

IS HUMBLE COMPASSION (AGAPE-LOVE) OUR BEST CLUE TO THE MYSTERY OF ULTIMATE REALITY?

*My Personal Journey Through Consciousness,
Suffering, Science, Philosophy, and Faith*

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Mystery and Uncertainty

The older I become, the less certain I am about many of the things I once thought I understood. Yet strangely, some things now seem clearer than ever. Looking back across seven decades of life, research, study, work, relationships, successes, failures, joys, and losses, I've become increasingly convinced that rational compassionate humility is not merely a virtue; it is a necessity. The deeper we investigate the "Reality of the Cosmos", the more we discover and realize that it is far stranger, more beautiful, and more mysterious than any theory has been able to explain.

The best minds in the world admit that while we know a lot about how things in the Cosmos work and interact, we do not know what they "are". We do not know what their true essence actually is. For example, no one knows what *time* really "is". Nor what the essence of *gravity* "is". That is why there are so many conflicting scientific and philosophical theories about many fundamental things in what we assume to be "Reality".

My growing conviction about the centrality and necessity of rational compassionate humility did not arise from theology alone. Nor did it emerge from any single field of inquiry such as science, philosophy, psychology, or personal experience. Rather, it developed gradually through the convergence of all these perspectives. Throughout my life, I've been drawn to a set of questions that seem to confront human beings regardless of culture, religion, or historical era.

As a philosophical counseling psychologist, I discovered that many people are not consciously aware of how deeply these questions influence their lives. Yet as the counseling process unfolds, their significance often rises to the surface. Beneath our daily concerns, many of us wrestle—consciously or unconsciously—with questions such as: What is a "mind"? Why do we exist? Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there so much suffering among both

humans and animals? Why does compassion exist, especially self-sacrificial love? Is there a deeper reality behind the Cosmos? And if so, what is the fundamental nature and character of that ultimate Reality? If there is a personal, conscious Mind of Compassion behind the cosmos, am I accountable for whether I choose compassion or selfishness regarding the humans and animals in the world around me?

In fact, as I sit here in a coffee shop writing this essay, I'm surrounded by various tables of people all discussing issues directly related to these profound questions — including popular issues like the meaning and potential of AI, AGI, ASI, and even the possibility of disclosure regarding alien intelligences beyond our earth or beyond our normally perceived dimensions. Their discussions are not just philosophical or theological, but *practical* as they struggle to understand how these mysteries and questions might impact their decisions involving their personal identity psychologically and their important relationships socially.

Humility, wonder, and confusion

My fascination with these profound questions began in childhood. Long before I had ever heard of philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, Hume, and Berkeley, or scientists and thinkers such as Schrödinger and McGilchrist, I found myself wrestling with many of the same mysteries that have occupied humanity for centuries. Over time I came to recognize a simple but life-changing truth: what any of us can know with absolute certainty is far less than we often assume. That realization ought to produce intellectual humility rather than dogmatism. Yet it also reveals something equally important. Although certainty is limited, the truths we can know with confidence are of immense significance. They are sufficient to shape the way we live, the way we love, and the way we understand reality itself.

As Descartes famously expressed it, “*I think, therefore I am*”. In other words, the one thing I can *directly* experience is my own conscious subjective awareness. Everything else that I assume exists objectively —the external world, other people, even the existence of a physical universe—is known only *indirectly* through my subjective perception using *abductive* inference towards the best explanation. I know with certainty that I am conscious because of my *direct* experiences like pleasure and pain, joy and grief, thoughts and emotions.

Everything else that I think I “know” or that I assume objectively exists comes through my internal *conceptions* of apparent external *perceptions*.

As a youth, this realization generated equal measures of wonder and confusion. How could I know that other minds truly existed? How could I know for certain whether what I perceived corresponded to an external reality? How could I know if compassionate love was “real”? While the questions were fascinating and often a temptation to sadness, thankfully they never led me toward full blown pessimistic despair. Mostly, they awakened a profound curiosity. The world appeared adventurously mysterious rather than meaningless. I think that’s because at heart I’m an explorer.

As I researched further, and grew into my teens and young adulthood, another realization emerged. The existence of *consciousness* itself appeared to be one of the greatest mysteries in science and philosophy. In academia it’s called, “The Problem of Consciousness”. That’s what initially led me to shift my academic pursuit from biochemical neurobiology to psychology, sociology, and philosophy. While modern neuroscience has revealed astonishing details about the brain, nevertheless no scientific theory fully explains why subjective experience exists at all. Electrical activity can be measured. Neural networks can be mapped. Brain regions can be identified. Yet none of these discoveries explains why there is something it feels like to be a conscious being. The existence of subjective awareness remains one of the deepest puzzles confronting science and philosophy.

The more I studied, the more I discovered that some of the most respected scientists and philosophers in the world were similarly wrestling with the same questions. Materialists, idealists, panpsychists, naturalists, theists, pantheist, pan-en-theists, agnostics, and atheists all offered competing explanations. Yet none possessed a complete solution. Increasingly, I found myself agreeing with scholars who emphasized the importance of intellectual humility, such as John Polkinghorne, George Ellis, Denis Noble, Philip Goff, Bernardo Kastrup, Donald Hoffman, Marcelo Gleiser, Stephen C. Meyer, and many others, especially Ian McGilchrist. The deeper our human inquiry goes, the more we encounter mystery, wonder, and awe.

Beyond the initial recognition that my own consciousness is the only thing I (*or you with your own mind*) can directly know exist — with certainty — two conscious experiences stood out and demanded a quest for explanation.

The first is the conscious experience of **suffering**.

The second conscious experience is self-sacrificial compassionate **love**.

Suffering — maybe a sign that love works through freedom not force

Throughout my life I've witnessed suffering in forms that are difficult to describe. I've seen suffering among human beings through counseling, pastoral ministry, friendships, family relationships, and of course through global news. I've also witnessed suffering among animals through decades of work as a caregiver, rescuer, rehabilitator, and zoo animal caregiver. I've seen disease, injury, fear, grief, neglect, abuse, PTSD, and death. I've held injured and suffering wildlife in my hands. I've watched animals struggle to survive. I've observed the consequences of horrific human cruelty and indifference towards fellow humans and animals. And, I've struggled with suffering caused by "nature", the philosophical and theological problem called "natural evil" and "theodicy".

(See my separate personal animal stories — sidgalloway.com)

The existence of *suffering* is significant. It's an *ugly* "sign" that something is wrong. It could be an indication that something negative way back in the ancient history of the Cosmos a long time ago either changed through inimical infection, or it could be that something was introduced at the beginning that caused such horrific suffering. One thing seems almost universally true — most people intuitively, deeply, and emotionally recognize that selfish survival of the cruelest that causes horrible suffering is not the ultimate way of "goodness".

For many people, the reality of suffering raises profound questions about the existence of God. It certainly did for me. If a loving all-good and all-powerful God exists, why is there so much pain? Why do children suffer? Why do animals suffer? Why does nature itself often appear indifferent to the well-being of conscious creatures? These questions cannot simply be brushed aside. Any worldview that seeks to explain reality must take the problem of suffering seriously. Over the years, I've found that those who insist they have complete answers often seem not to have fully grasped the depth and severity of suffering as it is personally experienced. At the opposite extreme, I've also found that

those who claim there are *not* any good answers have often not carefully considered many of the strongest explanations that have been offered — especially those showing how and why a loving God works through freedom not forced coercion.

Compassion — a sign that something is right, bright, and good

Another reality proved equally difficult to explain. Again and again I witnessed people willingly accepting loss, inconvenience, pain, and even risking death in order to help others. I saw parents sacrifice for their children. I saw caregivers sacrificially devote themselves to the vulnerable and needy. I saw rescuers risk injury to save, restore, and eventually release wild animals they would never see again. I've seen a bear at a zoo rescue a bird that was drowning in a pool of water. I've seen a young marsupial opossum twin rescue his brother who was stuck in wire mess. I saw loving forgiveness offered where bitter revenge seemed justified. I've seen acts of kindness that provided no obvious macro-evolutionary advantage and often came at significant personal and even communal cost.

In contrast to suffering and selfish survival of the fittest, the existence of self-sacrificial *compassion* may be even more significant. It's like a *beautiful* sign pointing towards something sublime, and possibly divine. Like radiant warm stars shining in the cold darkness of a night sky, compassion breaks through the suffering that seems to saturate the world.

For example, Siddhartha the Buddha is one of those individuals who reflected this bright ray of compassion. Similarly, Gandhi, Martin Luther-King Jr., Mother Theresa, and countless *unknown* “ordinary” people throughout history and today seek to live the way of love.

Fascinatingly, in the Bible's Old Testament (OT), the light of compassionate love frequently shines through the brutally honest, selfish violence of so many dark historical stories and culturally projected *misunderstandings* of God the Creator Source. This light of humble, other-serving love (*Hebrew OT: chesed, ahavah* — *Greek NT: agape*) is revealed for example in the beautiful story of a family's beloved pet lamb as told by Nathan the Prophet to confront and rebuke King David who had committed adultery and murder. Other examples include the Genesis pictorial narrative of the Eden Garden presenting God's original desire for humans and animals to live as companions not competitors — then there is

the beautiful picture in Isaiah chapter 11 of a future ideal world where children, lions, wolves, lambs, cows, and calves will all live in peaceful harmony together forever.

All of these Old Testament rays of sunshine culminate in the New Testament love life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. He described himself as a “good” shepherd seeking and speaking for the most vulnerable and needy — a person consistently loving and forgiving his enemies — even those who tortured and hung him on the Roman cross of crucifixion.

Self-sacrificial compassion throughout the history of the world appears strangely disproportionate to what would be expected if reality were fundamentally indifferent. Notice that this is not a simplistic rejection of all forms of horizontal micro-evolution. Micro-evolution can explain many forms of cooperation, kin selection, reciprocal altruism, group behavior, and social bonding. But *neither* micro/horizontal nor macro/vertical evolution can explain individuals and even whole cultures knowingly accepting suffering, loss, or even death — for strangers, animals, future generations, and even for enemies — with no expectation of reward.

All of this begs the questions — Why should a universe so dominated and driven by self-interest produce conscious beings capable of sacrificially loving beyond self-interest? Why should creatures shaped by competition repeatedly admire cooperative service more than domination — forgiveness more than revenge — and generosity more than selfishness? Why do we instinctively regard self-sacrificial compassion as morally superior to cruelty?

Over time I became convinced that these questions point toward something profoundly important. They suggest that understanding reality requires more than material science alone. Matter, energy, information, and biology are part of the story. But consciousness, value, meaning, and the moral experience of self-risking compassion are evidence of something much deeper.

“The Problem of Consciousness” & Multiple Competing Hypotheses

This realization led me to continue exploring the great worldview traditions that attempt to explain reality. Atheism, scientific materialism, methodological naturalism, idealism, panpsychism, pantheism, panentheism, and the various

forms of religious theism all offer insights. Each attempts to explain consciousness, rationality, morality, suffering, and existence itself. They all have strengths and insights. Yet they all have challenges and fall short of fully explaining the prime aspects of reality. The question is not which worldview can answer *every* question with certainty. The question is which worldview provides the most coherent and comprehensive explanation of the evidence — especially the beautiful evidence of compassionate love. Which explanation is most worthy of my trust and my action?

For me, this inquiry gradually led toward the possibility that consciousness *cannot* be a late, accidental, and merely emergent byproduct of unfolding reality. Instead, consciousness is somehow foundational to reality itself. The extraordinary intelligibility of the universe — the effectiveness of mathematics — the quantum mystery of mind, measurement, and reality — the precise fine-tuning of physics chemistry and biology that make living things possible — the existence of conscious self-reflecting rational human minds capable of discovering profound truths, all seem to point in this mystery: consciousness is unsolved.

The quantum world presents one of the deepest mysteries in science: How do the mathematical wave functions of quantum theory become the definite reality we experience? And why does measurement seem to play such a fundamental role? These questions have led some physicists and philosophers to wonder whether consciousness itself may be more deeply woven into reality than classical science once imagined.

Yet even this conclusion felt incomplete. Suppose reality is grounded in some form of ultimate consciousness. What kind of consciousness would it be? Here I found myself returning to the reality of *compassion*.

Throughout history human beings have disagreed about politics, religion, economics, and culture. Yet remarkably, across those differences there remains widespread admiration for self-giving love. We celebrate courage that protects the vulnerable. We honor those who sacrifice for others. We admire forgiveness. We esteem compassion. Something deep within us recognizes these qualities as profoundly good. Humble self-sacrificing compassionate love seems to be the universally recognized highest valued virtue.

The Picture Painted by Jesus of Nazareth

These realizations continued to bring me back to the storied portrayal and profoundly simple message of Jesus of Nazareth. Not to debates about denominations, institutions, doctrines, or culture wars. Rather, I returned to the simple yet radical vision that stood at the center of his life and teaching.

Love your neighbor. Serve rather than dominate. The greatest is the servant of all. Love your enemy. Forgive those who harm you — following his example when he said — while hanging on the cruel cross of crucifixion — *“Forgive them for they do not understand what they are doing”*.

What fascinated me was not merely that Jesus taught these principles. Many teachers have spoken of love and compassion. What struck me was the extraordinary consistency with which Jesus uniquely embodied them. In fact, most historians and theologians recognize that Jesus intentionally planned his three year public ministry as a visible public demonstration of the highest form of compassionate love — as a living sign pointing to the Source “God is Love”.

His life and teachings strategically challenged and confronted the power players of his time in such a way that the end result would inevitably be arrest, torture, and crucifixion, through which he could prove the forgiving power of love that can — and did — transform enemies. His pattern of self-giving love appeared not merely as a moral ideal but as a revelation, as a reflection, as evidence of the deepest and highest nature of reality itself.

With this central frame of reference, I gradually came to see the possibility that self-sacrificial love is not simply one human virtue among many. It may instead be the greatest clue to the fundamental character of existence — the meaning of life. If *consciousness* is foundational, and if *compassion* represents the highest expression of conscious life, then perhaps compassion reveals something about the nature of the reality from which conscious animals and humans arise. As the Greek philosopher quoted by the apostle Paul in the New Testament said,

“In God [the Source of Love] we live and move and derive our existence”.

Our Own Open-Armed Cross of Compassion

When we are opposed, threatened, or wounded, our *natural* “wild” instincts so often reflect the untamed patterns of nature itself. We react by defending ourselves, striking back, or fighting to protect our own interests. As you reflect on this, picture the arms and hands in these *natural* reactions. When threatened our attention narrows to self-preservation.

In striking contrast stands the *unnatural* image of Jesus on the cross, his arms stretched wide—not in defense or retaliation, but in forgiveness and self-giving love, embracing even his enemies. Perhaps this cross-shaped love reveals the deepest *supra*-natural reality behind, beyond, yet within the universe. Perhaps this is what the ultimate Source of all things is truly like. Perhaps this is what we should mean when we speak of “God.”

I cannot prove this with certainty. None of the answers to the most profound kinds of questions can be proved. Yet they also cannot be disproved. Absolute certainty is rare in human knowledge — except for the direct knowledge we each have of our own subjective conscious existence. Even aspects of mathematics and logic, as demonstrated by Kurt Gödel, cannot be proven with certainty. Albert Einstein’s theories have shown us that *time* is not certain but *relative*. And quantum physics has shattered our “belief” in the certainty of physical *matter* itself. Even in biology, genetics, and epigenetics, new discoveries have led many scientists to reexamine key assumptions of the Neo-Darwinian *macro*-evolutionary synthesis, being challenged by many evolutionists, including the Agnostic eminent biologist Denis Noble and the Cambridge educated Christian philosopher of science Stephen C. Meyer.

Science progresses through provisional, hypothetical models. Philosophy proceeds through argument and inference. Theology pursues answers to questions that extend beyond direct observation, experimentation, and even philosophical debate — particularly does a “God” exist, and if so, what kind of Mind or “Person” is God. Many people who say they reject the concept of “God” are actually rejecting particular descriptions and distortions of God. They have neglected to adequately consider the possibility of a Grand Conscious Mind as the Source of all — especially humble, self-giving agape love.

In every field, human beings reason from evidence toward conclusions that remain open to revision. This is not a weakness. It's the condition of our extremely limited, often self-deceptively biased, finite minds as we seek understanding.

Humility

Humility therefore becomes essential. Humility allows us to hold convictions without arrogance. It allows us to pursue truth without pretending that we possess it completely. It allows scientists, philosophers, theologians, skeptics, and believers to engage one another honestly in a shared search for understanding.

After nearly seventy years of asking questions, I now hold onto *fewer* certainties than I once imagined possible. Yet I still remain convinced of several things.

Consciousness is real. Suffering is real. Compassion is real.

I've spent a lifetime looking at some of the harshest realities in nature and humanity. Yet when I look across all of it—from theology to psychology to animal rescue to my decades long analysis of Jesus's model of psychotherapy and social harmony—the conclusion I repeatedly return to is *not* despair.

It's the conviction that self-sacrificial compassionate love is the most extraordinary thing we encounter in conscious existence, and therefore may be our most important clue to the character of whatever lies at the foundation of reality itself.

Whether one calls that ultimate reality God, Mind, Logos, or something else entirely, I've come to suspect that the deepest characteristic of that ultimate reality is *not* power.

It is personal, relational, self-sacrificial, compassionate love.

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