Chapter 9

BLISS

INTRODUCTION

Suppose I'm correct about what the foregoing chapters assert and imply about ultimate reality—that it is not a being or an agent of any kind, but beyond being and not-being; that it surpasses the cognitive grasp of any possible creature and only appears kaleidoscopically fractured in pseudo-rational glimpses; that personal symbols are far less adequate for expressing its nature and significance than impersonal symbols related to the axiologically laden depth structures and dynamic flows of nature; that it is perfectly consistent with both many kinds of religious naturalism and many kinds of apophatic mystical philosophical theology. On that assumption, I find myself confronting a profoundly personal question. This question absolutely fascinates me.

Given my individual peculiarities and our species-conferred cognitive-emotional biases and limitations, and also acknowledging the limitations of human sociality and corporate inquiry, what is the state of mind appropriate to apprehending ultimate reality most fully, purely, and truly? What can my kind of being achieve most purely and perfectly in the way of apprehending and engaging ultimacy, allowing that there is no pure purity and no perfect perfection?

Thomas Aquinas asked this question and his answer was "beatific vision." An entire network of South Asian philosophical-theology traditions also had an answer: ānanda or bliss. My answer to this question has a lot in common with Thomas's, but my South-Asian influenced approach to bliss centralizes the cognition-breaking quality and the moral impenetrability of ultimate reality in a way that Thomas mutes and rejects, respectively, in his account of beatific vision.

Bliss seems not to be one thing, judging from the way the word is used. But I sense convergence within diverse usages rather than straightforward equivocation, particularly in spiritually alert language wielders. That convergence
invites further reflection on bliss, and on what the qualities of bliss suggest about the ultimate reality to which it is a faithful and spontaneous response. With that goal in place, I begin here with a personal story about encountering bliss. That serves as an entry point into an analysis of the concept of bliss. I then ponder the manifold ways we tame bliss in an attempt to cope both with the overwhelming luminosity of ultimate reality and with our challenging life situations.

**ENCOUNTERING BLISS**

I was lying in a hospital emergency room with a drip in my arm to pump fluids and pain medications. I was five hours into a fourteen-hour battle with a kidney stone on my left side. The pain was extreme for long periods of time and driving me into a desperate state of mind. On the standard zero-to-ten pain-scale, I was at ten. When medical personnel asked me for my pain level, though, I would only report nine out of ten. I was consciously reserving ten out of ten for torture victims. It was a weird kind of self-protective piety: it was my way of telling myself that things could be worse. It was also a kind of spiritual practice, empathizing with people whose cruelty-abetted agony felt so abstract at other times. My pain unexpectedly opened up a potent imaginative connection with them.

I later checked with a friend who had both suffered through kidney stones and given birth to two children. She said there was no question: a kidney stone was much more painful for her. For me the pain was basically unimaginable, in the sense that I had never previously imagined that such pain was possible. It’s unimaginable now, though. In fact, I constructed detailed interpretations of the higher numbers on the pain scale. Ten was reserved, as I’ve explained. Eight and nine were for pain so severe that I would beg relief from supernatural powers I didn’t even believe existed—eight when I could force myself to stay silent while begging, nine when I couldn’t prevent myself from vocalizing the pointless pleas.

Six and seven were for intolerable pain that defeated my reasonably well-developed ability to concentrate—six when I could sense that it was me who was the subject of the pain but I couldn’t concentrate well enough even to try meditation-type pain management techniques—and seven when my very sense of self was skittled by the pain and scattered in all directions. Five, the midpoint, was all ambiguity: heaven-like relief when traveling downward and powerful pain with hell-like promise for more on the way up.

Only one of the medications the doctors were giving me seemed to take the edge off the pain. They first gave it to me about one hour into the ordeal after concluding that the other medications they tried weren’t doing the job. They told
me a lot of people found it effective against this kind of pain. Sure enough, fifteen minutes later, the pain started dropping downwards, moving out of the begging zone of nine and eight, passing through the non-concentration zone of seven and six, pausing at ambiguous five, and then coming to tremulous rest around a blessed four, meandering up or down a bit as my body processed the ongoing assault on its geometry. Such relief! I actually got an hour’s sleep, thanks to the pain drop and the sedative effects of some other medication.

Unfortunately, the doctors could only pump me with that magical pain medication every six hours, and it would wear off after about three hours, leaving me on my own meager pain-management resources the rest of the time. The sum total of those resources when the pain was above five consisted either of just lying in bed, writhing, or pacing slowly along one wall of my cubicle, bent over and mumbling pleas for release to non-existent deities, bodhisattvas, apaecost ghosts, mother nature, and nobody in particular.

It was at the five-hour mark that I heard over the emergency room’s crackling radio that EMT’s were bringing in a young woman in extreme discomfort, ten out of ten on the accursed pain scale. That’s where I was, too, at the time, though I was still describing it as nine out of ten. Sure enough, this woman arrived, screaming in agony, and I could hear the medical staff rushing to attend to her. In my little cubicle, lying on my mechanical cot, with the privacy curtain mostly closed, I pulled the meager sheet up over my head, curled into a fetal ball, and felt completely crushed. I was overwhelmed by a potent realization of how much pain there is in our world, how much the beings of our planet suffer. I began quietly sobbing, utterly immersed in empathic connection to all pain, everywhere. My mother’s pain as she patiently died from chilling bone cancer, my father’s pain as he slowly drowned while losing a bacterial war in his ravaged lungs, the dental patient from the endlessly harsh era before effective anesthesia, my suicidal friends over the years, the gazelle caught by the rampaging lioness—they were all with me. I was at the top of the pain scale with a fractured sense of self and no ability to concentrate on anything except begging, yet I was flooded with empathy. The begging yielded to dark despair even as the pain cracked me open to empathy. I was laid bare, with no defense. I surrendered to the pain roaring around me, as potent in empathic imagination as in bodily realization.

Perhaps fifteen minutes into this extraordinary state of mind, a nurse came in to check on me. She spoke to me, while I was buried under my sheet. I pulled the sheet down and, with tears in my eyes, not really looking directly at her, asked her how she could bear to witness the pain she sees on a daily basis. She seemed momentarily stumped by my question before replying that “a good sense of humor
helps." I was so grateful for that simple, practical answer. Slowly rising from the cot and from the overwhelmingly depressive depths of empathic despair, I resumed micro-pacing to and fro along that oh-so-familiar wall of my little cubicle, vainly trying to keep the unbearable pain at bay.

This vision of pain has been so seared into my memory that it is has never left me since that miserable experience. A mere passing mental glance in its direction causes the vision to bloom vividly in my mind, empathically connecting me to the depths of nature and its suffering creatures. In this vision, nature is awesome, mostly unscaled to the interests and needs of Earth organisms such as human beings, and yet somehow still supportive of our lives and aspirations, at least at a few special places and in a few precious epochs. Of course, even regimes of stable secundity mostly friendly to life are suffused with predation, physical pain, emotional suffering, and existential anxiety. Moreover, as many recent novels and movies have reminded us, those wondrous regimes are still vulnerable to extinction-level events, mere side effects of nature just blindly doing its natural, neglectful thing.

The experience giving rise to this vision of pain and suffering is one I would not willingly choose to go through again: After all, extreme pain was the engine that levered me open to that arresting vista with its astonishing gift of empathic connection to endless hordes of suffering organisms. Very few people choose to embrace extreme pain, no matter how intense the experiential payoff might be. The experience was affectively ambivalent, centrally horrifying yet festooned with ribbons of wonder. It was not a pleasant experience, therefore, and it is best remembered, not relived. In memory, the miserable accompaniment of raw physiological pain abates while the ribbons of wonder decorating an abysmal horror become more prominent. Especially as remembered, this experience is well worth pondering.

To begin the reflective process, the reality of human tendencies to cognitive error obliges me to evaluate the cognitive reliability of the various aspects of the experience. The vision of suffering itself passes muster with everything I think I know about the world—a judgment made with reasoning skills unimpaired by pain—so I take it to be cognitively reliable and actually insightful.

The feeling of wide-hearted empathic connection to other suffering creatures is more difficult to validate, and I am sure there was a lot of projection
involved (what do I really know about a gazelle’s pain when a lioness runs it down, or about the suicidal ideation of a number of friends over the years?). Nevertheless, I trust this feeling of empathic connection for two main reasons. On the one hand, biological continuity across species with central nervous systems means we have a basis for interpreting the experience of non-human species. In many cases that gives us good reason to think that pain systems are operative and important, even though we can never know for certain what the subjective experience of pain might be. On the other hand, there is an inspirational heritage of spiritual practices in many religious, humanistic, and ecological traditions that centralize the cultivation of empathy as a virtue. For example, some Buddhist traditions have specific meditation techniques to induce wide-hearted karuṇā, or compassion, and these techniques can involve visualizing the suffering of other people and non-human beings in much the way that I did in this experience. The momentum of this heritage indicates that the cultivation of the virtue of compassion is passing many concrete validation tests in millions of lives more or less constantly.

What about my vocalized begging for relief from supernatural agents? I regard this with more skepticism: it tells me about my inbuilt cognitive tendencies but not about what’s real. After all, indiscriminately implored ancestor ghosts, Mother Nature, bodhisattvas, gods, and even the molecules of the air I was breathing because I would have taken relief from absolutely anywhere. The wild metaphysical pluralism of my casting about for relief seems comical in retrospect. So I don’t trust the cognitions tangled up in those helpless pleas for mercy, and I didn’t take them seriously even at the time. It’s just that I couldn’t help myself.

Using the five faces of intensity to parse the phenomenological features of this experience is illuminating (see chapter 8). The experience was strong on depth and horizon simultaneously, and to about the same degree. After all, it involved cognitive-emotional connections both to the profound character of nature as such and to other natural creatures.

The scale face was the most prominent, with fractured self-awareness yielding to wide-hearted empathic merging with the surrounding world in its vastness, in its indifference to suffering organisms, and in its clumsy evolutionary carelessness that produced greater sensitivity to pain than organisms actually need to optimize their inclusive fitness.

But the vastness of scale was not an abstract merging of self and world; the complexity face was also prominent in the details of empathic connection.
Particular people and their stories were present, along with a particular spider consuming its mate, a particular gazelle being run down by a murderous cat, predation’s unsettling of the Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium and details of fitness calculations from evolutionary theory, and biochemical visions of cellular pain receptors in overdrive and neural processing of in-flooding pain signals—there was a high order of cognitive complexity.

Meanwhile, the mystery face was less prominent. There was no sanctified perplexity and no deference to ignorance. On the contrary, this was an experience of knowledge hard and clear as perfect diamonds. But the “why is it so?” question was present, with its inevitably mysterious answer: suchness. This nature is neither envisaged nor planned; it is what it is. Pain is simply the way of things. The suchness answer is an inquiry-blocker, and thus it seems also to involve a mystery-savoring embrace of the irrational. Yet this answer arrives when inquiry has fully exhausted itself so it is no rational retreat into mystery. Suchness is just what we’re left with when all other answers fall away under the pressure of carefully interpreted experience.

CONCEIVING BLISS

Overall, I think the quality of this experience is fairly described as bliss. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that this was an encounter with bliss. I’ve experienced other encounters with bliss, some of them extremely pleasant in contrast with this appalling episode. Surely many people think of bliss in terms of orgasm, particularly when it creates the most intense feeling of togetherness with an intimate companion. That intoxicating feeling is also rightly described as bliss, I think, though we must beware our bias toward the pleasant (chapter 7).

Despite the emotional and other qualitative differences between orgasmic bliss and the bliss of pain-driven empathic despair, I sense profound similarities. To begin with, both are affectively complex. In obviously basically pleasant orgasmic bliss, particularly when two people are mutually infatuated, pleasure is deeply tinged with an intense pain of longing for merger, for completion; while in the obviously basically unpleasant bliss of pain-driven empathic despair, the glorious magnificence of scale fragments self and wondrously merges self with world. Other similarities bear on bodily factors such as the neurochemically extreme nature of these situations and the time course of their waxing and waning.

I find myself driven to think of these and other similar experiences all together, as encounters with something having a stable yet only partially assimilable character, something also worthy of the name bliss.
In chapter 8, I supplied an evolutionary framing of our species' bodily capacity for intense sensitivity to the valuational depth structures and dynamics of reality. I acknowledged there that every manner of question about existential validity and cognitive reliability swirls around intense experiences. I showed that a strictly conditioned judgment of reliability can be assigned to certain qualities of intense experiences—qualities that, in a suitable cognitive framework, mitigate rather than exacerbate the problem of plural conflicting interpretations, which haunts the interpretation of intense experiences. I argued that naturalistic frameworks for interpreting the cognitive reliability of intense experiences fare much better against the mitigating-pluralistic-conflict criterion than cognitive frameworks privileging one interpretation over others for reasons that can't win consensus among all qualified inquirers because of the function of kind of special pleading. On that basis, I embraced a critically realistic interpretation of Intensity as Such: our bodily capacity for intense experiences engages us with the actual valuational depth structures and dynamics of our world. Those depth structures and dynamics are complex, but they are also partially rationally penetrable thanks to our exquisite sensitivity to the valuational dimensions of reality.

When we place experiences of bliss within this interpretative framework, a cascade of consequences flows. First, we enjoy a limited rational entitlement to treat those experiences as encounters with Bliss, now (as the capitalization suggests) in the objective sense of an axiologically potent aspect of reality itself. Second, our attention is drawn to the features of our encounters with bliss that recur across the range of such experiences as most likely to prove reliable in manifesting the stable character of Bliss. Third, the features of bliss that don't recur widely across the range of relevant experiences testify to the multi-dimensional superfluousness of Bliss and the fractionated character of all encounters with it. Fourth, focusing on diverse encounters with Bliss rather than a favored and spiritually convenient instance serves to disclose the bias to the pleasant that often operates in this area of philosophical theology. Fifth, this drives us to seek a properly balanced account of Bliss, one in which we take its disturbingly chilling aspects as seriously as its mesmerizingly enjoyable aspects. Sixth, thought of as an indicator of the character of ultimate reality, Bliss is strongly resonant with the language-straining, only-partially-rationally-graspable, morally inassimilable apophatic vision of ultimacy presented throughout this book.

I won't re-argue this line of reasoning here. For the purpose of this meditation, it's enough to point back to chapter 8 (as well as to Wildman 2011) and
then focus my efforts on explaining and drawing out some consequences of Bliss, so understood.

The most popular and influential work in the Pali canon of Indian Buddhism is the Dhammapada. It happens to be my favorite Buddhist scripture and the one with which I have spent the most meditative time. The Dhammapada contains a famous description of the spiritual goal of enlightenment in terms of bliss (in Buddhakakkhita's translation):

There is no fire like lust and no crime like hatred. There is no ill like the aggregates (of existence) and no bliss higher than the peace (of Nibbana). Hunger is the worst disease, conditioned things the worst suffering. Knowing this as it really is, the wise realize Nibbana, the highest bliss. Health is the most precious gain and contentment the greatest wealth. A trusty person is the best kinsman, Nibbana the highest bliss. Having savored the taste of solitude and peace (of Nibbana), pain-free and stainless he becomes, drinking deep the taste of the bliss of the Truth. (Buddhakakkhita 1990, 15: 202–5)

The fifteenth chapter of the Dhammapada is titled "Sukhavagga" and usually translated "Happiness." Both the title and the chapter's content display the bias toward the pleasant at work, framing as affectively wholly positive, rationally intelligible, and morally good an experience that is in fact affectively complex, cognitively inefflable, and morally inassimilable—as other Buddhist texts, and other parts of the Dhammapada itself, testify.

A more realistic encounter with Bliss is depicted in the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita, from the classic Indian Mahabharata epic. The charioteer Krishna accedes to the request of his warrior-master, Arjuna, to reveal Krishna's universal form. The manifestation is awesome and profoundly unnerving for Arjuna. In fact, that may be two ways of saying the same thing given typical human physiological responses to vast spaces and encompassing visions that take us beyond the comforting simplifications of conventional reality.

The transfiguration story in the New Testament depicts an encounter with Bliss for subgroup of Jesus's disciples. They are swept away with emotion to the point that they behave slightly irrationally, seeking to build shelters so that they could remain in a state that was necessarily short-lived. I interpret that as a sign of the cognitively overwhelming nature of encountering Bliss.

Toward the end of the Hebrew Bible's famous book of Job, Yahweh silences Job, his arrogant friends, and the reader with a theophany akin to Krishna's
self-manifestation in the Bhagavad-Gita. The sheer terror and unlimited wonder of this encounter with Bliss reduces Job to utter humility and submission. His reasonable parsing of evidence concerning the reasons for his suffering is scattered to the winds as he ponders where he was when the foundations of the earth were laid (Job 38:4). The fierceness of Yahweh, mocking and provoking Job, is a fitting expression of the emotionally multivalent, comprehension-defying, morality-transcending character of Bliss when we encounter it unfiltered by buffering social conventions and handy psychological defenses. Those are the three features I want to focus on: emotional multivalence, cognitive ineffability, and moral inassimilability.

In my research on intense experiences using quantitative measurement strategies, I have seen in the numbers what many interpreters have asserted based on introspection: intense experiences tend to be both affectively more positive and affectively more negative than ordinary experiences (see Wildman 2011; Wildman and McNamara 2010). The co-occurrence of emotional extremes—one of the markers of intense experiences generally—especially applicable to encounters with bliss. Just as the ecstatic bliss of orgasm is most intense when accompanied by the deep pain of insatiable longing to merge with another; and just as the pain-driven expansion of empathic awareness into an ecstatic vision of suffering is most intense when laced with wonder; so every experience of bliss involves emotional complexity. That complexity is immediately apparent, often enough, but it certainly becomes apparent as soon as we dig beneath the phenomenological surface of such experiences.

I think the reason for this is the superfluity of meaning that we detect in encounters with bliss. Our axiological sensitivity equipment, as impressive as it is, has limits. In moments of bliss, we are flooded with meanings vectored in all directions, not necessarily mutually consistent yet coherent in an emotionally recognizable way across experiences. That's we human beings hitting our limits in value apprehension. As value-detection devices, emotions seem custom fitted to handle basic social interactions. We need to know what will make us happy or sad, angry or afraid, content or restless, and our emotions speak with a relatively clear voice in those ways. But the same system can detect values for which it wasn't adapted in the long phylogenetic history of hominid species. Such high-order values won't show up as neatly correlated with simple emotions; rather, we will detect them through complex combinations of simple emotions that seem inconsistent, in the presence of rich cognitions that express the significance of the value-infused
moment. These are the very markers of intense experiences, generally. The same
point applies to encounters with bliss, save that the cognitive content of blissful
moments may be even more fractured than in some other intense experiences.

With that we come to cognitive ineffability. This is perhaps the most famous
marker of encounters with bliss given the degree to which mystical writers and
the secondary students of mystical authors strive to wrap their extraordinary
minds around it. In Michael Sells’s Mystical Languages of Unsaying (1994), we read
a marvelous analysis of linguistic techniques in multiple traditions for managing
the cognition-breaking qualities of ineffable experiences. Sells focuses especially
on techniques of negation, and Timothy Knepper takes this further with a distinc-
tion between proposition-content negation and illocutionary-force negation.
This is worth exploring as a way into the understanding of cognitive ineffability.

John Searle’s speech-act theory, expanding on John Austin’s famous How to
Do Things with Words (1962), distinguishes between the propositional content of
a speech act and its illocutionary force (see Searle 1969, 30). Illocutionary force is
the intention of the speaker in making an utterance. This might include asserting
a purported fact, exclaiming that I’m in pain; promising to take out the garbage,
or officially declaring a marriage. Not all speech acts have propositional content
(“Ouch!”), but most do and such propositions can be expressed in the usual sub-
ject-predicate way. To declare a marriage, an officially recognized celebrant in a
quite specific context utters, “I declare that P” where P is a proposition expressing
the fact of the marriage; a fact that is becoming true as the declaration is made. To
assert that the marriage is long overdue, the illocutionary force is assertion and
the propositional content is that “this marriage is long overdue.”

When cognition and thus language are under great stress, we may not know
how to ASSERT P for any relevant proposition P. That’s an indication of ineffability,
and if we are supposed to be an expert language wielder it’d be good evidence of inef-
fability. Instead of asserting anything, mystics have universally found it more con-
venient to deny things instead, indirectly hinting at what they feel can’t be directly
stated. Here’s where Knepper’s contribution becomes so valuable. In the context
of a speech-act analysis of the denials so common in mystical writing, it becomes
obvious that there is more than one mode of denial. We can deny either the propo-
sitional content (ASSERT NOT-P) or the illocutionary force (NOT-ASSERT P).
We can also deny both (NOT-ASSERT NOT-P). All three combinations of denial
arise within mystical texts and are indicative of the intricacy of the language games
dedicated to fathoming the depths of cognitively ineffable experiences.
The via negativa (see chapter 1) employs the first pattern, the denial of propositional content, and does so in a way that involves entire systems of symbols with denials organized in a very particular way. By contrast, the pressure to silence (see chapter 8) is a failure of the will to express, and thus is an extreme instance of the combination of the second and third patterns, denying illocutionary force (assertion) both for all relevant propositions and for negations of those propositions. Often enough illocutionary-force negation is simpler and less comprehensive than this, as when a lawyer addressing a panel of judges employs the utterance device, “I don’t say that this case is totally without merit, but...” But in relation to mystical experiences, when language is under severe stress, the two kinds of negation and their combination—both in individual utterances and in relation to entire systems of symbols—are pressed into service to wrangle with the cognitive breakdown that seems to accompany all attempts to comprehend the mystical object.

If the intricacy of mystical language games is any indication, intense experiences of many kinds—encounters with bliss included—bear the marks of cognitive ineffability. They resist clear and coherent expression, they possess a superfluity of meanings, their valuational potentials point in manifold directions, they skittle the capacities of ordinary language, and they provoke the creation of specialized linguistic techniques as well as expert communities to use and sustain those techniques.

In addition to this, however, I think that bliss is especially cognitively challenging. Our normally quite serviceable value-detection equipment is utterly overwhelmed in encounters with bliss. The complexity face of intensity can be in overdrive, struggling to assimilate all of the cognitive content, while personal identity fragments and the scale face of intensity dominates the experience. And all of that happens to the accompaniment of potent and opposed, yet somehow fitting, emotions, driving home the impossibility of registering everything there is to understand about encounters with bliss.

Unlike the moral clarity of Dhammapada 15 and Aquinas’s depiction of the beatific vision, moral inassimilability is the norm in encounters with bliss. In the theophanies of Job and the Bhagavad-Gita, the moral qualities of the divine personage are utterly unscaled to human interests and needs, neither rationally comprehensible nor ethically defensible. My favorite symbols for ultimate reality—the ground and abyss of being, the depth structures and dynamics of nature—bespeak a wellspring for all possibilities and their realization, not merely
the ones we can appreciate. To attribute moral character to ultimate reality so
understood is deeply questionable. It is a forcing of the available data to fit a pre-
conceived, spontaneously arising conception of the moral intelligibility of the
cosmos, one that ramifies the social orders we prize and confirms the shape of
our personal moral striving.

In the personal encounter with bliss I describe at the beginning of this
chapter, there is no possibility of exculpation of ultimate reality (for all of the
reasons discussed in chapter 2). But there is also no fidelity to theodicy’s charge
of moral badness. Rather, the charge of moral badness or neglect, along with
interest in arguing over acquittal, drop away entirely, as so much socially con-
structed wistfulness. What is manifested beneath those moral and theological
exertions is a comprehensive vision of unlimited fecundity with no intrinsic
moral interests, yet ontologically grounding all axiological possibilities what-
soever—including all moral possibilities. The pleasant and the unpleasant, the
beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad—as we see these polarities and as
any other possible being might see them—are all equally the creative fruit of
this ultimate reality.

What I am describing is very far from a morally groundless reality, at least
in one sense. Of course, there is no morally homely deity to define the morally
good with the clarity of a just lawmakers, and to some that may seem to be the
very definition of a morally groundless reality. But what we actually sense in the
moral possibilities around us are definite axiological structures, including a moral
logos pointing neither to the Bad nor to the Good but to if-then relationships. If I
repeatedly lie, then people will stop trusting me. If I love my enemies and forgive
those who persecute me, then I will experience greater peace of mind and happi-
ness while my enemies may eventually find themselves transformed. If I secretly
torture and kill many people, then I will realize abysmal axiological possibilities
that hardly anyone understands or appreciates.

The moral possibilities of reality are intricately structured with determinate
patterns and dynamics. They don’t point in a particular moral direction, just as bio-
logical evolution in our ecosystem is a constrained but undirected walk through a
space of biological possibilities, and just as there is no teleological envisagement
guiding cosmic evolution beyond the mathematically traceable outworking of
the fundamental regularities of nature. We engage axiological depth structures
and dynamics in everything we do and in all that we are. But there is finally
nobody beyond ourselves—as individuals and in our morally invested groups—
to command that we navigate the moral depth structures and dynamics in any
particular way.
To see these depth structures and dynamics more or less comprehensively, in their morally inassimilable glory, in their cognitive complexity, in their emotional multivalence, is to encounter bliss. Indeed, those very axiological depth structures and dynamics may be the closest we ever get to describing rationally the logical object of encounters with bliss, Bliss as Such.

Taming Bliss

Given the emotional complexity, cognitive ineffability, and moral inassimilability of encounters with bliss, what’s happening in the moral assurance of Aquinas’s depiction of the beatific vision? What’s going on in the moral clarity of the uncharacteristically short-circuited description of bliss in Dhammapada 15? Well, Aquinas is simply describing the way ultimate reality must be if his theology is sound, probably on the basis of intense experiences of awareness of what he conceived as the divine presence. And Dhammapada 15 is addressing the practical moral dimensions of life, testifying that seeking nibbāna (in Sanskrit, nirvāṇa; liberation in the sense of the goal of the Buddhist Noble Eight-Fold Path) is incomparably better than all other human activities. These are worthy testimonies. After all, Aquinas does pick up on the cognitive ineffability element of bliss to some degree, reminding us that even the unmediated beatific vision will be a finite image of the infinite God (see Aquinas 1948: Summa Theologica I, question 12). And Dhammapada 15 rightly contrasts the existential fulfillment of seeking nibbāna with the frustration and even the simple happiness of other human life adventures. Nevertheless, part of the net effect of such descriptions of bliss is one-sidedness, a yielding to the ever-present temptation that is the bias to the pleasant (again, see chapter 7).

I think of this as taming Bliss. The emotional complexity, cognitive ineffability, and moral inassimilability of encounters with bliss individually and jointly imply that the logical object of those encounters, Bliss as Such, should be a wild thing. Its mercurial logos, its axiological structures and dynamics, its givenness in suchness, its grounding of all value possibilities, its lack of morally or aesthetically vectored preferences, and its spontaneous (non-envisaged and non-purposeful) exploration of a vastly complex space of axiological possibilities—all of these qualities lead me to think of it as wild, and therefore also as untamed relative to the manifold ways we human beings have an interest in taming it.

In fact, I think there are both disadvantages and advantages for individual and social wellbeing associated with taming Bliss. I made this case in a preliminary way earlier (see chapter 6 on the “Eclipsing” of ultimate reality’s wilderness.
at the level of an entire symbol system). Here I approach this theme from a more existential angle.

Nietzsche's Madman from *The Gay Science* absolutely refuses to tame bliss (see Nietzsche 1974). Nobody understands him, locked as each one is into the socially constructed world where taming bliss is actually a survival skill. The Buddha absolutely refused to tame bliss, devoting his life to helping people see ultimate reality beneath the robust delusions of bliss-taming conventional reality. In both cases enlightenment is presented as monumentally difficult. To see reality as it most truly is—as grounded, pervaded, relativized, deconstructed, and negated by bliss—is emotionally uncomfortable, psychically destabilizing, and socially disruptive. This is why it is advantageous for individuals and societies to tame bliss.

As implied earlier (see chapter 6), completely denying bliss is an empirical dead end. Encounters with bliss keep popping up in our experience so outright denials run aground on the shoals of implausibility. What's required is eclipsing, reducing bliss to a mere aura of light; or taming, confining bliss to a safe and sturdy cage; or distraction, being too busy with material acquisition and social duties to notice the bliss-perfused spiritual depths of reality.

This point can be elaborated by extending the conception of "sacred canopy" as Peter Berger developed it in his book of that name (see Berger 1967). Sacred canopies are cosmically ratified legitimations of the social construction of reality that generate social commitment and warrant the exercise of social control. But they are more than that, too. Like our planetary ozone layer, which shields us from harsh ultraviolet light, a sacred canopy also protects us from the searing light of ultimate reality. This isn't Moses beholding Yahweh from the cleft of a rock; after all, Moses was placed there for his own protection and he would have taken more in if he could have tolerated it. Rather, this is the taming of bliss as an essential part of maintaining social stability. Bliss untamed is the power source for the deconstruction of our social worlds, and sacred canopies work much better when we don't understand the magic behind the scenes. Therefore, social stability requires both the taming of bliss and the control of individuals who encounter bliss so forcefully that the social construction of reality becomes transparent for them—think of the death of Socrates or the crucifixion of Jesus, as extreme cases, and the marginalization of disruptive individuals, more generally.

René Girard's scapegoating theory describes a form of social control that periodically releases pent-up anxiety, a pressure that can be understood as the accumulating awareness of bliss. Bliss can't be denied outright because encounters
with bliss can’t be prevented, so it must be regulated, like pressure in a steam engine. The key to effective regulation is release valves that allow pressure buildup to escape when it passes some critical threshold. The scapegoating mechanism is one such release valve. Another is the eclipsed glow of bliss in heart-rending art and architecture, music and literature. By seeing this aura of glory—a tantalizing hint of bliss—people make limited sense of their encounters with bliss, and actually effectively engage ultimate reality. But bliss is tamed at the same time. Its winking disruption of the social construction of reality becomes barely noticeable. Its spontaneous and unruly underwriting of all axiological possibilities is pared back to a useful set of pro-social moral laws, typically marked by in-group obliviousness to the Other. Its prophetic testimony to the emotional complexity, cognitive ineffability, and moral inassimilability of ultimate reality is almost inaudible.

Individual emotional health is also a non-trivial consideration when weighing the advantages of taming bliss. Bliss untamed can skittle psychic stability. Bipolar disorder has something to teach us here. A manic state is emotionally and cognitively overwhelming because of the sheer extent of the vision of reality that is involved. Akin to the prismatic unpacking of white light into a rainbow of colors, manic awareness sees much that ordinarily lies hidden—indeed, sees too much too fast for any degree of mental clarity. Tragically, manic awareness is often delusionally self-aggrandizing, biasing and distorting a vision of reality that might be illuminating if there were psychic space to evaluate it and refine it. The manic state can also yield to dangerous full-blown psychosis in those with the Type-I version of bipolar disorder. Yet some people living with bipolar disorder sometimes learn how to regulate the inner experience of mania through deep familiarity with the world that arises in that spectacular and dangerous state of awareness, aided by discipline born from painful experience.

At the very least, this is a good analogy for the psychic dangers of bliss untamed. But I think the point can be taken further. Consider the likely prominent role of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia in shamanism, probably the original religion of our species. This way of socially accommodating people burdened with what we now call psychiatric illness conferred upon them an honorable role at the periphery of the social order. There they proved to be efficacious problem solvers and healers, through expertise in the unleashing of dissociative states both in themselves and in psychologically healthy people suffering from failures of emotional and physical wellbeing. In fact, I suspect that the shamanic function was another of
the pressure-release valves helpful for maintaining social stability, simultaneously
marginalizing and employing disruptive individuals. Without saying that the cog-
nitive content of manic and schizophrenic states of awareness is reliable, I do see
powerful resonances between mania and the encounter with bliss untamed, espe-
cially as interpreted against the background of shamanism. More than that, I think
the truth of manic cognitions lies in their awareness of bliss. By the same token, the
danger of bliss untamed is manifested in the psychically destabilizing quality of
manic awareness. I have considerable respect for the value of manic awareness for
shedding light on the profundity of the blissful state of awareness.

Many people are utterly incapable of falling prey to manic or schizophrenic
psychosis, for want of brains peculiar in the requisite ways. No matter what kind
of stress they experience, or how intense their encounters with bliss, most people
don’t experience manic states of awareness, with all of the ambigious advantages
of such states for grasping the quality of bliss untamed. Yet some of them can still
cultivate awareness of bliss through meditation, and especially intellective types of
contemplative practice. Such practices lie at the origins of ancient warnings about
the psychologically destabilizing effects of some meditative states of awareness.

Nietzsche wasn’t thinking of contemplative adepts when he pondered the
utter failure of people to grasp the Madman’s testimony to bliss untamed. The
problem ordinary people have in encounters with bliss is the cognitive disso-
nance it provokes. Manifestations of bliss comport with no extensively socially
embedded portrayal of ultimate reality. Yet the perceptive among the non-ill, non-
adept ordinary will discern hints of bliss untamed in their own sacred scriptures
and other cultural products. Consequently, they are left wondering about the
emotional complexity, cognitive ineffability, and moral inassimilability of their
encounters with bliss and what those features of their experience portend for the
character of ultimate reality, as their ultimate concern. Most will not choose to
conceive of their ultimate concern as emotionally, cognitively, and moral unscaled
to their interests, no matter what their encounters with bliss and their sacred the-
ophanies suggest. Fortunately for them, anthropomorphic cognitive-emotional
machinery, long stabilized in the phylogenetic history of our species, lies ready and
waiting to deliver them from the dark and stormy ocean surge into the relatively
calmer waters of more personal portrayals of their ultimate concern. Psychological
threat resolved, bliss tamed, all is well.

What, then, are the advantages of bliss untamed? What virtues properly belong to
beholding one’s ultimate concern as emotionally complex, cognitively ineffable,
and morally inassimilable? In a nutshell, the virtue is enlightenment. There can be authentic engagement with ultimate reality under misleading symbolic descriptions of its character. But enlightenment arises only where reality is taken for what it is.

The one seeking enlightenment strains to rise above the convenient and pleasant distortions of ultimate reality, as well as the suffering endemic to it, stretching every muscle to reach the next toehold, the next fingerhold, ascending an impossibly sheer rock face. At the top of the climb, nothing short of bliss untamed will satisfy, despite the fact that lower down such an insight was unthinkable. In the enlightened state, the bodhisattvas assure us, we experience the cessation of suffering through the elimination of attachment. This is not only the bliss of nirvāṇa; the encounter with bliss is the very condition for the loosening of the grasping of attachment in the first place. We have no interest in non-attachment at the foot of the sheer rock face. But that desire blossoms in us as we rise. And our yearning for bliss untamed blooms right along with it.

CONCLUSION

I have nothing more to say about the virtues of bliss untamed except this: enlightenment is not for everyone. Indeed, for some it is appalling. For others it is the only truth, the only comfort.

This sparkling vision of dazzling darkness and blinding light inspires me to testify to unruly ultimacy, to bliss untamed, and I'll play my part in keeping alive that memory in the larger story of human religion. But I won’t turn my back on the institutional conditions for the very possibility of my own awareness of ultimacy, nor on the religious symbols systems that enable speech about the theological depths of reality, nor on the religious venues in which people encounter the aura-like presence of bliss eclipsed, nor on the spiritual pathways by which people migrate in my direction away from the anthropomorphically reassuring delusions of conventional reality and toward bliss untamed. Even when not welcome in the assemblies of the religious, I'll still speak up for them. And when welcome, I’ll sink into my favorite variety of bliss: undimmed perception of ultimacy joined with the hearts of fellow spiritual travelers who know, like I do, that nothing less searing than ultimacy undimmed, nothing less disturbing than bliss untamed, and nothing less wondrous than abysmal suchness, will be worthy of our peculiar worship.