



**Cilliers, Johan 2020. *Grace upon Grace: Reflections on the Meaning of Life*. Stellenbosch: Sun Media. ISBN: 978-1-928314-71-4: R230. e-ISBN: 978-1-928314-72-1: R185. 83 Pages.**

Johan Cilliers relates that *Grace upon Grace* came to existence in his experience of “being retired of late”, where he could “ponder the meaning of life from a different angle” (xi). On the one hand, Cilliers implies that *Grace upon Grace* does not have the purpose of academic contemplation. On the other hand, it takes one no time in interaction with *Grace upon Grace* to realise that Cilliers is indeed thoroughly grounded in contemplating the meaning of life in a sophisticated theological manner.

And so I found myself on a journey with Cilliers as he relates the biblical text of John 1:16-17, where the concept of grace upon grace comes to the fore, with the meaning of life (1). The structure of *Grace upon Grace* is relayed in the search for meaning through three chapters: “Not knowing, fully ... Knowing, fully ... [and] Being known, fully ...” (7).

In my reading of the first chapter, I found his contemplation on the fragmentation of identity where he tries to grasp the focal idea of not knowing fully. In conversation with Henning Luther, Cilliers showcases how identity should be understood as fragmented, “not-being-whole” (18). Cilliers then contemplates the implications of a fragmented identity for the meanings of faith, love, sin, and grace (19). The overall point lodges around the idea that any endeavour of claiming to know fully is unhealthy, whilst a healthy uncertainty opens the space for God to “continuously [fit us] into a larger picture of fulfilment” (19) and brings us to the point of “openness, a stance of expectancy, and embracement of being led into the mystery” (27).

I have much appreciation for Cilliers in verbalising the reality of identity as fragmented. I suspect he is implicitly critiquing the identity politics of our time – or at least I read it as such. And in the dislodgement of identity as fixed and without complexity, he is indeed correct. The implications of certainty regarding identity politics are myriad, and they do have direct consequences for the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and societies as a whole. To my mind, the current trends in identity politics

are detrimental in almost every sphere of human existence, not even mentioning movements that seriously consider unity, reconciliation, and justice. That being said, as much as I agree with Cilliers that an “unhealthy certainty” (22) is, well, unhealthy, Cilliers ignores the possibility for healthy certainty. His argument, to my mind, should also take cognisance of the importance of social structures and institutions which make it possible for a fragmented identity to exist. After all, in his example of the *Bicycle Wheel* by Marcel Duchamp, as much as Duchamp “challenged the traditional preconceptions of what art is” (28), his work would have had no platform to challenge tradition were it not for the art institution itself. With this, I am not calling for a view that upholds tradition without critique – such a stance is also unhealthy – but I am calling for the acknowledgement that there are healthy certainties that make a fragmented identity possible. And without those healthy certainties, we might find ourselves (and because of the cracks in our society, some do find themselves) in situations of chaos that cannot move to grace upon grace, at least not within the confines of daily existence.

In chapter two, Cilliers augments his understanding of knowing fully with the idea of an ontology that moves and finds its existence in God – which he calls “intology” (45-46). The point he makes is that within the human experience in its fulness, especially with regards to the most brutally painful, we are taken up into God’s being and history (46). Herein he proposes a convergence of God’s future with the present as both God’s vulnerability (our suffering as entering God’s being, and God entering our suffering) and God’s Fulfilment as God’s triumph and imagination for a promising and new future (46-47). Furthermore, this ontology of knowing fully that we are in God finds its extension *into* life, where Cilliers imagines that we “are brought back ‘into’ life, so that we can dance with the joy of life, to the tune of grace” (47).

This chapter represents Cilliers’ more imaginative theological contemplation, and he engages the Covid-19 situation substantially, especially given that *Grace upon Grace* was written relatively early in the pandemic. However, two things are insufficient. Firstly, Cilliers’ claim that his ontological contemplation is not an attempt at the “romanticising of suffering” (46) showcases the unconscious opposite: that it may indeed be romanticism, especially since he apologetically counters such

argument. Once more, what Cilliers places on the table with his ontology is exceptional; I am, however, personally more inclined to the school which claims that suffering is part of human existence – although that holds its own theological problems. Secondly, the movement from suffering as ontology in God towards being taken back into life seems forced. I agree with what Cilliers is saying, but I miss an explanation of the linkage between suffering and living life fully. Granted, he goes on to contemplate one of his paintings to make the point that journeying is a kind of “coming home” (48-50). However, what does he mean with journeying? And which posture(s) – spiritually, bodily, and psychologically – will aid in the move from suffering to living life to fullness through the journey? Does he claim that any journey always leads to grace – as a type of happenstance result where human agency is unnecessary?

In chapter three, Cilliers contemplates being known fully. His argument is twofold. Firstly as our existence inevitably leads to death, symbolising human fragility and present in all forms of interruption to wellbeing, it is our reaction to the changes in life, which is essential, as “antifragile” resilience (59-61). Thus, Cilliers works with the bodily reality of human existence as both fragile and the possibility of antifragile resilience. Secondly, with the previous as a base, he shows that grace is found in the knowledge that “God fully knows us” in our bodily reality (62). Therefore, as moments of disruption and change lodges us into a confrontation with our fragility, we are known fully by God. When we can react in resilience to these disruptions, God also knows us fully. Once more, as already mentioned in the previous chapter, Cilliers’ emphasises the theological argument of Christ’s participation in bodily existence as the point of both knowing our fragility and antifragility (64).

I thoroughly appreciated both of Cilliers’ arguments in this chapter. Just as with Cilliers, the idea of antifragility resonates with my own lived experience. I would, however, have wanted to hear more about what Cilliers has to say about this concept. He contemplates this idea and moves onwards, rushed. After all, as fragile beings, the move towards a posture of antifragility and resilience holds significant promise for wellbeing. I would like to have heard more about Cilliers’ thoughts on it. The opposite would be to fall into a victim mentality that is detrimental to persons and their immediate environment, reverberating outwards to the greater

society. And I do not think that God knowing us fully equates to a life of irresponsible and destructive existence - which Cilliers alludes to in the meditative interruption of this chapter (67-71). With regards to being known bodily, Cilliers strikes a necessary cord in homiletic contemplation. Although more research has come to the fore on this matter, there should be constant vigilance to the discussion and incorporation of the body.

Cilliers concluding chapter goes beyond merely the meaning of life as he contemplates it, towards the art of making meaning. Herein he brings together what he has espoused throughout *Grace upon Grace* to propose three aspects of the art of making meaning (in unity with the three chapters) which must simultaneously be present: interpretation, expectation, and healing (76-79). One of the final paragraphs ought to be quoted in full:

[Making meaning] proposes a process, a life-long journey, struggling with and within the tensions and challenges and frustrations of not knowing, of the experiences and glimpses of full knowledge, and the inexpressible comfort of being known. (79).

Overall, *Grace upon Grace* is an exceptional contribution to Cilliers' repertoire and should be read and contemplated by theologians in academia and the church.

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***Martin, Ryan J. Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards: “The High Exercises of Divine Love.” (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, 33) New York: T&T Clark, 2019. x + 281pp. ISBN 978-0-567-69486-7. Paperback. \$39.95 USD.***

In this published form of his doctoral dissertation, Ryan Martin addresses the theme of affections in Jonathan Edwards’s theology. Primarily, he aims to correct some common misunderstandings of Edwards’s “affective psychology” that are present in some interpretations of Edwards’s work.

Martin argues that Edwards does not use the term “affections” as a synonym for “emotions,” as we often use the term today, and as some interpreters have claimed. Nor does Edwards owe his understanding of affective psychology to the philosopher, John Locke. Rather, Edwards’s understanding and use of concepts like affections, passions, will, and soul come from his own Christian theological tradition.

The book begins by surveying an array of sources from authors who have either misunderstood Edwards’s influences and associated him with Locke, or who have misunderstood Edwards’s use of affections by associating them with emotions/feelings in some sense. This sets up Martin’s thorough engagement with Christian sources from the patristic, medieval, Reformation, and Puritan eras. This latter survey demonstrates that Edwards’s language and thought about matters of affective psychology come from this rich Christian tradition, and not from recent philosophical notions. Martin concludes this survey by stating, “most contemporary understandings of emotions have little in common with the portrait of affections and passions” that one sees in the history of Christian thought (88). The tradition has been much less interested in bodily feeling (emotions) and much more interested in “affections” and “passions” understood as movements of the soul or will, “toward or away from rational or spiritual good and evil”(88). That is, affections and passions refer to higher and lower inclinations of the will and understanding, with “religious affections” being inclinations of the soul toward the highest good, namely God himself. These affections are not bodily in nature, though they may affect the body, but are given by the Holy Spirit to the truly regenerate in order to lead them

to love and enjoy God, reflecting that love to the world around them. For Edwards “affections were the soul’s inclinations toward spiritual realities” (195).

Following his historical survey, Martin then examines Edwards’s own writings, in chronological order, to demonstrate both how Edwards understood and used “affections” and related terms, and how his understanding of these concepts remained consistent throughout his life. This section is especially useful to Edwards’s scholars, pastors, and even those new to Edwards’s thought. Martin provides excellent and thorough summary-analyses of all of the major works. Through this, Martin shows just how central the notion of affections is to Edwards’s whole theological system, especially his soteriology. Edwards stressed “gracious affections,” as true signs of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work in a person, to distinguish them from bodily passions or natural affections. The latter may not be evil in themselves, but are often made to serve sinful purposes, and are certainly subject to sinful distortion. They are thus unreliable for life or as indicators of true religious experience. *Gracious affections* are important to understand, as inclinations of the soul toward God and all that God loves, because these are necessary for Christian confidence and living. More than that, humanity needs these things in order to be healed. As Martin states, “grace orders the soul” (202). The soul is disordered by sin and needs to be set right.

Additionally, these new affections/inclinations of the soul are not contrary to reason. Reason itself is renewed by the Spirit, and now works together with these new “high exercises of divine love” in the soul in a harmonious way, overruling all contrary desire. Citing Edwards, Martin highlights this reality, “Grace tends to tranquility, as it mortifies tumultuous desires and passions, subdues the eager and insatiable appetites of the sensual nature and greediness after the vanities of the world” (*WJE* 25:544, p. 202). Martin clarifies this by adding, “saints’ souls are restored, and peaceful affections reign reasonably over the sense passions” (202).

The book concludes with a short section commending Edwards as a source for a more thorough theology of affections. This is needed in general, but also in the realm of Edwards studies, because sufficient understanding of affections in Edwards has been lacking.

The work is extensively researched and well-arranged. Its argument is both convincing and compelling. It uses many technical terms and concepts, and so may be better understood by those with some theological and philosophical training. However, those who seek to engage with Edwards's theology, or who preach on Edwards's' take on these themes, cannot afford to miss this book. Martin has made a genuine and important contribution to the extensive community of scholars and pastors currently studying this great early eighteenth-century pastor-theologian. Given the expansive interest in Edwards's thought, seen in study centers committed to his work in both North America and South Africa, Martin's book is essential reading for understanding the theme of affections, so central to all of Edwards's thought.

Those with academic interests will need to reckon with this work, and not continue to repeat the misunderstanding that Edwards was utilizing a Lockean psychological scheme. And those with pastoral or ministerial interests will need to understand that Edwards is not talking simply about an emotional aspect of Christian faith. Edwards proves to be a first-rate theologian capable of great philosophical sophistication, always subject to scripture and interested in the holiness of God's people and the glory of God throughout all time and history. Those with similar interests will find Edwards, and his faithful interpreter, Ryan Martin, to be an inspiration and guide.

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