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All the World Is Shining, and Love Is Smiling through All Things: The Collapse of the "Two Ways" in 'The Tree of Life'

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Abstract

Chapter Summary: From the blackness emerges a subtly scripted epigraph from the biblical book of Job, silently posing a question to the viewer on behalf of the almighty: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation...while the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" Following thirty-five chapters of Job's story, filled with relentless criticism on the part of Job's "friends" in response to Job's ongoing poetically formulated and impassioned lamentations, and the demands he places before God - demands for justice and an explanation for his suffering - at last the voice of the almighty speaks from within the raging storm, responding not with an answer but with a questions: *where were you?* - the very question Terrence Malick poses to us at the beginning of *The Tree of Life*. Thus, from the opening moments of the film Malick is signifying to the viewer that *The Tree of Life* is to be a meditation on the meaning of suffering. [excerpt]

Book Summary: Amid all the controversy, criticism, and celebration of Terence Malick's award-winning film *The Tree of Life*, what do we really understand of it? *The Way of Nature and the Way of Grace* thoughtfully engages the philosophical riches of life, culture, time, and the sacred through Malick's film. This groundbreaking collection traverses the relationships among ontological, moral, scientific, and spiritual perspectives on the world, demonstrating how phenomenological work can be done in and through the cinematic medium, and attempting to bridge the gap between narrow "theoretical" works on film and their broader cultural and philosophical significance. Exploring Malick's film as a philosophical engagement, this readable and insightful collection presents an excellent resource for film specialists, philosophers of film, and film lovers alike. [From the Publisher]

Keywords

suffering, transgression, redemption, betrayal, forgiveness, time, memory

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All the World Is Shining, and Love Is Smiling through All Things

The Collapse of the "Two Ways" in *The Tree of Life*

Vernon W. Cisney

The Kingdom of God does not "come" chronologically-historically, on a certain day in the calendar, something that might be here one day but not the day before: it is an "inward change in the individual," something that comes at every moment and at every moment has not yet arrived—.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

And he said to man,
"The fear of the LORD—that is
wisdom,
and to shun evil is
understanding."

—Job 28:28

From the blackness emerges a subtly scripted epigraph from the biblical book of Job, silently posing a question to the viewer on behalf of the almighty: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation . . . while the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"¹ Following thirty-five chapters of Job's story, filled with relentless criticism on the part of Job's "friends" in response to Job's ongoing poetically formulated and impassioned lamentations, and the demands he places before God—demands for justice and an explanation for his suffering—at last the voice of the almighty speaks from within the raging storm, responding not with an answer but with a question: *where were you?*—the very question Terrence Malick poses to us at the beginning of *The Tree of Life*. Thus, from the opening moments of the film Malick is signifying to the viewer that *The Tree of Life* is to be a meditation on the meaning of suffering.

This question, however, is not merely one among others. The most ambitious pursuits in human history have set out with this very question firmly in tow. Every religion throughout the course of human history, up to and including the modern religion we know as the sciences, has arisen in an effort

to answer this question, and to make humanity's best attempts to solve the problems it poses. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes the following, which bears a complete citation:

Precisely *this* is what the ascetic ideal means: that something *was lacking*, that an enormous *void* surrounded man—he did not know how to justify, to explain, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning. He suffered otherwise as well, he was for the most part a *diseased* animal: but the suffering itself was *not* his problem, rather that the answer was missing to the scream of his question: “*to what end suffering?*” Man, the bravest animal and the one most accustomed to suffering, does not *negate* suffering in itself: he *wants* it, he even seeks it out, provided one shows him a *meaning* for it, a *to-this-end* of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering itself, was the curse that thus far lay stretched out over humanity—and the ascetic ideal offered it a meaning! Thus far it has been the only meaning; any meaning is better than no meaning at all.²

Humankind can tolerate suffering, it can will it and welcome it, provided it is capable of finding an explanation for the suffering—some comprehensible meaning that will make it all make sense. But in doing so, the framework of meaning that is created must encompass the fact of suffering, which means that it must be conceptually *larger* than the suffering itself—it must as a precondition or a necessary accompaniment reflect upon the meaning of life itself. To give meaning to life is to at the same time contextualize the suffering endemic to it. Thus, in presenting us with a film meditating on the meaning of suffering, Malick is at the same time offering us a film that reflects on what it means to be part of *the tree of life*.

The Nietzsche passage also presents us with at least one possible solution to the problem; namely, what Nietzsche calls *the ascetic ideal*, and what I shall refer to throughout this chapter as “the ascetic worldview.” By the ascetic worldview, I mean the view, fundamental to nearly all religions, that there is something inherently and irredeemably wrong with the world, that nature (and more specifically human nature) suffers from a deficiency. Most strains of monotheistic religion hold that the world came into being as part of a perfect design, but somewhere early on it fell far short of its purpose, leaving the whole of life itself forever contaminated: as Detective Somerset reads from the pages of John Doe’s journal in David Fincher’s *Se7en*, “We are not what was intended.”³ The “falling short” pervasive through the whole of existence is most evident in the sins and sufferings of human beings. What could be more evident after all than the fact that death, pain, sorrow, self-loathing, despair, and so on are all objections to life itself? Nevertheless, now that the fallenness has taken root, nothing in all the natural world has been

left untouched by it, for "we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."⁴ The ascetic worldview thus decries the world, despairs of itself, castigates the natural, and interprets all of human life as a struggle for transcendence away from life or away from "the flesh," which struggles ever against the spirit,⁵ body vs. soul, nature vs. grace. Even in its more joyful manifestations (and history has given us no shortage of examples of joyful asceticism), the ascetic worldview nevertheless always finds fault in creation, and ultimately longs for escape therefrom. Thus, the solution offered by the ascetic worldview to the problem of life is, thought through to its logical conclusion, the *escape* from life—*death*.

By contrast, when I speak of the "affirmative worldview," I mean the view which affirms the beauty and glory of all creation, suffering and death included.⁶ Where the ascetic worldview is a desire for transcendence, the affirmative worldview is the embrace of immanence and all that it entails. As Gilles Deleuze writes, "We need an ethic or a faith, which makes fools laugh; it is not a need to believe in something else, but a need to believe in this world, of which fools are a part."⁷ My touchstone thinker for the affirmative worldview will be Benedict de Spinoza, as he provides one of the most elegant and rigorous formulations of the affirmative worldview ever offered in the history of Western philosophy.⁸

In this chapter, I shall argue that the view of life offered in Malick's films, and specifically *The Tree of Life*, (drawing inspiration from *The Thin Red Line*), is a vision of the affirmative worldview, as opposed to the ascetic, but this requires clarification. Early in *The Tree of Life*, we hear the voice of Mrs. O'Brien, as she reflects upon her childhood, offering one of the more famous passages of the film: "The nuns taught us there are two ways through life: the way of nature, and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow."⁹ That this line occurs so close to the film's beginning, and with the authority of the religious tradition as its justification, might seem to suggest that the film itself endorses the dualism, but such is not the case. To be clear, it is the argument of this chapter that the belief in the "two ways" is itself an adherence to an ascetic worldview, one that can only endure the world by escaping it; one that can only tolerate nature by learning to transcend it. Mrs. O'Brien therefore throws down the gauntlet of the ascetic worldview at the outset of the film. Thus, in order for the thesis here offered to bear out, it will have to be the case that this distinction, way of nature vs. way of grace, is unsustainable; indeed, this is what we shall in fact see. If the ascetic posits a fundamental separation between "two ways," then the affirmative will entail the joyous abolition of this separation. The purported breach between the "way of nature" and the "way of grace" in *The Tree of Life* ultimately collapses: the way of nature *is* the way of grace; the two are in fact one. Malick's is a belief in this world.

All Things Shining: *The Thin Red Line*

On December 23, 1998, after a twenty-year hiatus from filmmaking, Terrence Malick returned to the screen with his World War II epic, *The Thin Red Line*. Besides the triumphal return of one of Hollywood's legendary directors, the film boasted an all-star cast,¹⁰ a setting in one of American history's most famous battles, a Christmas-week opening, and a running time of nearly three hours, thus providing all the raw material necessary for a crowd-pleasing blockbuster war epic. The anomalous nature of Malick's directorial style, however, can best be summarized by way of a brief comparison between *The Thin Red Line* and the other World War II epic released in 1998, the more popular and nationalistically charged *Saving Private Ryan*, released in July of that same year. Steven Spielberg's film opened to thunderous fanfare on the part of the public, coupled with almost unanimous critical acclaim. Malick's film—though generally highly regarded among critics (despite some expressions of confusion), and opening to initial popular enthusiasm—soon saw the enthusiasm wane as viewers discovered that the film lacked the romanticized heroic, muscular, testosterone-fueled and plot-driven narrative of *Saving Private Ryan*, and the word quickly got out. While Spielberg's film was nominated for 11 Oscars, netting 5 (including Best Director), Malick's was nominated for 7, and won none.

Why such disparity, and why such marginalization of Malick's film? Sometimes a nation is simply not "in the mood" for a war film; when the economy is bad, for instance, when we are currently in the midst of an actual war, and so on. However, such was not the case in the United States in 1998. The economy as a whole was doing quite well; the American middle class was thriving more vigorously than it had in decades or has since, and aside from a few skirmishes¹¹ here and there, we were involved in no major military conflicts. Besides, as noted, both films we are here considering are war films, both are set during World War II, and one was wildly popular while another was largely marginalized. So it could not have anything to do with the thematic content. Nor could it be due to any shortcomings in terms of acting, as *The Thin Red Line*, as noted, boasts one of the most star-studded casts in recent film history, with each actor performing magnificently. Likewise, the scope and ambition of the two films is comparable, with *Saving Private Ryan* opening with the famous D-Day invasion of Normandy, and *The Thin Red Line* centering on the no-less-famous battle of Guadalcanal.

The difference is that while Spielberg's film brilliantly employs carnage and gritty impressionistic cinematography, coupled with the constant evocation of viewer empathy, to tell an emotionally stirring story that makes a basic moral point about the sacrifices America's soldiers have made on behalf of her citizens, the story of *The Thin Red Line* is far less easily grasped, for a number of reasons. First, it takes place between the narrative points, rather than through the narrative points. There are no highly charged heroic

moments to speak of. Even its grand gestures are far more subdued. The intensely dramatic moments of the film (the death of Sergeant Keck, Captain Staros's refusal to lead the charge in the face of certain defeat, the gunning down of Private Witt, etc.), are all used as opportunities for deeper philosophical contemplation, or to evoke a particular emotional reflection; but even then, the emotion these scenes evoke is much more subterranean (or perhaps, "subcutaneous") than we are often accustomed to seeing in films. Secondly, Malick, though he uses leading Hollywood actors and actresses to tell his stories, does not rely upon any one of them to act as his hero or spokesperson. This trend is continued in *The New World* (2005) and in *The Tree of Life* as well. Rather, the story is told in the dialogical development that takes place, again, between the characters. The moments of insight are often found in the voice-overs, which (in a strategy that Malick inaugurates in *The Thin Red Line*—Malick's first two films each have a single "narrator") are not always easily distinguishable one from another. Finally, the story is less easily grasped because it makes a point that seems so counterintuitive and obviously false. This story is that life is expressed even in death, that God's glory shines through the most seemingly horrific situations, and that beauty dances within the monstrous. The film opens with a series of questions, spoken by Private Train: "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?"¹² and it ends with his own auto-response: "Darkness, light. Strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh, my soul. Let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining."¹³ Along the way, we hear Private Bell saying, "We together. One being. Flow together like water. Till I can't tell you from me. I drink you. Now," and Private Witt affirming, "You're death that captures all. You too are the source of all that's going to be born." As Sergeant Keck is dying from an accidental, self-inflicted wound, Private Witt looks on and smiles, with an apparent tear in his eye, basking in the beauty of a life coming to its close; and faced with his own capture, Witt calmly and graciously raises his rifle as if to fire, in order to ensure and welcome his own death, at the hands of his Japanese counterparts.

Even the most seemingly nihilistic voices in the film, Sergeant Welsh, for instance, bespeak a deeper truth, essential to the story that the film tells: "In this world, a man, himself, is nothing. And there ain't no world but this one."¹⁴ There's no world but this world, no hope for redemption from some beyond, and each of us, strictly speaking, is nothing more than a tiny part of a bigger whole. Despite the pessimistic terms in which it is couched, Welsh's assertion is a proclamation of immanence, the faith in *this* world, nothing more than this world. Immanence is, for most of us, a difficult burden to bear—in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche refers to it as "the greatest weight."¹⁵ But it also bears within it the greatest power of affirmation, because it anchors the meaning of

life to life itself. From beginning to end, *The Thin Red Line* tells the story of the interconnectedness of all creation, and the affirmation of all being, even the most unbearable and unthinkable; and this perhaps answers the question as to the source of the disparity regarding these two great war epics. For what, after all, could be more absurd than the supposition that one can find reflection in war, or beauty in death?

Job, Spinoza, and the Meaning of Affirmation

The Tree of Life aggressively pushes the above question to the point of absolute incomprehensibility. While embodying all the same strategies that divided audiences in *The Thin Red Line*—such as extended close-up shots of nature, the probing, philosophical voice-overs, the lack of any overt narrative—*The Tree of Life* is almost a *more* egregious assault on our patience, as it divests us of the thunderous explosions and gunfire of *The Thin Red Line*, and ostensibly tells the utterly mundane story of a boy's upbringing in Waco, Texas. But this is strategic on Malick's part. By situating the story in the happenings of everyday life, it also more forcefully poses to viewers the question of the meaning of their own suffering, disallowing the possibility of its remaining in the abstract; it becomes their own existential question, one that they cannot but address. In a setting as seemingly extraordinary as warfare, with which most of us are familiar only through fantasy, perhaps larger-than-life metaphysical musings on the oneness of all and the Heraclitean war in the heart of nature; on the identity of the self with the other that the self kills; on the glorifying event of one's own death, all these might be allowed to remain purely in the abstract. But what happens when the director situates the question within the day-to-day sufferings of the average human being or the average American family life, with which most of us can easily identify? What if he forces us to reflect upon the death of a child, a brother and a son, a "true" and "kind" young boy? Is it still possible to believe or to affirm when we are forced to reckon with the fact that everyone we love is ultimately and essentially finite? It is no accident that the film opens with an excerpt from the paradigmatic Western text on suffering, the book of Job.

In Job, we read, "Behold, the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom."¹⁶ Benedict de Spinoza¹⁷ transforms Job's proclamation slightly, but to the point of a radical difference: "*Knowledge of God is the mind's greatest good; its greatest virtue is to know God.*"¹⁸ Spinoza's God, however, is not "the LORD," the transcendent Yahweh of the Jewish tradition from which Spinoza was excommunicated, nor is it the heavenly father of the Christian tradition, who *so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son*¹⁹ to die for it. Rather, Spinoza's God is Nature, the one and only substance in existence.²⁰ Nature, strictly speaking, is indivisible,²¹ and consists of an infinity

of attributes, each of which expresses an eternal, infinite essence.²² Through God *are* all things that are, and thus it is only through God that a thing can be truly and essentially known.²³ For, given that God is the one and only substance, it follows that anything else that *is*, must be a mode of that substance.²⁴ And since a mode cannot be known except through the knowledge of the substance of which it is a mode, and any effect can only be adequately known through the knowledge of its cause, it follows that the knowledge of any singular thing that *is*, is conceivable only through the knowledge of God.

To truly reconcile oneself with Spinoza is disorienting. We find ourselves in a foreign land when we step onto Spinozistic soil, a system of thought wherein god-intoxication is but a hair's breadth from full-blown atheism, and where "ethics," in the sense of "being who one is," has little to do with "morality," as we are typically accustomed to the term. What does it mean to distinguish ethics from morality, when in common philosophical parlance, the two are often conflated? Ethics, at least as it is conceived according to the tradition, might be defined as the study of how one ought to live; this "ought" implies an "ought-giver," whether personal (in the sense of a divine being) or purely rational (as Kant understood morality). Thus "ethics" seems to imply adherence to a code, a principle, a way of life, and so on, typically characterized as residing within the domain of "morality." Ethics, then, involves the pursuit of the knowledge of this code or principle, dictating to us what we ought and ought not do, and how we ought and ought not make moral decisions. Ethics thus involves the study of the moral law. It is a thought that actively seeks limitation, a thought that views humans in a violent and contestational relationship with the world of nature. The moral law is what we "ought" to strive for, and our human nature is what the study of ethics is to help us overcome. For this reason, moral philosophers often, as a matter of habit, use "ethical" interchangeably with "moral."

This is not how ethics *must* be understood, however, and there is a whole history of ethical thinking that is overlooked when we posit this conflation. After all, *ēthos*, the Greek word from which "ethics" is derived, is originally related²⁵ to the notion of one's "habitat," or "dwelling place." In this sense, *ethikos*, the adjectival form related to *ēthos*, has more to do with "how one dwells" than it has to do with "the criteria by which one makes decisions." Aristotle demonstrates in the opening of book 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* an etymological relation between character, habit, and by extension, action: "virtue of character (*ēthos*) is a result of habituation (*ethos*), for which reason it has acquired its name through a small variation on '*ethos*.'"²⁶ For Aristotle, and indeed for the Stoics and Epicureans as well, the only way to *do* good is for one to *be* good, and "good" has no meaning other than this; "ethics" aims therefore toward an overall perfection of the nature of the thing.

For my purposes and as I understand Spinoza, the two, morality and ethics, are infinitely separated. "Ethics" concerns itself with the power and

perfection of each thing—with each body, in the words of Gilles Deleuze, “going to the limit of what it can do”;²⁷ while morality seeks to aid the individual in escaping her nature, ethics on the contrary seeks to enable the individual to embody her nature, to “become what one is.” As we have organized the subject matter, then, the nature of morality is ascetic, while ethics, strictly speaking, is affirmative.

Each thing that is, according to Spinoza, is a mode of God, the essence of which is defined according to God’s essence, and God’s essence is his power.²⁸ Thus the essence of each thing that is, is its expansionary²⁹ expression of God’s power. Spinoza’s is thus an ethics not of external limitation, but of internal expansion, or the *conatus*, the striving of each thing to flourish or expand. This striving and flourishing is synonymous with virtue: “By virtue and power I understand the same thing . . .”³⁰ Where morality looks at Being and asks, from the perspective of a transcendent, objective, “god’s-eye” view, “what is wrong, and what *ought* one to be,” Spinoza’s ethics asks, from an immanent point of view, “what *can* one be?” which is an altogether different question, deriving from an entirely different view on life. “Joy” is the word Spinoza uses to characterize the passage from a lesser to a greater degree of perfection, the affect that derives from the thing’s expansion, while “sadness” is the passage from a greater to a lesser degree of perfection.

We return to the quote with which we started the discussion of Spinoza: “*Knowledge of God is the mind’s greatest good; its greatest virtue is to know God.*”³¹ The virtue of any given thing is its going to the limit of what it is capable of, or in other words, its being, fully and completely, what it is from the perspective of eternity, contemplatively coming to terms with its own essence and thus becoming free to act from its own nature. This virtue, we now see, is synonymous with the knowledge of God, a principle embodied in two distinct but related ways. (1) The more we see each thing as determined, the less likely we are to attach either the emotion of love or hate to it, and thus, the less likely we are to be saddened or weakened on its account: “Given an equal cause of love, love toward a thing will be greater if we imagine the thing to be free than if we imagine it to be necessary. And similarly for hate.”³² The more we understand the nature of the divine, the more we recognize that everything in Nature happens as a precise expression of God’s eternally perfect power. Each individual relation of thoughts, forces, and bodies manifests as part of an infinitely vast causal nexus, with no part independent of the whole, with the same necessity with which it is true that $2 + 2 = 4$. While we have the tendency, Spinoza claims, to look at the means-ends calculations of humans and to abstract general patterns of perfection from human contrivances which we then use to evaluate other contrivances of a similar sort, we are not justified when we carry out the same abstraction and evaluation in the world of nature, comparing nature as it *is* with nature as we think it *ought* to be. “Nevertheless, we shall bear calmly those things which happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage

demands, if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could not have avoided those things, and that we are a part of the whole of Nature, whose order we follow."³³ (2) The more capable we become of separating our affect itself in response to a stimulus (which is part of the causal nexus in which we inhere) from the image of the external association from which it arose, the more capable we become of forming a clear and distinct concept of the affect itself, thereby transforming it from a "passion" (something suffered) into an "action" (something done), and transforming its negation into an affirmation. For instance, the affect of remorse, Spinoza claims, is a sadness accompanied by the idea of a past thing which has turned out worse than we had hoped. Stripping away the image of the external thing (which we cannot know clearly), we are left only with the affect of sadness, which we *can* know clearly, and the moment we formulate a clear and distinct concept of the affect as it affects us, it ceases to be passive; our thoughts become adequate to the affect, and the affect becomes active. This is the way of freedom. It is attained not by escaping nature or overcoming nature, but by fully manifesting one's nature.

The Way of Nature and the Way of Grace

Let us now return to the discussion of Malick's film. Does *The Tree of Life* present us with an ascetic or affirmative view of life? There is a great deal of evidence sprinkled throughout the film that might lead us to conclude the former, starting with the dilemma presented to us by the mother's voice-over at the outset of the film:

The nuns taught us there were two ways through life—the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow . . . Grace doesn't try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries . . . Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. And love is smiling through all things . . . The nuns taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end.³⁴

Here we see laid out clearly before us a choice, between our *nature*, which is presumably a microcosm or an extension of the world of nature itself, and the way of grace; through which we might hope to *overcome* or *escape* our nature. The account given to us by the mother echoes, in many ways almost exactly, the exposition of the ways of nature and grace as found in *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, fifteenth-century German theologian:

Nature is not willing to die, or to be kept down, or to be overcome. Nor will it subdue itself or be made subject. Grace, on the contrary, strives for mortification of self. She resists sensuality, seeks to be in subjection, longs to be conquered, has no wish to use her own liberty, loves to be held under discipline, and does not desire to rule over anyone, but wishes rather to live, to stand, and to be always under God for Whose sake she is willing to bow humbly to every human creature.

Nature works for its own interest and looks to the profit it can reap from another. Grace does not consider what is useful and advantageous to herself, but rather what is profitable to many. Nature likes to receive honor and reverence, but grace faithfully attributes all honor and glory to God. Nature fears shame and contempt, but grace is happy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus . . .

There is need of Your grace, and of great grace, in order to overcome a nature prone to evil from youth. For through the first man, Adam, nature is fallen and weakened by sin, and the punishment of that stain has fallen upon all mankind. Thus nature itself, which You created good and right, is considered a symbol of vice and the weakness of corrupted nature, because when left to itself it tends toward evil and to baser things. The little strength remaining in it is like a spark hidden in ashes. That strength is natural reason which, surrounded by thick darkness, still has the power of judging good and evil, of seeing the difference between true and false, though it is not able to fulfill all that it approves and does not enjoy the full light of truth or soundness of affection.³⁵

The essence of nature then is self-assertion, self-willing, self-expansion; while the essence of grace is self-denial in the name of the glory of God. The essence of nature then, according to Thomas à Kempis, and according to Mrs. O'Brien, is fundamentally flawed. Grace, in this view, enables us to overcome nature. This supposition that there is something wrong in the nature of things, we identified as the "ascetic worldview." Mrs. O'Brien thus appears to endorse the ascetic worldview (despite her gracious and joyful exuberance throughout the film). Life presents us with two paths, one the way of nature, the other the way of grace, and we must make a choice.

In addition it seems apparent *prima facie* that *The Tree of Life* presents us with a very clear dichotomy of hero and villain, Mrs. and Mr. O'Brien, respectively. As Brett McCracken, film critic for *Christianity Today*, notes:

As the stern, business-minded Mr. O'Brien, Pitt represents the way of nature, valuing a competitive, almost Machiavellian approach to life.

He's big on the idea of ownership, control, and being a self-sovereign man ("You have control of your own destiny," he says). As the loving, compassionate Mrs. O'Brien, newcomer Chastain embodies the way of grace. She nurtures the kids, cares for them when dad's mad, and is quick to forgive. In parallel scenes of waking the boys up from bed—mother by playfully slipping ice cubes down the back of their pajamas; father by ripping their covers off—we see the contrast clearly.³⁶

Likewise, Rex Reed claims, "Dad is a strict and abusive disciplinarian—slapping his wife around, punishing the boys for the slightest offense."³⁷ Despite his offensively inaccurate and inattentive remark,³⁸ Reed's comment highlights a truth: we are meant to see, at least ostensibly, the mother as the "hero" and the father as the "villain" in this tale, and one (the mother) clearly represents the way of grace or unconditional love, while the other (the father) clearly represents the way of nature, or willful control, self-assertion, and domination. Thus we might be led to assume that the distinction, nature vs. grace, indeed holds, and that the way of grace is the film's purported "right way."

Finally, we might be led to see *The Tree of Life* through an ascetic lens as a result of its pervasive use of overtly Judeo-Christian imagery and iconography. The Job passage at the beginning, along with the pastor's sermonizing on the same; the elemental imagery of water (as purificatory, in the sense of the baptismal) and of fire (as the Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit)³⁹ highlighted throughout the film; the multiple appearances of the image of Christ on the cross; the fact that the family attends a Christian church—the pervasiveness of Christianity throughout the film might very well lead the viewer to the conclusion that the film is indeed about a Christian escapism as an answer to the problem of suffering. Moreover, when we see Jack pray, he prays almost exclusively for limitations (*help me not to . . .*), to help him overcome a nature he has grown to despise, claiming, "What I wanna do I can't; I do what I hate."⁴⁰ Clearly Jack, both as a boy and as an adult, embodies the contradictory natures of these two ways, and this is made explicit by Jack himself: "Mother. Father. Always you wrestle inside me. Always you will." He strives to overcome himself, to "kill" the father inside him and embrace the motherly aspect of his nature. This patricidal desire is made manifest in the gripping scene where Jack discovers his father working beneath the car, and momentarily contemplates the ease with which he might disengage the jack; likewise, when Jack prays, speaking of his father, "Please, God, kill 'im . . . Let 'im die."⁴¹ The father, the embodiment of the way of nature, is what Jack seeks to overcome. Thus, it is not difficult to see why an ascetic reading of Malick's film is attractive. McCracken writes, "In the battle between nature and grace, grace always wins, in the sense that survival is, in the end, out of our hands. It's in God's hands. It's only by his grace that we can breathe in summer air, touch the butterfly, chase the bubbles, and swim in the creek."⁴²

However, if our reading ends here, we miss a crucial aspect of the film: the dual character reversal on the part of the parents. It is easily missed for two reasons. (1) It is broken in half, with R.L.'s death taking place at the very beginning of the film (prior, we might say, to the beginning of the film, properly speaking), and the father's employment crisis taking place near the end of the film. (2) These two moments are not as pervasive, and hence not as persuasive and compelling, throughout the film as the ongoing struggle between the dominance of the father and the gentle acceptance of the mother, along with the passive-aggressive ways in which she does in fact undermine Mr. O'Brien. Some examples of this undermining are the almost imperceptible disappointed glances she gives at the table when Mr. O'Brien fails to pay sufficient attention to Jack's academic achievements, the subtle looks of understanding she gives to the boys when Dad is being hard on them, and the episode where, in response to Mr. O'Brien's overreaction to R.L.'s dinner-table insubordination, Mrs. O'Brien begins slapping Mr. O'Brien. These are all ways in which Mrs. O'Brien silently says to the children, "I'm on your side," and this sympathy is not lost on the boys. For when Mr. O'Brien is out of town for business, the boys are quite comfortable in pushing the boundaries, and Mrs. O'Brien indulges the boys' playful revelry, exultantly joining in the laughter and mockery of Mr. O'Brien's sternness. In her own way, Mrs. O'Brien combats the way of nature embodied in Mr. O'Brien's character. This struggle dominates the movement of the film in a sense, such that the two potentially gracious moments that bookend the film are not as salient. Throughout almost the entirety of the film our emotions pull us (at the insistent behest of Terrence Malick) to like the mother and dislike the father. Let us now examine this reversal.

The Collapse of the Two Ways in *The Tree of Life*

When Mr. O'Brien's company shuts down his plant, he is faced with a choice, in his words: "no job; or a transfer to a job nobody wants."⁴³ He calmly recounts the many ways in which he has done everything right—never being late, never missing a day of work, tithing every Sunday, and so on. Mr. O'Brien believed that, if he just worked hard enough, if he were perseverant and diligent, if he were dedicated enough, then he could make himself into a self-sufficient agent—he could control the contingencies of life, he could assert himself. The crisis of his employment situation presents him with an opportunity for a realization of grace, and Mr. O'Brien accepts it, suddenly acknowledging that, despite all our best efforts to control the fate of things, our destiny is not, after all, *up to us*: "I wanted to be loved 'cause I was great—a big man. Now, I'm nothing. Look. The glory around. Trees. Birds. I dishonored it all and didn't notice the glory."⁴⁴

Let us now cut back to the film's opening sequence, when the news of R.L.'s death arrives by telegram to the front door, and in the aftermath following. Mrs. O'Brien, upon receiving the devastating news, collapses to the floor, shrieking, while Mr. O'Brien, when he receives the phone call at work, looks on in shock, taking deep breaths, and doubling over as if to fall down twice, but ultimately resting his hands on his knees. Certainly no one can pass judgment on either of the parents for their respective responses, as most of us can only speculate as to how we personally would bear such news. But the aftermath continues this divergent reversal in character. In one scene, presumably on or around the day of R.L.'s funeral, the two parents pace up and down the street, with the mother crying, rubbing her face in despair, shaking her head in disbelief, and saying, "I just want to die, to be with him,"⁴⁵ while Mr. O'Brien silently rests a consoling hand upon her shoulder, and looks down the road with stoic resolve, no less shocked or hurt by the tragedy, but more accepting nevertheless. This is an acceptance that almost seems to incite disdain within Mrs. O'Brien.

What, then, of their religious devotion in the wake of this tragedy? Mr. O'Brien, earlier in the timeline of the family's history (though later in the actual arrangement of the scenes of the film), seems to attend the family church services in order to advance his station, to make personal connections, and to live out his unfulfilled fantasies of being a musician, playing the organ in the services with an almost mystical fervor. As he himself says, following the closing of his plant, Mr. O'Brien had connected "tithing every Sunday" with overall success in life. Like Job, he believed that if he did things right, he could curry favor with God and thus, he could master fate; this self-delusion, however, had been shattered when Mr. O'Brien had faced his crisis in his career, by which he had largely defined his sense of self. Thus, in the wake of R.L.'s death, Mr. O'Brien appears almost to embrace the inscrutability of the divine in the face of the worst, while Mrs. O'Brien, who, throughout the entire rest of the film, seems to be the very embodiment of Christian grace and acceptance, curses this inscrutability. The minister says to her, "He's in God's hands now," to which she somewhat mockingly replies, "He was in God's hands the whole time . . . wasn't he?"⁴⁶ Twice in the opening few minutes of the film, and after the news of R.L.'s death, we see Mr. O'Brien on his knees praying, while both times Mrs. O'Brien looks on from a distance resentfully, and in apparent disbelief of his pious devotion. And while this tragedy has opened in the mother a severe crisis of faith, evidenced by her ongoing whispers, demanding that God reveal himself to her, we see no such obvious crisis in Mr. O'Brien.

It becomes clear then, that Mrs. O'Brien has made an assumption, one she may not have realized she made, but an assumption nonetheless. She has allowed herself to believe that, by being faithful to God, she has thereby protected herself. She has assumed that by living her life according to her understanding of the way of grace, by "loving everyone," forgiving, and so

on, she could, as it were, stop or suspend the way of nature, that the natural order of things, the vast, infinitely interconnected causal nexus of relations, ultimately binding together the whole of being, might be suspended for those that she loved, that the necessary connection of cause and effect would be interrupted by the God whom she had so dutifully served so as to work things according to her plans, that she could overcome nature through grace. If there is an obvious crisis in the way of nature for Mr. O'Brien, there is an equally crippling crisis in the way of grace for Mrs. O'Brien.

The news of R.L.'s death exposes and shatters her assumptions. Moreover, it reveals a tension inherent in the ascetic worldview. Within the very notion of a way of nature opposed to a way of grace lies a paradox: in the name of "acceptance" and "submission" we create for ourselves an opposition, an "enemy" that must be overcome. Like the way of nature itself, (which the ascetic worldview declares to be its enemy), we seek to lord ourselves over a perceived opponent, to dominate and control it, to bring it to submission, and ultimately vanquish it. Like Job, Mrs. O'Brien strives *against* nature *in search of grace*—in the form of a comforting explanation from God, some answer that would help her situate R.L.'s death back into the cozy picture of creation she had painted for herself—and in so doing she misses the very essence of what the way of grace demands. Moreover, this happens every time we, from our finite and limited perspectives, look to the splendor of creation and haughtily diagnose a fault therein. As Spinoza claims, "So when they see something happen in Nature which does not agree with the model they have conceived of this kind of thing, they believe that Nature itself has failed or sinned, and left the thing imperfect. We see, therefore, that men are accustomed to call natural things perfect or imperfect more from prejudice than from true knowledge of those things."⁴⁷ We formulate abstract patterns and specific plans of how we think things ought to be, then we shake our fists and curse the heavens when things do not go the way we would like them to. In the name of the world as we think it ought to be we pass judgment upon the world as it is.

Ultimately, Mrs. O'Brien's freedom, and Jack's as well, is attained when she finally recognizes the identity of the way of nature with the way of grace. Jack's glimpse of "heaven" in the end (which, to be sure, is grasped in the here and now, not in a beyond) is his loving embrace of everything he had hated about his father, and everything he had resented about his brother. It is not *forgiveness*, if by forgiveness we mean a settling of accounts based upon the repentance of the other. This would be a conditional forgiveness based upon their changing their nature. Jacques Derrida writes, "Imagine, then, that I forgive; on the condition that the *guilty* one repents, mends his ways, asks forgiveness, and thus would be changed by a new obligation, and that from then on he would no longer be exactly the same as the one who was found to be culpable. In this case, can one still speak of forgiveness? This would be too simple on both sides: one forgives someone other than the guilty one."⁴⁸ To

offer conditional forgiveness is to demand that the other transform, which, Derrida argues, is not forgiveness at all. To truly forgive means that we must suspend the demand for an accord with a logic whereby things make sense to us, and to *accept the sinner as sinner*. This is why Jack, in his experience of "heaven," must greet Mr. O'Brien and R.L. as the father and the brother as he remembers them, not as their most recent personae, but as the very persons whom he had hated and resented. He has spent his life trying and failing to "kill" his father. His salvation requires that he embrace him. In so doing, Jack finds himself, he finds his way back "to the child he was." Thus it is that Jack, like Nietzsche's thief on the cross, enters paradise: "When even the criminal undergoing a painful death declares: 'the way this Jesus suffers and dies, without rebelling, without enmity, graciously, resignedly, is the only right way,' he has affirmed the gospel: and with that he is in Paradise."⁴⁹



Figure 56. Mrs. O'Brien,
eyes uncovered

Mrs. O'Brien's freedom comes when, with the sun shining down upon her, and with the spirit of grace aiding her, Mrs. O'Brien's eyes are uncovered (figure 56), implying that she has now come to see a truth that she had not seen before. As Spinoza describes, freedom derives not from a change in circumstance, but from a change in vision. With the sun's diffuse, ethereal evanescence nearly absorbing

Mrs. O'Brien into it, to the point where it is difficult at times to discern where *she* ends and *nature* begins, Mrs. O'Brien unfolds her hands (figure 57), lifts them to heaven, and says, "I give him to you; I give you my son."⁵⁰ That her seeing results in a giving entails a Spinozistic *act* on her part, not a resigned submission, not a mere acceptance, but recognition of truth, and an affirmative embrace of her own act of release.

As Spinoza writes, Mrs. O'Brien's passion ceases to be a passion and becomes truly active; and, with this, Mrs. O'Brien becomes free. The truth that she has come to see is that God's glory is revealed in all things, even when it seems incomprehensible and impossible to bear—the way of nature is the way of grace.



Figure 57. Mrs. O'Brien's
unfolding hands

Conclusion

In this light the ending of the book of Job assumes a new significance. God speaks from within the storm, as we said, responding not with an answer, but with questions of his own: *where were you?* and a question Malick does not

note in the film: *who are you?*: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?"⁵¹ The question, *where were you?* launches the remaining chapters, in which God elaborates upon the intricacies and interconnectedness of the whole of nature. Here we find some of the most beautiful passages of scripture ever written. But the question, *who are you?*, does not get answered, at least not explicitly, neither by Job, nor by God himself. The only place at which we are given a semblance of an answer is when Job says, "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?"⁵² Perhaps the reason we are not given an answer to the question, *who are you?*, is that Job realizes that he is, strictly speaking, *nothing* and *no one* but a part in the magnificent whole that is expressed by God in the power of Nature itself, which both *gives* and *takes away*. To quote the minister's sermon on the book of Job:

We run before the wind; we think that it will carry us forever. It will not. We vanish as a cloud; we wither as the autumn grass; and like a tree, are rooted up. Is there some fraud in the scheme of the universe? Is there nothing which is deathless? Nothing which does not pass away? . . . Is the body of the wise man, or the just, exempt from any pain? From any disquietude? From the deformity that might blight its beauty? From the weakness that might destroy its health? Do you trust in God? Job, too, was close to the Lord . . . At the very moment when everything was taken away from Job, he knew that it was the Lord who had taken it away . . . Does he alone see God's hand who sees that he gives? Or does not also the one see God's hand who sees that he takes away? Or does he alone see God who sees God turn his face towards him? Or does not also he see God who sees God turn his back?⁵³

This power is at once beautiful and violent; it both bestows and strips, creates and destroys. This is why those symbols alluded to earlier, fire and water, are both spiritual and elemental, creative and destructive. Fire is the symbol for the Holy Spirit in the New Testament Acts of the Apostles. In *The Tree of Life* it spawns worlds in the creation sequence, and commemorates the passing of a loved one in the gentle form of a candle, but it also destroys a young boy's home, leaving him permanently scarred and outcast among his classmates. Water is the symbol of purification and rebirth, embodied in the Christian ritual of baptism, and in *The Tree of Life* it is the source of life, again in the creation sequence, in the form of the ocean, and during the scenes preceding the birth of Jack. It is also a purifying stream in the opening minutes of the film, as adult Jack allows it to peacefully flow over his fingers, on the anniversary of his brother's death. But it also drowns a small child, bringing Jack face to face for the first time with the reality of death, and

opening his own confrontation with God. The same magnificent power that gives us life threatens at each moment to take it away.

The way of grace becomes the way of grace only when it accepts that it is not and cannot be understood as distinct from the way of nature. Nature (whether human, tree, volcano, or otherwise) does what nature does; we can strive, if we like, against it, we may curse it, decry it, or reject it, but nature will go on *naturing*, and manifesting in an infinitely vast web of cause and effect, in which we are but a tiny part. In the vast scheme of things, we are insignificant, an element no more important than the sparrow, or a hair on one's head. And yet, for that very same reason, this insignificance makes *this* moment, *this* life, and *this* being, an irreplaceably singular drop in the cosmic ocean, and for that fact, our insignificance *is* the very essence of our significance. Thus, alternatively, we may affirm life, in all its mystery and inscrutability at every moment, with the understanding that the vast majority of things are out of our control, but that life is no less splendid or majestic—no less *divine*—as a result. We may affirm "the metaphysical comfort" that Nietzsche describes, "that life is, at bottom, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable,"⁵⁴ and each life is a part of this splendor. Thus it is that *The Tree of Life* spends such a great deal of time at the origins and ends of eternity. It is also why the famous "dinosaur" scene, so widely panned by many of the film's viewers, was so crucial. Just as God rebukes Job, each life is but a tiny bit of an incomprehensibly great cosmos; from eternity to eternity, nature manifests, expressing the power and the grace of God. In the context of these manifestations, death and suffering are necessary elements, and thus even when we are hurting, they too necessarily express God's grace. As Private Train says in *The Thin Red Line*, "One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. That death's got the final word, it's laughing at him. Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory, feels something smiling through it." Let all of creation rejoice, in the univocal affirmation: "Look out at the things you made. All things shining."

Notes

1. Terrence Malick, director, *The Tree of Life*, 2011. This passage is excerpted from Job 38:4, 7, and appears to be from the American King James Version.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swenson (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1998), 117.

3. David Fincher, director, *Se7en*, 1995.

4. Romans 8:22.

5. See Romans 8:12–13, Galatians 5:16–18.

6. It must be made absolutely clear that, in saying this, I am not arguing for a quietism with respect to the specific sufferings of living beings, and especially not those sufferings inflicted by other living beings. As I write this piece, schoolhouses

in Gaza are being bombed, the United States is mourning yet another recent street execution of a young African American male by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and a murderous, regressive, and oppressive regime is violently expanding its domain in Iraq. My argument is not that we should turn a blind eye to such atrocities. Rather, in arguing for the affirmative worldview, I am arguing for a philosophy of immanence and flux. Perpetual fluctuation entails creation of the new, and immanence entails that the new must arise from the old. Thus passage and decay are an essential component of a philosophy of immanence. This is the heart of the affirmative worldview. In point of fact, I am convinced that such a philosophy is better equipped to deal with such specific sufferings as those mentioned, precisely because only a philosophy of immanence claims that the world, and nothing but the world, provides us with the necessary resources for addressing sufferings and injustices. Nothing beyond life itself is going to come and redeem life; individual sufferings will not be recompensed in a future realm; thus the time to act is always now. It is not life itself, or the world itself, that is flawed, but rather, what human beings do with it; and we can do better. But we can do better precisely to the extent that we embrace the sufficiency of life itself. An obvious objection presents itself, especially in light of the thought of Spinoza, who will serve as the inspiration for what I am calling the affirmative worldview. Since human thought is part of human nature, and since human nature is part of the overall expression of nature, and moreover, since human actions accompany human thoughts, it follows necessarily that human actions, even the most atrocious, derive from the divine essence. While it is certainly the case for Spinoza that the actions of bodies accompany thoughts, and that human thoughts, including resentments, prejudices, and fears, arise "naturally," it is also the case that they arise on the basis of failures to see things clearly. Human beings are capable of correcting these failures, and accompanying this change in thought is a change in the actions of bodies. This process of enlightenment is what Spinoza calls the "intellectual love of God" (*Ethics*, V.32, "Corollary"). Thus, acknowledging that nature is the ultimate source of these thoughts and actions in no way requires us to fold our arms and passively accept or, worse, affirm them.

7. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galatea (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 173.

8. It is *not* an argument that Malick is a *Spinozist*, but rather that his films offer us a glimpse of affirmation, and Spinoza will provide us with the conceptual apparatus to help us read the film this way. We might have used Heraclitus, Epictetus, Lucretius, or Nietzsche himself.

9. Malick, *The Tree of Life*.

10. Sean Penn, Nick Nolte, James Caviezel, John Cusack, Adrien Brody, John C. Reilly, Woody Harrelson, Jared Leto, John Travolta, and George Clooney are all in the film along with many other fine actors.

11. "Skirmishes" is a relative term. The August 20, 1998, American bombing of a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory, Al-Shifa, estimated to have ultimately caused tens of thousands of deaths, is certainly an important and devastating event to someone living in the region, but in the United States, given that it is not a declaration of "war" or a long-term financial or human commitment, it does not register in the public consciousness as a significantly militaristic moment.

12. Terrence Malick, director, *The Thin Red Line*, 1998.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 273.
16. Job 28:28.
17. All Spinoza citations will be taken from the version of the *Ethics* in the following volume: Benedict de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The "Ethics" and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).
18. Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV.28.
19. John 3:16.
20. Spinoza, *Ethics*, I.14.
21. Ibid., I.13.
22. Ibid., I.D6.
23. Ibid., I.15.
24. Ibid., I.25, "Corollary."
25. See Homer, *The Iliad*, book 6, for instance.
26. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), II.1.
27. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 37.
28. Spinoza, *Ethics*, I.34.
29. Ibid., III.7.
30. Ibid., IV.D8.
31. Ibid., IV.28.
32. Ibid., III.49.
33. Ibid., IV, "Appendix."
34. Malick, *The Tree of Life*.
35. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Aloysius Croft and Harold Bolton (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2003), III.54, 55. I am personally indebted to John McAteer for this reference. For his reading of the film, which argues along similar lines, see <http://filmphilosopher.wordpress.com/2011/07/21/the-nuns-taught-us-there-are-two-ways-through-life-the-way-of-nature-and-the-way-of-grace/>.
36. *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/mayweb-only/treeoflife.html?start=1>.
37. *The Observer*, <http://observer.com/2011/05/evolution-in-real-time-terrence-malicks-ponderous-the-tree-of-life-ponders-the-meaning-of-existence/>.
38. Mr. O'Brien is indeed a strict disciplinarian with respect to the children, but he never slaps Mrs. O'Brien. In fact, it is unclear what Reed is referring to here, except perhaps the scene where, following a particularly aggressive act of corporal punishment by Mr. O'Brien on the boys, Mrs. O'Brien begins slapping Mr. O'Brien in the kitchen, and he restrains her wrists to bring the fight to a conclusion.
39. See Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16, Acts 1:5, 2:3.
40. Malick, *The Tree of Life*.
41. Ibid.

42. *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/mayweb-only/treeoflife.html?start=1>.
43. Malick, *The Tree of Life*.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, "Preface."
48. Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001), 38-39.
49. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), 99.
50. Malick, *The Tree of Life*.
51. Job 38:2-4.
52. Job 40:4.
53. Malick, *The Tree of Life*.
54. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 59.