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REVIEW OF “A NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL-SEMIOTIC
MODEL OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES”

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BY

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“A Neuropsychological-Semiotic Model of Religious Experiences”

By Wesley J. Wildman and Leslie A. Brothers.

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Editors: Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, Theo C. Meyering, and Michael A. Arbib.

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Introduction

This paper is a synopsis and review of Wesley J. Wildman and Leslie A. Brothers’ essay, “A Neuropsychological-Semiotic Model of Religious Experiences,” a richly conceived attempt to provide a methodology that can account for what the authors term *experiences of ultimacy*. The essay appears in the forthcoming book *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*.

Wildman and Brothers’ essay is a densely compressed tour through a subject of considerable interdisciplinary complexity, drawing on sophisticated understandings from neurological science, psychology, the philosophy of religion, and semiotics. My goal is to condense their account even further so as to give the reader a sense of the value of Wildman and Brothers’ contribution. Their greatest success lies in their defining the essentially interdisciplinary character of the endeavor to assess experiences of ultimacy. The potential of their constructive effort to model these experiences on neutral ground remains to be proven.

Defining the goals and methods

Wildman and Brothers are looking for ways to interpret “experiences of ultimacy.” By using this term, the authors mean to offer “a vaguer, more inclusive” rendering of what others have referred to as “God-experiences.” For example, they do not want to exclude similar such

experiences which occur in non-theistic religions and among nonbelievers. There are substantial problems of definition to be overcome here: foremost, the twin facts that “the way people describe their experiences depends crucially on [their] social and linguistic contexts” and that “we cannot know with certainty the contents of [others’] minds.”¹

Because the authors cover a lot of ground, it is difficult to explain their ambition in a few sentences. The reader is advised to begin by examining Appendix A, which is a copy of Wildman and Brothers’ own *Appendix A: A Reader’s Guide*, to gain a comprehensive overview of the steps they take. The bulk of the essay is contained in the first goal, “Describing Ultimacy Experiences,” which is meant to lay the groundwork to suggest a sound basis for constructive efforts in philosophy and theology to interpret religious experience. On this foundation, they proceed into their own constructive ventures, which are the two compact final sections: “Procedures for Identifying Typical and Authentic Ultimacy Experiences” and “The Causes and Value of Ultimacy Experiences.” Looking at their section headings, it appears as though Wildman and Brothers are making some bold claims about what they are going to deliver: do they really have a way to discern *authentic* ultimacy experiences, or the *causes* of these experiences? Really, I think they are intentionally floating these seductive phrases to lead the reader into some crucial moments of anticipation, at which points they push the argument in an unexpected direction. In so doing, they knowingly fail to deliver on the big promises, but instead seize the opportunity to re-frame the questions in a way that they believe will, in time, advance the field.

Wildman and Brothers have three goals, each of which demands a strategy that can overcome daunting obstacles:

- (1) *To describe ultimacy experiences* – in the face of the broad phenomenological diversity of such experiences and their descriptions, and the difficulty of reducing

such experiences to a common language. To this end, they deploy an array of descriptive targets drawing from different disciplines, which is meant to cumulatively allow consistent judgement.

- (2) *To provide procedures for identifying typical and authentic ultimacy experiences* – while facing two barriers, that of knowing the contents of a person’s mind with any certainty, and that of gaining consensus on the idea that anything like a God-experience could be deemed “authentic.” These challenges they meet by deflection, proposing a standard – in which the causal interpretation offered by the experimenter’s social-linguistic community is itself evaluated on the basis of the various targets the authors propose – which they then promptly admit is all but impossible to meet because of the linguistic challenges it poses. This sets up their strategy for goal (3).
- (3) *To specify the causes and value of ultimacy experiences* – a goal for which, in a world of many cultures *and* a religious/secular divide, consensus would seem impossible. To do so, they deploy the capstone of their approach, which is to shift the entire conversation into what they call a philosophical-semiotic framework. In this scheme, by plotting “not causal interactions themselves but rather their traces in the form of sign transformations,” they claim to achieve neutral territory for conversations about experiences of ultimacy.

Helpfully, Wildman and Brothers maintain a position of neutrality as to the reality or nonreality “of that which is taken to be the object of an experience of ultimacy.” Stated another way, “while we shall assume that ultimate reality leaves causal traces of a particular kind, we assume nothing about the nature of this ultimate reality.” They also note at the outset that their stand on the problem of defining religious experience is provisional. ²

Describing Ultimacy Experiences

People have been trying to define religious experience systematically since William James, with some considerable successes, but never sufficient to overcome the inherent difficulties – of “other minds” that cannot just be opened like sardine cans; of the diversity of such experiences; and of the lack of a universal descriptive field of reference for them.

Responding to the limitations in existing definitions of religious experience, Wildman and Brothers offer instead a collection of markers: phenomenological characteristics, neurological

signatures, people’s descriptions within their own social-linguistic contexts, the judgement of experts in religious discernment or of psychologists, and the wisdom of generations encoded in theological and ethical traditions. Thus, to see whether a reported experience is in fact an “experience of ultimacy” requires running the purported experience through evaluations of this entire series of markers, which the authors liken to a set of targets. Ultimacy experiences come close to the bull’s eyes of the various types [See Appendix B, Diagram 1. Identifying the Target Group – Ultimacy Experiences].³ We shall now examine each of these markers in turn.

Phenomenology sets the stage by specifying what it is we’re talking about when we refer to “experiences of ultimacy.” Finally, the collection of targets is rounded out with correlations to the language and practice of social psychology, and to the truth-discernment practices of religious and ethical communities.

Target #1: Phenomenology

The authors begin by laying down a comprehensive phenomenological taxonomy of ultimacy experiences. That is to say, they classify these experiences based on the nature of the observed events. The basic way that they divide these phenomena is between discrete (brief, momentary) and extended (long-term) ultimacy experiences, which they see as having vastly different properties. Discrete experiences center on sensory awareness, sense of self, presences, cognitions, and emotions. Extended experiences, which can occur over a period of years, divide into two classes: (1) dynamic processes of orientation and control that help people maintain their relationships to themselves and to the world, and (2) gradual processes of transformation involving apparently lasting changes in behavior, personality, and beliefs.⁴ After reviewing some of the history of phenomenological descriptions, drawing on sources such as Kierkegaard, Otto,

Persinger, and Berger, they provide what they see as the key descriptive elements of these experiences.

Elements of discrete ultimacy experiences:

- Sensory alterations, such as perceptions suffused with light, sounds or visions
- Self-alterations, including the sense of being out of one's body, merger, union, or enlarging of the self
- Presences, felt as mysterious or awesome, including nonphysical beings
- Cognition, referring here to a convincing sense of illumination, profound understanding, increased awareness, or a sense of unreality or of assurance
- Emotions which may be incongruous with their setting, such as feelings of ecstasy, awe, dread, guilt, safety, or tranquility⁵

Elements of extended ultimacy experiences:

- Existential potency, that is, ways of orienting and transforming the self which have direct existential relevance for the person
- Social embedding, referring to the fact that such experiences rarely make any sense in isolation from a community in which they can be interpreted (It's notable that the community in question may well be mediating the society's need for stability by a process of social legitimation).
- Transformation of behavior and personality, which is of a moral or a specifically religious character – the classic case being conversion, when an individual orders his or her life in accordance with the felt reality of ultimacy experiences.
- Transformation of beliefs, such as the individual's relationship to a higher being or abstract principle⁶

Target #2: Neurology

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Target #3: Social Psychology

Another collection of lenses for describing experiences of ultimacy is provided by psychology. Focusing first on psychoanalysis, Wildman and Brothers draw from theories of early development to propose parallels between psychological development stages and the transformative aspects of ultimacy experiences. Second, they discuss an understanding of the subject-object dynamic grounded in D.W. Winnicott's concept of the "transitional object" – that

part of experience between self and not-self. Suggestively posing faith as the suspension of the question, “Did you create that (revelatory experience) or did you find it?”, they relate a further extension of the “transitional object,” provided by Christopher Bollas: the concept of a “transformational object – a person, place, event, ideology that promises to transform the self.” They see this psychoanalytic concept for describing personal change as resonant with the way that the transformations wrought by extended experiences of ultimacy are mediated “through a relationship with symbols, rituals, or other persons.”⁷

Third, they draw a comparison between psychoanalyst and spiritual mentor or guide. The purpose of this comparison is to highlight that fact that both are concerned not only with what the subject is, but with what the guide “infers and implies what the patient might become....” That is to say, the relationship is meant to produce meaningful change similar to that worked by an extended ultimacy experience. As such, the comparison highlights the fact that an extended transformation ultimacy experience requires both “the flexibility of the subject’s social-linguistic mental framework” and a regulative relationship with an authority or community which holds the established wisdom.⁸

Fourth, Wildman and Brothers note the complex way that analysts must discern critical bits of unconscious material as they come to light, based on criteria such as “the assent of the patient...subsequent behavior, dreams, and other communications.” They assert that the discernment of what’s really happening with an ultimacy experience is similarly complex. Because of this complexity, ultimacy experiences “cannot be understood in isolation from a rich appreciation of human dependence on the conceptual-linguistic conditions of the social environments in which people live and change.”⁹

Finally, they cast ultimacy experiences in the light of evolutionary psychology, which asserts that the human mind evolved in response to the demands of reproductive fitness in the context of a hunting and gathering way of life. Moral behavior is explained here by the need to sustain a fragile group by promoting relationships based on reciprocity. Thus individuals must repress selfish behavior in favor of altruism. Evolutionary psychologists speculate that there are universal deep structures for moral beliefs due to these patterns. Self-deception is suggested as the means of disguising to oneself one's own selfish interests, thus making selfish acts appear more convincing to others. Thus the evolutionary inducements to having certain beliefs and behaviors might be strong enough to actually predispose people to have experiences of ultimacy, because these experiences can serve the purpose of solidifying such adaptiveness. Though this conclusion is speculative, the authors consider it probable in view of the way that the rich emotional lives of humans are seen to produce just such an effect.¹⁰

Target #4: Theology and ethics

Ultimacy experiences frequently play a role in the lore of religions. Such narratives are so theologically and conceptually powerful that people typically describe their own ultimacy experiences in terms that fit these traditions of their group. Wildman and Brothers assert that these narratives are valuable markers because they “probably encode with tolerable accuracy...the group's collective wisdom about the way ultimacy experiences occur” and the transformations they induce. Group narratives can in fact dictate an entire process of change along the lines of extended ultimacy experiences (the authors cite the Christian process of personal salvation). At the same time, different sub-groups within a broad tradition will place

different emphases on the importance of certain types of experiences. Thus Pentecostal Christian groups tend to give more weight to “speaking in tongues” than others.¹¹

In a similar pattern to theological expressions of extended ultimacy experiences, ethical commitments can build through successive stages, “accompanied by changes of values and self-understanding.” However, ethical concepts are more deeply embedded in all cultures than religious concepts are, so explicit ethical development narratives seem to be correspondingly less necessary, and thus less defined and widespread.¹²

The complication is that such narratives are inscribed in the specialized language of the group. Wildman and Brothers note that in order to make use of such theological and ethical knowledge in pursuit of consistent descriptions of ultimacy experiences, a complex background analysis must be brought to bear. “The history of an idea, its spreading and variations, is the essential background for trying to make sense of theological descriptions of ultimacy experiences... Without this background, theological language cannot be penetrated very far.” The authors admit that this caveat – the extraordinary complexity of clarifying the spread and modification of influential theological ideas – is a problem which limits the usefulness of theology for interpreting ultimacy experiences, unless it can be overcome.¹³

This context of theology and ethics brings to light the enduring problem of the phenomenology of religion: “the development of criteria capable of detecting when dissimilar reports describe phenomenologically similar religious experiences.” The authors posit that it is plausible to expect that two phenomenologically identical experiences could be described in such different theological terms that their identical nature would be undetectable. No method to date has been able to overcome this divide. The problem is further compounded by the fact that the specialized concepts of different religious and cultural contexts are often so incommensurable.¹⁴

Discernment of the authenticity of ultimacy experiences is the final piece of the multitarget puzzle. In many religious traditions, an authoritative group convenes to assess whether an individual's reported experiences are genuine or theologically valid. In such cases, the individual reports her experience, then the discerners bring the collective wisdom of their religious group into an inquiry to determine the value of the experience. Wildman and Brothers describe this discernment as a regulative process, because people need to try out their reports on others to discover whether they are apt. For an ultimacy experience to make sense to a person, it almost certainly has to make sense to others in her wider community.

Wildman and Brothers find the process to be very successful and effective in creating agreement among the participants. Yet, since no one can observe what actually goes on in another's mind, we might ask the question, might the discernment of ultimacy experiences be a case of "hermeneutics all the way down"? (i.e., that, in spite of the happy agreement within the community, there is no way of getting at a definitive judgement as to whether the reality of the discerners is the same as that of the experiencer). They answer that the many factors they have cited "are relevant to assessing putative ultimacy experiences, and together they make less plausible the logically possible option of utter relativism."¹⁵

Identifying Typical and Authentic Ultimacy Experiences

What has been accomplished so far? Wildman and Brothers have provided a taxonomy of ultimacy experiences together with a variety of explanatory considerations which collectively are proposed to be useful for determining when a *typical* ultimacy experience has occurred. They stress the point that there is a spectrum of such experiences, and that, in describing the *typical*, they are providing a set of imaginary targets, at the center of each of which there is an ideal type,

recognizable by traditional theological criteria; [consistently describable by] a psychoanalyst or evolutionary psychologist; [and] with brain activity known to be strongly correlated with what are usually accepted as ultimacy experiences; and with experiential phenomena embracing several of [the elements outlined earlier].¹⁶

With this, they claim to have achieved a key goal: “a working model of the complicated hermeneutical transactions that occur between individuals and groups” in having and describing ultimacy experiences.”¹⁷ They liken this model to medical diagnostic procedures, in the sense that observations and judgements can be made based on working vocabularies, consistent with a larger framework, and effective in results, even in the presence of gray areas and unknowns. In fact, they go on to very briefly “diagnose” several experiences of ultimacy and chimeras thereof.

So much for the typical. What do Wildman and Brothers have to say about *authentic* ultimacy experiences? The main difference between the two, they aver, is that labeling such experiences as authentic requires a normative category. And whereas they see conventional wisdom as specifying “that there is no meaningful way to discuss richer normative judgements of authenticity in scientific contexts,” they assert that the only element that needs to be added is “merely the willingness of a social-linguistic context to stipulate what *ought* to occur.” As to whether this could or does happen in actuality, they note how psychologists often care about their patients and identify with their goals, “making a community of at least two people with shared goals and a clear sense of what *ought* to happen.”¹⁸

This brings us to the crux of their argument concerning the interpretation of the *authenticity* of ultimacy experiences. When religious communities accept a person’s ultimacy experiences, they expect that person to have received some kind of real capabilities as a result. In this sense, the interpretation “is effectively a causal model. It follows that judgements of authenticity can be described impartially,” that is, because there is a context of actual causality to

latch onto. But here's the rub: such judgements "cannot be confirmed from beyond the social-linguistic community within which those judgements are made without evaluation of the underlying causal interpretation of ultimacy experiences." And the problem of translating the distinctive language of a group is "so tricky" that nobody really tries. This leads us to the authors' own causal model.¹⁹

The Causes of Ultimacy Experiences

So, what is the cause of ultimacy experiences? To get to the answer, we need to unpack their model. A causal model "describes how causes and effects are arranged in chains or networks of events" by giving an account of their linkages and of what ought to be observed. Having established, then, that "models of the causes of ultimacy experiences underlie the judgements made in religious groups" about their authenticity, Wildman and Brothers acknowledge that such models are of little use because they are "too narrow in scope, limited by the usually unexamined convictions of the group, uninformed by outside experts, and oblivious to neurological considerations." One would like to put two models side by side, e.g., (1) that intentional divine action is a causal factor in some particular ultimacy experiences, versus (2) that the experiences can be explained without reference to an intentional divine causal agent. But in fact, "the actions of an intentional divine being – as with any causal agent – are only predictable to the extent that quite a lot is known about the nature of this divine being." But language about God is too slippery for this; divine intention is typically seen as inscrutable.²⁰

In the face of this impasse, Wildman and Brothers trot out a causal model of their own – a model of sign transformations within a philosophical-semiotic framework.

We begin with a review of what semiotics is about. “Semiotics is the theory of signs....Signs are treated abstractly as anything that can be taken to stand for something else....When one sign is taken to stand for another, we speak loosely of *sign transformation*...to suggest that signs flow from one to the next, each one standing for the previous one in some respect.” The importance for Wildman and Brothers is that the entire flux of signs describes causal processes in a given case “without assuming anything about the ontology of these causes,” i.e., without making judgement as to the reality of the “causes” shown. This facilitates the kind of neutrality they are seeking.²¹

They name a person’s participation in the encompassing semiotic flux “engagement,” a word that is meant to emphasize the active way that we involve ourselves, not just in our language, but in our perceptions, actions, and skills. The concept of engagement helps them to build a model that is critically realist. Critical realism is a philosophical position that “the strongest argument for the reality of our world is our ability to engage it in every sense – to move within it, sense it, talk about it, change it.” The world is not known directly, but *as engaged*, and therein lies the sense of “critical.” The point is that the flux of signs allows our engagement with reality to be either loose or tight in different situations. We do not have to choose between either believing only in what we see or believing that all points of reference are strictly relative. Instead, signs allow “diverse forms of engagement with the world.” It’s the difference between a knife revealed in a back alley and one that appears on the theatre stage. In this sense, they replace the choice between “a blunt realism about ultimacy and a hermeneutical disengagement from reality” that denies the knowability of such experiences with a more workable distinction between “what can be effectively – truly as well as efficaciously – engaged and what cannot be effectively engaged.”²²

Their next move is to place the entire group of components for the description of ultimacy experiences (as presented earlier) – that is, all available interpretations of the experience – “under the rubric of sign transformations.” First, they cast the links between neural events and events in the social-psychological and religious-ethical spheres as a flow of semiosis, of transformations conditioned by the respective environments. They point out therein a hierarchy of complexity among the phenomena we engage, and they characterize it as a matter of semiotic density: the more signs, the more complex a level of reality we are engaging. Now, all these sign systems are compatible and mutually supporting, and in their midst, “the experiencing self is neither solely brain-derived, nor solely socially derived.” High subjectivity, a denser flux of signs, as occurs in humans, support forms of engagement with levels of reality, “including questions of value and purpose” or “the expression of religious or ethical concerns.” For a clearer image of this relationship, see Appendix B, Diagram 2. From the critical realist perspective, the “incontestably important” engagement of humans with reality in the form of morality and religion *is* indicative of reality, even if the specific beliefs concerning causality are somewhat beyond explanation. Finally, then, they hypothesize that the rich and deep forms of engagement in the semiotic model and the earlier phenomenological definitions of ultimacy experiences are in fact *the same thing*. “Wherever exceptionally deep and rich engagement is found, there will also be found ultimacy experiences...and vice versa.”²³

The reader may have noticed that there has been no answer to the question, “what is the cause of ultimacy experiences?” The reader will probably not be surprised by now to find that there will be no answer (in fact, Wildman and Brothers do give their opinion in the end, but not in an argument that fits the context of their scheme). In summation, they explain why their model

should prove useful in helping to “frame and evaluate claims about the causes of ultimacy experiences.”

They begin by pointing to three ways in which their model impacts the process of comparing claims. First, it provides a “new and sturdy” constraint on models, in that models in this scheme must account for themselves in terms of the structured pattern of sign transformations that they describe (as pictured in Appendix B, Diagram 2). Second, the neutrality of the method – recasting contentious concepts strictly in terms of semiotic richness – affords a better chance for constructive debates between different views and provides a common language to work with. Third, candidate explanations must demonstrate their compatibility with the various levels of description. They cannot simply assert their richness and efficacy, nor can they withdraw from the competition to hit as many targets as possible without being judged thereby.

Finally, the effect of their semiotic model that Wildman and Brothers prize the most is that it is not causal. Because of this, they believe that it is vague, as they would have it, in all the right ways. It stays close to the data, yet it “plots a course around” the most controversial areas. Their strategy, they assert, “delegitimizes debates about whether or not real contact with some sort of Ultimate occurs in religious experiences. In exchange, there is an emphasis on the issue of whether that which is *actually engaged* in ultimacy experiences supports assertions made about ultimacy in theological accounts.”²⁴ In other words, the semiotic model might allow the replacement of the question “Is this a real contact with ultimacy?” with “Which of the targets most rightly describes what is actually engaged?”

Conclusion: Will it work?

Wildman and Brothers succeed in developing a sound proposal for a comprehensive methodology for accounting for experiences of ultimacy. They capture the interdisciplinary character of the endeavor and show how it can be used as a strength rather than as a source of divisiveness. Whether the particular elements they have chosen will stand the test of time is another matter. They need to put it into practice and develop actual case studies. They need to show that the kind of interdisciplinary dialogue and assessment that they propose can actually occur with the desired results. As for their reliance on the semiotic framework, this is hard to assess. It needs to be tried. Does it effectively “solve” – i.e., sidestep – the underlying problem in a way that moves the discussion forward?

The potential of their constructive effort to model these experiences on neutral ground remains to be proven. Through semiotic theory, they have proposed a common ground, if not a common language, for these various disciplines to interact. How this would work in practice is not at all clear. I was left wondering how, in practical terms, the data of various scientific disciplines and philosophical and theological traditions are to be coded and decoded in the form of signs in a way that can meaningfully resolve the questions at hand. For that matter, we might wonder whether the basic structure of semiotics is itself unproblematic enough to serve. I admit, however, that my knowledge of semiotics is limited. Their best proof would be to proceed with a research program that puts the methodology to the test.

Ultimately, it is unclear to me whether a strategy of tiptoeing around the ontological status of ultimacy and experiences of ultimacy, which Wildman and Brothers pursue throughout this work until the end (at which point they come out with a guarded endorsement of the ontological reality of ultimacy), can resolve anything at all. But I heartily endorse their effort,

because I am sure that no science or theology will ever conclusively solve the problem one way or another. In the face of this irresolvable impasse, one is grateful for any path that leads at least partway up the mountain.

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Endnotes

¹ Wildman, Wesley J. and Brothers, Leslie A. 1999. "A Neuropsychological-Semiotic Model of Religious Experiences." In *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy, Theo C. Meyering, and Michael A. Arbib (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory; Berkeley: Center for Theology and Natural Science, Graduate Theological Union), 350.

² Ibid, 349-350.

³ Ibid, 352.

⁴ Ibid, 355-6.

⁵ Ibid, 358-9.

⁶ Ibid, 362-5.

⁷ Ibid, 378-9.

⁸ Ibid, 379.

⁹ Ibid, 380.

¹⁰ Ibid, 382.

¹¹ Ibid, 383-384.

¹² Ibid, 384-385.

¹³ Ibid, 384.

¹⁴ Ibid, 385.

¹⁵ Ibid, 388.

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¹⁷ Ibid, 390.

¹⁸ Ibid, 394.

¹⁹ Ibid, 394.

²⁰ Ibid, 396-397.

²¹ Ibid, 398-390.

²² Ibid, 402.

²³ Ibid, 403-407.

²⁴ Ibid, 408-410.