – the existence of *relationships with other beings*. This is the case because morality does not really operate in absolute isolation except perhaps as something like kingly self-admiration, an unworthy condition, not long endured by an authentically moral Being, certainly not in the nature of the God we now know through the incarnation.

Surely, I thought, any truly *moral* creative agency would be impelled by moral integrity to find *or Create* the missing others. Therefore the inauguration of processes leading to the emergence of other thinking, feeling beings, living in time, capable of returning love (or of rejecting it), of new beings worthy of the love of a parent, would be the supremely moral act, *possibly the very first such act that we mere mortals might humbly imagine to have taken place*.

I followed this train of thought or cascade of insights (not without some fear on my part), sensing that it would imply a purposeful breakout from aloneness into the difficult but holy realm of moral risk. I even entertained the notion that one could mark the First Act of Creation as the Event when proto-deity became the True God of Creation. That our Creator would choose initiate the conditions of our own emergence *in spite of the risk of rejection or failure* would be proof that the Genesis Impulse was a supreme act of Divine love.

Because the Creator, as I imagined, would be/must be/is the very archetype, model and essential design of all Being that is called into Being, it would follow that all of the new, potentially moral beings in the universe are necessarily modeled in the Creator's *essential* image (incomplete that we are). The first implication: The core Genesis account is true.

Yet there is a trap for us. The very conditions that permitted the emergence of humanity in the universe, of beings capable of love and creativity, also must allow that all the ongoing processes of creation remain open to failure. It follows that that our thoughts and decisions must remain open to error. By endowing humans, in this way, with the power of creation, we lose the simple innocence of our fellow animals. We become prey to evil thoughts and become capable of choosing evil actions. The second implication: The core message of the Garden of Eden parable is true.

But it does **not** follow that the Creator would abide being insulated or cut off from our unfolding lives, with all the attendant joy or pain, connection or isolation, hope or despair. A supreme moral agent endowed with the capacity for infinite and unbounded compassion would not allow an absolute separation from us to ever take place. Any doubt on this point was extinguished when the Divine suffered among us as the persecuted, tortured Messiah.

Therefore all of our lives are necessarily linked to that of the Creator by a numinous pathway, one capable of carrying our pain directly into God's "heart". But mercifully, we are not so intimately connected; separated as we are from *each other* by space-time barriers, we remain linked only by our finite capacity for compassion. Were it otherwise, we would die of all the pain in the universe.

Not so for the Creator for whom all direct top-bottom control was necessarily severed (otherwise we could not authentically love nor be worthy of love in return and we would not be moral agents, just programmed automatons). The Creator, having purposefully not designed in a control link, remains still in touch with us: the Creator's deeper feedback loop of compassion and shared pain is always "on".

Though we are but children, we are also free moral agents; this means that we may turn against the Creator at some time just because we can.

As the One fully integrated moral Being, the Creator was required by ultimate moral integrity to participate in the creation process without controlling it, yet co-suffering through all the failure, and even the emergence of evil, sharing absolutely the experience of our pain and bereft-ness, and even sharing in the sense of isolation experienced by all of us for whom the presence of a caring Creator has become circumstantially impossible to apprehend.

## **THE GENESIS IMPULSE AS THE GREAT RISK**

This next account will be an attempt to reconstruct account of how a fully integrated Creator, perfect and unmoving, would chose to *enter the created realm of time and mortality at the risk of being destroyed by that choice*. Creation often begins with the conscious risk of the self-destruction of the Creator, a risk taken in order to be with Creation's children. Any parent who has dashed into danger to rescue a child has a glimmer of the force of the original Genesis Impulse.

If the universe was ever to be a suitable venue for the emergent creative tendencies leading to the arrival of "selfness", it necessarily must have been arranged with certain parameters. In order to allow the ontological and existential room for the emergence of the constructive and integrative tendencies, room must also have been allowed for the emergence of destructive, anti-integrative forces as well. This is the key to our understanding of *evil*. It also illuminates our strong cultural tendency to associate evil with an almost deity-like persona, the "anti-god". Evil tendencies linger like malignant cells near the roots of the creative in-breaking - one entry point cannot be closed off without choking out the other. But the paths of creation that lead to the emergence of conscious, intelligent moral agents remain capable of defeating evil at every turn.

But the matter of choice cannot be eliminated. When we are our most discerning selves, we reserve the word *evil* for the destructive, dis-integrating tendencies in human thought and behavior (as opposed to the operation of natural forces like weather, earthquakes and floods).

Evil inhabits all the warped human predispositions and agendas aimed against choking off the affirmation and flourishing of *life, conscious, compassionate creative intelligence* and the *forces of benign creation in general*. These need be free to operate in an unfinished, unfolding universe; evil abhors that kind of freedom. I suspect that the freedom and flourishing of these primal three ur-values (life, conscious reason, benign creation) closely tracks what was undoubtedly decoded in the biblical references as "God's will".

As a result, we are never very far from evil. We can readily observe the evil tendencies, purposes and agenda within the range of behaviors of otherwise intelligent, feeling beings. The signature of evil is always a conscious or unconscious mal-orientation, a purposeful opposition to life, conscious, moral intelligence, and ongoing benign creation. Evil is opposition to the hopes for us of the divine moral consciousness; in biblical terms it is the purposeful opposition to the Will of God.

Once evil was allowed to emerge in the universe (as an unavoidable side effect of the Creative impulse that gave birth to conscious, morally aware beings), it can only be



overcome via the actions of other courageous, morally aware beings who recognize its appearance and choose to oppose it with intelligence, humanity and cunning.

Were we the product then of a Genesis gamble? The parable of Job vaguely echoes the original divine Genesis gamble, but the divine “Genesis impulse” was no casual wager made at a safe remove between jesting “lesser gods”. Instead it was the risky self-shattering of the One Divine Unity, the mighty invulnerable Being-becoming-vulnerable. Just as any mother in the pangs of giving birth faces the prospect of her own death, so did the Creator of all. The Genesis Act released an infinite number of seeds-of-potential-being into all the potential universes; they were God sparks, the potential children of God, self-engendering bits of benign becoming, pregnant \*information\* if you will, representing linked parts the Original Divine Spark, but shattered and scattered, released into the wild by an act of wild Divine hope.

I sometimes still succumb to a fear that the Divine Being is now *at risk*; that once having taken that first dramatic, irrevocable step out of isolated perfection in order to be able to fully love us, the “jury is out” on the whole enterprise. The truly scary notion of God at risk has a particular resonance for me with that “Tinkerbell” moment in Peter Pan when the tiny fairy is revived by the cheers of believers.

Then I am reminded of the insights of Martin Buber who described this as an eclipse. In his collection of essays, *The Eclipse of God*, Buber identifies entire eras in which culture has erected barriers to the recognition of God, much in the same way that the sun can be eclipsed by the moon. It is a temporary interruption, if you will, of the line of communication.

## THE SHEMA

The *Shema* is set out in the Jewish and Christian texts as follows:

***“And you shall love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your might.”*** [V-ahavta et Adonai Elohecha b-chol l’vavcha u-v-chol m’odecha.]

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

This was repeated essentially verbatim by Jesus as the most important of all commandments in Mark 12:30.

Having qualified my qualms and concerns here with a reference to Martin Buber's "The Eclipse of God", I am reassured by his observation, "The eclipse of the light of God is no extinction; even tomorrow that which has stepped in between may give way." It is a striking book, originally taken from a lecture he gave in 1929 to the Schopenhauer Society in Frankfurt, later published in 1952 with other talks and essays in the book of the same title. Buber's point was that we are living in a dark time when, like an eclipse of the sun, something has been allowed to come between us and God. As he implies in the last chapter, "God and the Spirit of Man", the occulting obstacle is man and man's cultural artifacts alone. Sometimes, I think it may be that we have are afraid to recognize the God who actually *needs* our love. And it may also be the case that my fleeting sense of a risk to God is an artifact of the secular eclipse.

We who were ordained to emerge in the divine "image" remain a work in progress. The price of divine love was the profound omnipresent risk to the Divine Being and the price of being **us** is the obligation to confront and oppose the omnipresent enemy we call *evil*.

As indicated, we have been equipped to detect the answers the Great Questions via a study of the large scale structure of events and the subsequent teasing out of the implications by communities of the conscious and morally aware. For example, I believe that the meta-narrative arc from Big Bang to the emergence of morally founded civilization encodes the message that directionality reveals purpose, that purpose reveals caring and that caring reveals personality capable of caring.

## THE VISIT

THEN, we must confront and accommodate history's most compelling Narrative, an Event so powerful and improbable that the very course of human history was changed by it. The witnesses alive at the time have preserved its main elements for us. We have been told through those witness accounts of a unique human, a baby boy conventionally born of a mother, who grew so charismatic, so innately Holy, that his status was believed to transcend that of a mere man.

Their accounts tell us that this living man was so suffused with the Divine Essence, that it was if he incarnated the Divine nature. Those accounts and their unsettling implications are by now burned indelibly into the record. History has recorded the birth, life, deeds, teachings, brutal torture and execution of Jesus of Nazareth by the occupying Roman Imperial authorities. The post-execution re-emergence into the world of this messianic Holy figure, first to his immediate followers, then ultimately to billions of souls, did not take place without witnesses. That the first century child who became a teacher, a healer,

a man of undeniable holiness and courage, a man in whom the Spirit of the Divine Being was manifested, that he actually survived an execution was apparent to hundreds of witnesses at the time. If it had been a volcanic event of the same scale, scientists would still be studying it. But it was a spiritual Event of such profound magnitude that theologians have been engaged with it and the implications for two thousand years.

This was an Event so charged with meaning that that it actually changed the ethos of the world culture. And a radical theology emerged from the Event, much as an unpacking of the message encoded. The essential theological message: The Creator of the Universe is the ultimate loving Being, the Holy One in whom the life of Jesus, his loves and sufferings were co-endured. The “Jesus Event” was a tectonic shift in the noetic plates of the world. It sparked the release of transcendent hope into the entire realm of human activity and aspiration.

For me, the *Jesus Event* encoded a metaphysical message open to all who choose to discern it. To my mind as a Judeo-Christian, the Great Risk of Genesis is recapitulated in that Event, in the narrative arc from the life, teachings, acts, brutal torture-murder, and resurrection of Jesus, and in the subsequent world-leavening effects of that Event. The story remains unfinished, but the hope it engendered, once entertained, is ineluctable.

So I am moved by an inescapable claim on my conscience. It comes from a set of realizations: that hope is an actual force in the unfinished universe; that hope moves mountains because it moves people who move mountains; and that the Creator was and is still willing to risk all for hope. Surely, I think, this requires of me that I should never surrender a Gift so precious or dearly bought.

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<sup>3</sup> The author’s letters, comments and opinion pieces have appeared in publications as diverse as the journal *First Things*, the *Oakland Tribune*, the *Post Register*, and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. His wide ranging non-fiction articles and essays on criminal justice, law and morality, terrorism and security, religion and philosophy, among other things of interest are collected on the Policy Think Site, [www.javgaskill.com](http://www.javgaskill.com).