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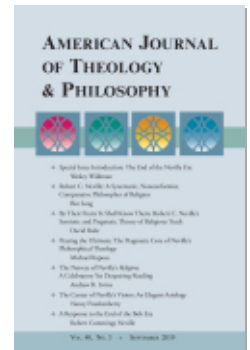
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## Praying the Ultimate: The Pragmatic Core of Neville's Philosophical Theology

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# Praying the Ultimate: The Pragmatic Core of Neville's Philosophical Theology

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## Abstract

*Robert Neville develops a portrayal of “religious virtuosity” that establishes an important link between his philosophical theology and his understanding of spiritual practice. “Praying the ultimate” is one especially apt label for such a practice. While Peirce’s pragmatism and semiotic theory offer key ingredients for Neville’s account, he creatively adapts these resources for his own constructive purposes. Here I place Peirce in conversation with Neville both to illuminate that account and to raise some questions about it.*

## Introduction

During a time period spanning from 2013 to 2015, Robert Neville published the three volumes of his *magnum opus* on *Philosophical Theology*, selected aspects of which will be the main focus of my attention in this essay.<sup>1</sup> Rather than hover at ten thousand feet and try to provide a broad overview or a bare sketch of Neville’s thought as he developed it there, I have decided to take the plunge, to focus my attention more narrowly on specific issues, while trying also to illuminate as much of the rest of his philosophical theology as I possibly can. This means lingering over volume one of his trilogy, on *Ultimates*, to a greater extent than I do with either volume two, on *Existence*, or volume three, on *Religion*.<sup>2</sup> Within the context of that first volume, I intend to narrow my focus even further, emphasizing certain arguments appearing within a single chapter of the book. This limiting of attention is not arbitrary, but rather, a strategic attempt to engage and examine certain ideas and convictions that I believe lie at the heart of Neville’s distinctive vision for

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1. This essay originated in a set of remarks delivered at a gathering at Boston University on April 19, 2018, marking the celebration of Robert Neville’s retirement. I am grateful to Wesley Wildman both for organizing that event and for conceiving of the idea of publishing a symposium of papers devoted to Neville’s work and honoring his intellectual legacy.

2. Robert C. Neville, *Philosophical Theology*, vol. 1, *Ultimates* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013); *Philosophical Theology*, vol. 2, *Existence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014); and *Philosophical Theology*, vol. 3, *Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015). I will refer to these volumes parenthetically within the body of my essay simply as “I,” “II,” or “III,” followed by a colon and a page number.

philosophical theology. In my evaluation, the chapter in question represents both a precis and a culmination of the elaborate argument developed by Neville in this most comprehensive articulation of his thought as a *system*.

The pragmatism of Charles S. Peirce has long been the primary influence shaping my own thinking about religious experiences, beliefs, and practices.<sup>3</sup> With such an admission in plain view, some readers might suspect that I tend to exaggerate the importance of Peirce and pragmatism for understanding Neville's thought; to be sure, Neville's erudition is remarkable, and a great variety of thinkers—from Plato and Confucius to Whitehead and Tillich—have supplied resources that he creatively adapts for his own constructive purposes. Nevertheless, Peirce is a key figure among the individuals in this group—for the issues that I will be examining in this essay, the most crucial influence of all. These issues will include Neville's portrayal of religious experience as a form of "symbolic engagement," his evaluation of the index as the most important type of sign among those that can be conceived as religiously significant, and his thoroughly pragmatic account of what it means, with respect to religious symbols, for someone to perform an act of interpretation.

Before commencing to execute this agenda, however, it may prove useful to say just a bit more here about Neville's relationship to philosophical pragmatism. I should note that it does not take long in the first volume of his trilogy for Neville to comment on this relationship; some brief remarks appear even in the preface, where he situates his philosophical approach within a tradition that "develops out of classical pragmatism" (I: xix). In the very same sentence, Neville announces that this approach "is closely related to the re-inscription of pragmatic themes within the project of analytical philosophy." Here Neville is referring to philosophical perspectives developed by such thinkers as "Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, and most especially Robert Brandom." On my reading, such a comment is evidence of Neville's tendency to display a gracious generosity toward even those points of view with which he strongly disagrees. Neville hints at such disagreement in the preface, but then turns to address it more directly later in the volume (see I: 68–70). There he characterizes Brandom's pragmatism as a form of "idealism," problematic because "limited to the analysis of discursive behavior," and also limited by its abandonment of the "category of 'experience'" (which Brandom has freely admitted he has no use for in his philosophy<sup>4</sup>).

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3. That thinking receives its fullest articulation in Michael L. Raposa, *Theosemiotic: Religion, Reading, and the Gift of Meaning* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

4. This admission is clearly articulated in Robert Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 197.

By way of contrast, Neville's philosophical theology is more firmly rooted in classical pragmatic soil, indebted to the thought of James, Peirce, Dewey, and even Josiah Royce, but most especially (as I have already suggested here) to Peirce's pragmatism. This means that he will direct attention not only to the discursive practices of religious interpreters but also to "the natural objects with which interpreters engage and from which they learn." Neville juxtaposes to Brandom's neo-Hegelian idealism his own commitment to a form of pragmatic naturalism. His indebtedness to classical pragmatism entails, once again following Peirce closely, that one should never ignore the element of "Secondness" in experience, that is, "the brute resistance of real things to interpretations of them such that the interpretations can be corrected" (I: 68–70).

Although it is not my primary purpose here to evaluate Neville's critique of neopragmatism, I would agree with him that in having taken the "linguistic turn" with a vengeance, some contemporary philosophers run the risk of ignoring altogether other forms of symbolic engagement. Neville articulates a more capacious conception of semiosis, not reducible to language or verbal behavior. Moreover, he is as much interested in thinking and talking about the objects of certain signs and symbols as he is in analyzing the behavior of their interpreters. As a consequence, Neville does not shy away from pursuing metaphysical or cosmological speculations; indeed, his philosophical theology demands such an intellectual exercise.

### **Praying the Ultimate**

Chapter fifteen of *Ultimates*, about "praying the ultimate," is a remarkable tour de force, a discussion located at the boundary that typically distinguishes philosophy and theology from spirituality, but here blurring the line between them. This chapter is one of the many places in his trilogy where Neville proclaims what I call the "gospel of indexicality." Among the three general types of signs that the American philosopher Charles Peirce classified in terms of their relationship to their object, the index is one that exists in a directly causal relationship, rather than resembling its object like an icon, or representing it by habit or convention like what Peirce called a symbol (although Neville himself uses "symbol" as a more general label for all types of signs). As such, an index directs our attention, often forcefully, to this or that particular thing, much as the contemplation of some effect—like a crater in the earth made by the impact of a meteor—might serve emphatically to remind us of its cause.

For the purposes of philosophical theology, Neville identifies the index as being the most important of the three types of signs. Why is this so? On his account, the "act of thinking ultimacy" must be primarily a matter of paying

attention, of “turning attention to the right thing” (I: 298), and it is the index that serves best to facilitate such an act. In order to make sense of such an account, it will first be important to explain briefly what Neville conceives as truly “ultimate,” no simple task since his meditation on the concept of ultimacy has itself extended over several decades, finding articulation in a great variety of his publications.

Indeed, religion is all about ultimacy on Neville’s analysis, about the multiple ways in which human beings engage ultimacy, and also about the symbols that we use for the purpose of such engagement. Here he chooses to follow someone like Paul Tillich who identified religion with “ultimate concern,” rather than numerous other thinkers who have proposed concepts such as the “sacred” or the “holy” as being most crucial for the task of understanding the religious dimension of human experience.<sup>5</sup> Yet Neville’s philosophical treatment of ultimacy is idiosyncratic and carefully nuanced, to some readers perhaps even paradoxical on first inspection, since his metaphysics proposes that altogether there are *five* ultimates rather than one. On the more common understanding of what it means to be truly ultimate, there can only be a single such reality and, strictly speaking, for Neville there is only one “ontological ultimate,” the primordial “creative act” that causes everything else to be, an act that is itself indeterminate, but is the ultimate source of all determinate things. In addition, however, he identifies four “cosmological ultimate realities that come from determinateness itself, and are relevant to human life” (I: 4). All determinate things have a form, they also have components, an existential location, and value. Each of these is a transcendental feature of the determinate created world, not just a feature of this or that particular thing or kind of thing, but rather, a trait of everything that exists, what Neville refers to as a “boundary condition” for everything in the world. While these four “are real ultimate conditions that every human being in every culture must face” (I: 4), nevertheless, “the ontological creative act is the ultimate reality on which all other ultimate realities depend” (I: 172). Without wanting to appear like I am evading the rather formidable challenge of interpreting Neville’s highly subtle and original theory of cosmological ultimacy, for the present purpose of understanding what Neville means when he talks about “praying the ultimate,” it is this indeterminate creative act that deserves special consideration.

Precisely because the ultimate as creative act is indeterminate, it has no nature, no properties, nothing can be said about it in itself, apart from what it determines in the act of creation. It is a creative act rather than a personal Creator, one to which we cannot legitimately assign agency, intentions, or

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5. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).

purposes. And so these are the questions that such a conception raises immediately for consideration: In the act of “thinking ultimacy” or of “praying the ultimate,” how does one go about the task of “turning attention to the right thing?” Since the ontological creative act is not any kind of “thing” at all, to what, where, or whom should attention turn; moreover, what constitutes a “right” turn from a wrong one? How would either a philosophical theologian or a spiritual devotee be able to discern the difference?

I want to suggest that Neville’s answer to this sort of question is an essentially pragmatic one, but since (as already noted) “pragmatism” is itself a fuzzy label for a broad range of philosophical perspectives, I want to be careful to explain what I mean in saying this. The ultimate reality cannot be engaged in any way, on Neville’s account, that is not somehow symbolically mediated; there is no direct, unmediated access to the ultimate. Moreover, the sign or symbol that is most useful for this purpose, as already indicated, is the index, which does not so much convey information about the ultimate reality as it does direct attention to it, thus facilitating our engagement with that reality. On Neville’s view, such engagement is a causal relation established by the index between its object and interpreter in such a way that (1) part of what is valuable in the object is “carried over” into the interpreter and (2) as a result of this engagement, the interpreter is somehow significantly transformed. The “truth” of such a symbol will be a function of the value that is communicated from its object to its interpreter; it will have virtually nothing to do with the picture or description of the object that the symbol supplies for its interpreter. Moreover, such truth will be measured by the way in which, as a result of this mediated engagement with the ultimate reality, the interpreter is subsequently transformed.

Any symbol that is purported to represent the ultimate reality by virtue of resembling it like an icon is, of necessity, literally false. Neville repeats this in his *Philosophical Theology* over and over again like a mantram. To think otherwise is to run the risk of idolatry. Yet any sign that is iconically false, once again, might be indexically true if it “carries over” into the interpreter what is really valuable or important in its object. What, exactly, is at stake here?

An icon cannot accurately represent the ultimate reality. No symbol can do that. For Neville, as for Tillich, all religious symbols are “broken.” On my reading of his *Philosophical Theology*, it is not exclusively but most especially an apophatic theology, a theology of mystery, and Neville speaks with a strong prophetic voice. Nothing, he insists, can be known about the ultimate reality apart from its inexplicably free and arbitrary act as creator of all that is determinate. Even metaphors are problematic because while they are taken to be literally false, they still assume some “likeness” between symbol and object. *There is no such likeness.* Neville’s ultimate reality as ontological creative act

is just about as “wholly other” as you can possibly get. He does make brilliant use of Duns Scotus’s argument about the univocity of being, while rejecting theories of analogy (I: 171, 180–84; III: 287); that is to say, there is one very bare and indeterminate sense of being that supplies unity for all of the multifarious determinate things that exist. Yet the ultimate reality (which is referred to as “God” by classical theists, but designated differently in other religious traditions)—a reality that he identifies as the source of such unity—has no nature of any kind, no qualities or character at all, apart from creation (I: 273–76).

So all of our religious symbols fall short of accurately representing the ultimate and must be regarded as representing either nothing at all or something else. What else? Theological and religious discourse, if it is about anything at all, in Neville’s view, is about the “symbolic engagement . . . of the interpreter with the interpreted, shaped and guided by means of the interpreting signs” (I: 288). As he insists, “the real object of symbolic engagement is involved in the engagement” (I: 287). Moreover, in the process of such engagement, the interpreter is “in some sense” constituted as “a causal product of the object,” thus gradually “transformed” by that object (I: 289). All that is required is that the interpreter pay proper attention. This is what Neville means by “praying the ultimate.”

It might be useful to consider more carefully how Neville conceives of the nature of such a “transformation.” He suggests that the ultimate reality will enter this engagement primarily as “something felt.” And how is it felt? “As the master grounding component of a certain kind of religious experience” (I: 284). And what is the result of this experience? Attunement “to ultimate realities so that we can discriminate how we should comport ourselves toward them” (I: 43). Finally, what constitutes such an attunement?

From Neville’s distinctively pragmatic perspective, it must be our conduct or behavior that manifests the true meaning of any particular religious symbol. It is only through practice that religious “virtuosity,” as Neville portrays it in each of the three volumes of his trilogy, can be achieved (I: 301–17; II: 232–49; III: 225–29). Such individuals, as a result of continuous practice—a lifetime of praying the ultimate—are able to “turn themselves into signs” (I: 133), thus becoming properly attuned and now embodying the “engagement of ultimacy as a habit” (I: 306). This emphasis on human practices and the role that they play in habit formation is one that is characteristic of a variety of pragmatic perspectives; the proposal that an individual self either is or can become a sign resonates most especially with Charles Peirce’s pragmatism.

Neville’s ultimate reality displays creative force, but has no qualities, no nature, no name, no intentions. We ought ideally to pay attention to the ultimate

without painting pictures of it or telling stories about it. Or perhaps it is better to say that we should not allow these pictures or stories to distract us from the reality of it. Once again, that reality is more readily felt than conceived or described. Because of it, we exist. Consequently, one of the things that we should feel as a result of engagement with the ultimate is a profound sense of gratitude. Pragmatically speaking, what is important is not some isolated feeling of gratitude elicited as a response to what is encountered in a particular situation. In the regular and repeated practice of praying the ultimate, it is a cultivated habit of gratitude that is the mark of religious virtuosity, one of the first and finest fruits of the spiritual life.

Return briefly now to my original question and dilemma. Since the ontological creative act is not “this or that,” not any kind of “thing” at all, there can be no determinate “it” to which one attends in praying the ultimate. This suggests that, at the end of the spiritual day, our indices are rendered as broken as our icons. This also makes the nature and quality of the attention that Neville’s theology demands something really quite extraordinary. Such attention might best be described as a form and habit of readiness, a kind of waiting, but not for anything in particular. I think that what Peirce called musement is a practice of paying attention in just this fashion, and Neville’s discussion of the various spiritual “paths” in chapter sixteen of volume one has Peircean echoes everywhere. The purpose of musement for Peirce was exactly, as Neville reports, “to make the meditative engagement of ultimacy a habit” (I: 306). Its aim was precisely “to attend to the things of creation such as they are” (I: 307), without practical purpose or bias. For Peirce as well as for Neville, traveling the spiritual path eventuates in a kind of falling in love with the ultimate, and then culminates through disciplined practice in one’s “becoming an adept lover” (I: 313). This is a love that should make one feel grateful, as already suggested, but as Neville further explains, it should also result in certain feelings of delight; delight always followed by gratitude is what it feels like to be habitually in love with God.

It is easy to see how on such an account, as remarked at the outset, philosophical theology of the most theoretically subtle and abstract sort nevertheless gradually blends with and bears fruit in a concrete theology of the spiritual life. It is this result that I want to examine with greater care, this description of how the self of the devotee becomes transformed into a sign of the ultimate reality that is the creative source of its being. My examination, in just a few instances, will be a gently critical one, affirming the substance of Neville’s account but raising questions about some of the details. I will need to consider more carefully both the dynamics of symbolic engagement and the precise nature of the sign that any person or self might be conceived to be. How, also, are the practices in which the religious devotee engages best to be understood, that is,



what role do they play in bringing about a religiously meaningful transformation, and how do they themselves function as a sign? In what sense, finally, are the habits that are formed through such practices also to be regarded as meaningful signs?

### **The Self as Semiosis**

The religious significance of the index in Neville's philosophical theology has already been clearly established here. The peculiar efficacy of that type of sign in shaping human attention is crucial to the gradual transformation of the self that eventuates in religious virtuosity. Such a self becomes a sign when the engagement of ultimacy is established as a habit. But what sort of sign? Neville never presents a detailed answer to this question, so it will be necessary to make some inferences based on the account that he does provide. It will also be useful to place him in conversation on this issue with Peirce, whose enormously complex and detailed classification of signs is either famous or infamous, depending on which among the differing judgements of those scholars who have examined it one happens to consult.

Recall that, on Neville's account, a symbolic engagement is one that "constitutes the interpreter as in some sense a causal product of the object." Insofar as this occurs at all, he suggests, and so insofar as there is any truth in our symbols, it is by virtue of their achieving "indexical reference." Consider more carefully this claim that such reference must be indexical. Every sign, at least from a Peircean perspective, refers to an object, but also itself "determines" an interpretant. The semiotic relation is fundamentally triadic. Neville has carefully explained how iconicity and indexicality are modes of reference, describing a sign's relationship to its object. But this is not to be confused with the sign's relationship to its interpretant. There is for Peirce no immediate relationship between a sign's object and interpretant; Neville clearly agrees with Peirce on this point. All experience/engagement is interpreted. So my concern here is that Neville's consistent emphasis on indices and indexicality underscores the sign/object relationship in a way that potentially obscures the essentially triadic nature of semiosis. Any sign will exert a kind of causal influence on its interpreter, not just those that can be classified as an index. Moreover, indices hardly ever exist in isolation from icons and symbols, but convey information as a result of being linked to them (so that as Neville himself carefully points out, the same sign can have both iconic and indexical features). The question that I am raising here is one about how Neville understands the connection between the semantic and the pragmatic functions of signs. To speak about indexicality is to underscore and emphasize the former, not the latter.

Admittedly, Peirce himself could occasionally be a bit fuzzy on this issue. While his most well-known classification of signs as icons, indices, or symbols was one that he consistently claimed to be based on the sign-object relationship, he also frequently noted the distinctive effect that indices can have on their interpreters, forcefully directing their attention to this or that. Neville follows Peirce in underscoring the significance of this observation about how an index channels attention. Yet it is the fact that an index achieves this effect without depicting or portraying its object in the way that an icon tends to do that explains its importance for the purposes of philosophical theology. This suggests that no perfectly sharp distinction between the semantic and the pragmatic functions of a sign can be established. Neville's apophatic theology motivates his interest in the semantic aspect of how indices signify. But my primary concern in this essay is with Neville's pragmatism.

In a well-known and richly suggestive remark that appears at the end of a series of lectures delivered at Harvard in 1903, Peirce stipulated that a concept entertained in thought must be regarded as "unauthorized by reason" unless it can show its passports at both the "gate of perception" and the "gate of purposive action."<sup>6</sup> Now all experience is semiosis for Peirce, never unmediated but always a matter of interpretation, so that the "gate of perception" marks the location where a semantic relationship is established between a sign and its object. The "gate of purposive action" designates the pragmatic space where an idea is rendered concrete in human practice. Indeed, for Peirce, the "ultimate logical interpretant" of any sign will be some habit of feeling, thought, or conduct established in the person who interprets it.<sup>7</sup> Consider, then, the relevance of Peirce's "two gates" metaphor to Neville's account of what it means to be engaged in "praying the ultimate."

Clearly the spiritual devotee will achieve virtuosity in Neville's view only by passing through both gates. There must be a real engagement with the ultimate as "something felt," a kind of religious experience facilitated most especially by indexical signs that shape the attention of the devotee in an appropriate and distinctive fashion. Moreover, even if such experience always takes the form of a blind encounter (nothing can be said or known about the creative act other than it creates), it can nevertheless be powerfully transformative for the person who has it. As Neville expresses it, such engagement can result in the gradual

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6. Charles S. Peirce, *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking: The 1903 Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism*, ed. Patricia Ann Turrissi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 256.

7. Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks, 8 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958), 5: paras. 476 and 491.

attunement of the religious devotee to the reality of the thing encountered. Recall that he was quite explicit in characterizing this sort of attunement as a process of habit formation and describing its effect on subsequent practices. Shaped and reshaped by this kind of religious experience, virtuosos will “comport” themselves differently. What begins with engagement culminates in some form of “purposive action.”

The puzzle as I have already identified it here is that the thing encountered in religious experience is no determinate thing at all, but rather the indeterminate creative source of everything else that exists. Moreover, the engagement with ultimacy is never direct but always mediated by symbols. Neville is sufficiently Peircean (or perhaps Tillichean) to require that this be the case, but his insistence that human experience is always semiosis stands in tension with his warning that in the case of religious experience these symbols are uninformative, even potentially misinformative, because of their character as broken. This helps to explain Neville’s careful identification of what is conveyed through such signs as being something that is primarily “felt” rather than something clearly perceived or conceived.

Here, too, there is an affinity with Peirce. Peirce emphasized in his philosophy of religion the status of religiously meaningful signs as being extraordinarily *vague*. In speaking about the nature of God as ultimate reality, he was convinced that we can only “wildly gabble” about such things.<sup>8</sup> (He agreed, moreover, that what an interpreter feels in response to a particular sign is a part of what that sign means, its “emotional interpretant.”) One of the thought experiments that I am trying to pursue in my reading of Neville against the background of Peirce’s pragmatism concerns the discovery of any possibly salient difference between an emphasis (following Tillich and Neville) on religious symbols being inevitably “broken” and Peirce’s claim that they are necessarily quite vague. One crucial and immediately evident difference is that Peirce judged it possible to describe God as being in some sense vaguely *personal*—not in any way closely resembling how human beings or even certain communities display a personality, but personal nevertheless. We have no license to make such a judgement on Neville’s view. The ultimate creative act has no intentions, no plans, no purposes in creating that we might infer from the signs that mediate its reality to us. In writing this last sentence, I was torn between whether or not to use the word “reality” or to substitute “presence.” Either seems appropriate, because the divine creative act must be a reality that, even if without intending to be so, is necessarily present to and for the things that it creates, in some sense not only being, but *being towards*, always a *being-in-relation*. The attunement

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8. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 6: para. 509.

of those virtuosi who learn to comport themselves in a distinctive way toward the ultimate must in some sense have been *elicited* by the creative act itself.

It is enormously difficult to talk about such matters, of course, another conclusion shared by Neville and Peirce and the basic reason why I have characterized both of their philosophical theologies as apophatic.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly enough, this reticence to describe the ultimate reality as “being like” this or that does not prevent either thinker from concluding with confidence that it is capable of *loving*, also that it elicits our love in response. This is less a mystery in Peirce’s case, since he described God as being vaguely personal.<sup>10</sup> But what could it mean for Neville to talk about God in this fashion, about God as a lover?

Any hope of an answer to this question will require examining those places where such talk appears in the pages of *Philosophical Theology*. One of the most notable is at the conclusion of volume one, on the very last page, where Neville alludes to a “strong analogy” between the love displayed by religious virtuosi and “the divine love in the ontological creative act of creation itself.” The latter, he proclaims, “is love in the most profound sense” (I: 324). This is a remarkable claim, given everything else that Neville has written in these pages about the natureless nature of the ontological ultimate. But it is also an important claim if one wants to understand the full religious significance of “praying the ultimate.”

My reading of Neville suggests that one can only turn attention to the “right thing” by contemplating anything and everything that exists in the appropriate way. It certainly could not be the case that he is recommending closing one’s eyes to every determinate thing in creation, pushing creation aside in order somehow to glimpse the creative act at its source. Such engagement with the ultimate would be immediate and not symbolic. There is nothing to know or say about this creative act other than that it creates. Neville is consistently clear about this. *All that we can know about the ontological ultimate is revealed in its*

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9. In referring to Peirce’s “philosophical theology,” I am not pretending to ignore his frequently articulated antipathy toward theology in many of its historical forms and manifestations. Yet Peirce’s affinity for certain medieval thinkers, especially Duns Scotus, as well as the closeness of his perspective to that of Neville as it is being reported here, justify the label, even if he did not identify himself as a theologian. For a description of Peirce’s thought as representative of an “apophatic” or “negative” theology, consult my argument in Michael L. Raposa, *Peirce’s Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 71, 150.

10. Even with regard to the personal nature of God, one should be careful not to exaggerate the differences between Peirce and Neville. Much like Neville, Peirce backed away from the claim that God can be said to have any *intentions* or *desires*, perhaps most explicitly in a letter written to Victoria Lady Welby in 1909. See Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Welby, *Semiotic and Significs: The Correspondence between C. S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, edited by Charles S. Hardwick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 111.

*determinations, its creations.* On this reading of Neville's theology, turning attention to the "right thing" is more a matter of attending to anything at all in the "right way." To become skillful at doing so requires practice, the consistent practice that characterizes a life of prayer and culminates in the development of virtuosity. As I have already suggested above, this is very much like what Peirce described as musement in his Neglected Argument for the reality of God.<sup>11</sup>

Neville's talk about "attunement" as a consequence of such practice, further resulting in some transformation in the way that one habitually "comports" oneself, maps neatly onto Peirce's portrayal of the musier falling in love with the idea of God to the point of wanting to "shape the whole conduct of life and all the springs of action into conformity with that hypothesis";<sup>12</sup> recall that Neville also describes the spiritual life as a process of becoming an "adept lover." Here my gentle criticism of Neville is framed once again in the form of a question. The adept lover thus attuned is a *person* in love—why should the reality to which she is attuned not be regarded in some sense as personal? If such an adept has become a living sign of the ultimate (using Peirce's categories, I have argued elsewhere that every person is a living *legisign*<sup>13</sup>), why must one insist that the truth of what that person now signifies in no way involves iconicity, an extraordinarily vague but nevertheless crucial likeness of person to Person, of love to Love? Why must the continuity now established between object and interpreter, mediated by symbol, be purely causal, consisting in nothing more? Even the crater caused or created by the brute force of the meteor's impact bears in its imprint some resemblance to the meteor itself.

Neville recognizes and admits that most of the symbols that are used to signify the ultimate—including religious virtuosi who serve as living symbols—possess iconic as well as indexical features. Nevertheless, they are iconically false, their truth consisting in whatever value is indexically carried over from object to interpreter. The interpreter of a religious symbol is a "causal product" of that sign's object without bearing any likeness to it. This sort of insistence on an austere apophaticism in one's philosophical theology, I am proposing, might stand in tension with Neville's observation of the "strong analogy" that "exists between virtuoso love of creatures and the creator, and the divine love in the act of creation itself" (I: 324). How can such an analogy exist if all signs as icons must be literally false and broken? Would it not make more sense to say with Peirce that no icon perfectly signifies its object, so that while one resembles the

11. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 6: paras. 458–67, 486.

12. *Ibid.*, para. 467.

13. In Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, chap. 2.

other, it will be only in some very limited respect and in a way that, especially for religiously meaningful signs, is extraordinarily vague? Perhaps the mistake here is in thinking of photographs as the paradigmatic example of an icon. (Another mistake, especially for the purposes of philosophical theology, might consist in regarding craters or weather vanes as paradigmatic indices.) To say that human love gestures toward and represents a response to the reality of a divine love is to underscore a certain continuity between the human and divine. That continuity is manifested as semiosis, yet hardly in the sense that one is a mirror image of the other; it is a continuity consisting in something more than sameness or relations of similarity. Yet the mere fact of continuity suggests at least the possibility of a very vague resemblance between interpretant and object.

That interpretant is also a sign. Can the shape in which it is determined be explained in terms of indexicality alone? If the self as living sign displays habitually hateful, cruel, or vicious behavior, then one might judge it to be a false sign of the ultimate. If a person was genuinely open to experience and to the ultimate creative act as it determines everything in experience (one might argue), no such habits should be formed; such openness or attentiveness would expose the interpreter to the shock or Secondness of experience that Neville sees as an important corrective, as rubbing against the grain of just that kind of behavior. This is the powerful and important sense in which Neville urges the interpreter to make all interpretations as *vulnerable* as possible. Such vulnerability is as crucial for flourishing in the spiritual life as it is for long-term success in inquiry.

Since Neville understands semiosis to consist in more than language, symbolic engagement to be a broader category than discursive behavior, he has a generously expanded sense of what it means to give an interpretation. The religious virtuoso becomes a living sign of the ultimate, not because of how she thinks about or conceives the ultimate (it can be conceived only in the most general terms as creator of everything but as nothing in particular). Neville's emphasis is on what is *felt* in symbolic engagement with the ultimate, then also on how one *comports* oneself habitually as a result of such engagements. It is to these particular respects in which the prayerful self interprets the ultimate and so also signifies it that I now turn in my concluding reflections.

### **Religious Virtuosity as *Habitus***

Neville's emphasis on the index and on indexicality is directly related to his concerns about idolatry, literalism, and fundamentalism as serious obstacles to achieving the goals of both theology and the spiritual life. I have tried to suggest,

without offering extensive argument here, that an appeal to Peirce's logic of vagueness might be more useful toward the end of addressing such concerns.<sup>14</sup> Yet another strategy toward this same end involves Neville's stress on the felt content of religious experience, as well as on its long-term effect in shaping the behavior of the person who has such experiences. This is what I have referred to as Neville's pragmatism. Here the concern is not so much with the relationship between sign and object as it is with the sign's effect on some interpreter. To be sure, that effect is also caused by the object in a way that is mediated by the sign. If the sign is an icon, our attention will linger over the features of the sign itself. If it is an index, our attention will be directed rather forcefully to its object. Since most signs or symbols have iconic as well as indexical features, our responses to them can be rather complex, and Neville's theology of symbolic engagement represents the most sustained attempt yet made to explore such complexity.

The point that I want to make about Neville's pragmatism is that he seems to privilege in his account of symbolic engagement the significance of what an interpreter feels and does, rather than what she describes or expresses in language. There is no narrow focusing on the "discursive" in his account (unless one were to suggest that he has developed a new and much broader concept of "discursivity"). In addition, since Neville is a true pragmatist, he is interested far less in episodic feelings or random actions than in habits of feeling and conduct. In these three volumes, he repeatedly describes the mingling of gratitude and delight that constitutes the habit of love displayed by any person who has become adept at loving, who has developed virtuosity. Not only will that person now serve as a sign of the ultimate, but everything that exists will be for her a sign, not just an object for her contemplation, but the sign of something *more*. If the object contemplated is beloved, Neville observes that this semiotic event can be described as a "shift from centering attention on the beloved alone to attention to the beloved as a creature of the ontological creative act" (III: 224). Now lover and beloved exist together in "an ontological context of mutual relevance." This is a perspective, as Neville himself indicates, very close to the one that Jonathan Edwards developed with his talk about "benevolence" or "consent" to "being-in-general" (III: 222).

This is the pragmatic core of Neville's philosophical theology. By not reducing semiosis to language (what we feel in response to a symbol, also what we subsequently do, are both an important part of what that symbol *means*),

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14. A more extended argument about the importance of a logic of vagueness for doing philosophical theology is included in chapter three of *Theosemiotic*, developing insights first articulated more than a century ago in "The Fuzzy Logic of Religious Discourse," *American Journal of Semiotics* 10 (1993): 101–14.



furthermore, by focusing on habits developed as a result of repeated engagements with ultimacy, Neville has established a clear link between his perspective and that of the classical pragmatists. This is not to suggest that what we *think* about the ultimate is completely unimportant. Indeed, for Peirce, feelings were vague thoughts and deliberate conduct was a form of embodied rationality. There is clearly a sense in Neville's theology, nevertheless, in which the significance of those words, stories, and pictures that we use to symbolize divinity has been carefully circumscribed. They are vitally important for the purposes of living the religious life, but not because of what they reveal about the nature of the ultimate; rather, their importance is attached to what they make us feel, how we are transformed by them and then proceed to comport ourselves.

I want to suggest that a less obvious link between Neville and his pragmatist predecessors is marked by his concern about precisely how one ought to pay attention in order to become adept at living the spiritual life. Although he has received barely a mention in this essay and his importance as an influence on Neville's thought is far less than Peirce's, William James judged volition to consist essentially in acts of attention; an insight first developed in his psychology, it was later to have significant implications for his understanding of religious experience and behavior. Peirce's interest was in how attention is involved in acts of abstraction, how it functions in different forms of inferences, also how it is shaped or determined by different kinds of signs. These are closer to Neville's concerns.

We ought to resist the temptation to think about icons or indices as distinct types of signs and regard them instead as being aspects of semiosis, so that one and the same sign may function in both of these ways. With this in mind, it might be possible to re-evaluate iconicity for the purposes of philosophical theology in a fashion that makes it less worrisome for Neville. Legitimate concerns about idolatry or literalism notwithstanding, one might suggest that there is an advantage to using icons for the purpose of facilitating symbolic engagements with ultimacy. The typical effect of an index, as already observed, is to direct attention immediately and forcefully to its object. If one's theology is decidedly apophatic, this can amount to staring into darkness, but the exercise of vigilance in enduring such experiences is precisely the sort of practice, on Neville's account, that can yield virtuosity.

Icons hold our attention without directing it elsewhere in the same forceful and straightforward manner. If we become trapped, preoccupied with the features of the icon as a thing, the risk of idolatry is real. Yet there is another sense in which icons can shape our attention, not simply by absorbing it but by rendering it indeterminate. Unlike the index, they suggest various possibilities but point the interpreter toward no particular thing. As Peirce suggested, they



invite a kind of contemplation which, if properly self-controlled, can help to expose what may lie “hidden in the icon.”<sup>15</sup> This is the sort of self-controlled playfulness that he prescribed for readers as musement in his *Neglected Argument*.

Insofar as religious virtuosi become signs of the ultimate, our interpretation of them, it seems to me, would need to take this form. It is in reading and rereading the patterns displayed in their behavior that the habits forming their character might best be illuminated. To use Neville’s language, in observing how they “comport” themselves, we would be most effectively enabled to grasp the manner in which they have become “attuned.” In doing so, as interpreters now with such persons as our primary texts, we might also become symbolically engaged, thus also gradually transformed. I think that Neville’s philosophical theology accommodates this way of thinking, even though he tends to emphasize in his account of praying or “thinking the ultimate” the sort of exercise that requires “a certain kind of education and intellectual practice,” admitting that “these are privileged contexts” (I: 299). I am pointing outside of such contexts to what Peirce labeled as a more “humble” alternative.<sup>16</sup> It involves being awake, remaining open, and looking carefully in just the way that Neville so effectively describes, but with a slightly different understanding of the forms of semiosis that might develop, and perhaps a different hypothesis about whether or not the resulting encounter with ultimacy will be one that is personal.

Whether or not reading Neville’s *Philosophical Theology* results for its reader in a real engagement with the ontological ultimate, it is very likely to be transformative in intellectually exciting and important ways. Notwithstanding the many other influences upon it and strands of thought woven into it, Neville’s work represents the most serious attempt to develop Peirce’s ideas for the purposes of philosophical theology since Josiah Royce published *The Problem of Christianity* in 1913.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 7: para. 555.

16. Peirce referred to his argument for God’s reality as “humble.” See *Collected Papers*, 6: para. 486.

17. Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).