

Jonathan Beaver and Vernon W. Cisney, eds. *The Way of Nature and the Way of Grace: Philosophical Footholds on Terrence Malick's "The Tree of Life."* Northwestern University Press 2016. 264 pp. \$99.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780810132559); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780810132542).

This anthology assembles twelve essays by philosophers, film scholars, and humanists organized around the themes of nature and grace, conceived as ways of life, in Terrence Malick's 2011 film. Also included is the Translator's Preface to Malick's English translation of Heidegger's 1929 essay 'Vom Wesen des Grundes' ('On the Essence of the Ground'), the filmmaker's only piece of published philosophical writing to date. The anthology adds to a growing literature of books and journal articles studying this film that have sprung up very rapidly since its release eight years ago. The essays comprising the volume follow two principal strands. About half of the essays take up the film's manner of treating its primary philosophical problematic, namely, how to reconcile the notion of a loving, present God with the existential fact of unexplained, undeserved tragedy. In the film, this tragedy lies in the premature death of R.L., the gentle, sweet-natured son of Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien (played by Brad Pitt and Jessica Chastain, respectively). To be sure, as a thoughtful viewer of this film would know, *The Tree of Life* portrays such a reconciliation cinematically through its thematic treatments of ascension, the afterlife, the 'desert of eternity,' and various theological allusions suggesting the hand of Providence. But the film's intended meaning here is obscure and requires a lot of help in order to be formulated coherently. The book's contributions are by and large quite illuminating in this regard; as I read these essays I discovered many new insights into the film's puzzles that had never occurred to me over ten or twelve viewings. Most of the remaining essays treat one or more ways of engaging the film's themes through the lenses of selected seminal philosophers and perennial philosophical themes. On the whole, this anthology's contributions would be best regarded as philosophically-minded film criticism, which is to say, readings of the film according to one or more pre-existing philosophical threads. There is less emphasis on the film's own way of treating its subject specifically as a film (sometimes called film-as-philosophy or 'filmosophy') whereby one might consider the uniquely cinematic aspects in which the film engages its subject matter or expresses a thought-process. Likewise of sparing emphasis is an approach oriented in the philosophy of film, where one might examine this film from an aesthetics or philosophy of art standpoint and dissect its mechanisms accordingly. A bit more material on these scores would be welcome, given that what makes Terrence Malick's filmmaking so powerful is its reflective subversion of traditional conventions of the medium.

Throughout, nearly every essay engages the film's opening passage (repeated in the title of this book), in which the voice of Jessica Chastain's character describes the teaching she received from nuns as a child about the 'way of nature' and the 'way of grace.' As related in her opening voiceover, the way of nature represents will, self-gratification, and force; the way of grace expresses forgiveness, humility, and most importantly for the film, the promise that no one who chooses the way of grace ever comes to a bad end. A related recurring theme in the book's chapters is the film's parallels to the story of biblical Job, a few lines of which appear during the film's beginning sequence. Job suffers a similar fate to the O'Briens, losing his good fortune despite his unwavering character and his loyalty to God. Many of this book's essays read *The Tree of Life* as a modern retelling of the Job dilemma. Other chapters treat similar Judeo-Christian themes of this ilk one would expect to see. The sixth chapter, written by John Bleasdale, takes up the film's treatment of death. The seventh chapter, by Paul Camacho, engages the topics of confession and forgiveness in

the film from an Augustinian standpoint. Finally, the eighth chapter, by Manuel Cabrera, Jr., takes up the film's depictions of finitude.

This book will be very useful to scholars of philosophical and theological film. It will also provide a helpful guide to more casual viewers who simply want to gain a better foothold on understanding Malick's complex film. Many of the chapters reveal interesting tidbits about the making of the film and the genesis of its screenplay. While several of the essays offer convincing philosophical readings of the film and admirably piece together its jarring narrative structure, the most exciting chapters step outside the confines of the film and treat its subject matter in wholly other terms. To discuss a few examples, the chapter by film studies scholar Mark Fursteneau ('Technologies of Observation: Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* and the Philosophy of Science Fiction') analyzes *The Tree of Life* as a science fiction film and compares its philosophical premise to other works in that genre. As Fursteneau writes, *The Tree of Life* can be considered science fiction insofar as it employs elements that press the boundaries of what is known about human life, using the unknown to inform the known as it were (70-71). Vernon Cisney's chapter makes an equally provocative and compelling case critical of the film's defense of the 'way of grace.' Cisney observes that the film actually fails in justifying the moral position to which it appears sympathetic (the 'way of grace'), suggesting that the 'way of nature' outlook embodied in the character of Mr. O'Brien better grapples with the film's struggle with faith. To make this case, Cisney cites Spinoza's conception of God in the *Ethics* to the effect that what we traditionally think of as God in a religious worldview can simply be recast philosophically under the totality of nature, the infinity of all attributes of existence (218-19). In this light, the film's two 'ways' of life collapse into a single, a-moral cosmology founded in nature; the way of grace simply is the way of nature. Another highly illuminating, well-argued chapter by Leslie MacEvoy explores similar territory by proposing a solution to *The Tree of Life*'s moral quandary through an interpretation of Nietzsche's thesis of Eternal Recurrence. The comparison to Nietzsche's thesis is apt, given that the film grapples with reconciling human freedom with notions of fate and eternity. MacEvoy's reading of Eternal Recurrence in Nietzsche is one of the freshest and most insightful accounts of this thesis I have come across. This essay would be an excellent find for any scholar considering Nietzschean themes in film.

While most of the chapters are successful in what they set out to achieve, several might have benefitted from rethinking. A chapter by Erin Kealey suggests interpreting the film's juxtaposition of nature and grace through the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles' doctrine of love and strife. While it is certainly true that some parallels exist between the two dichotomies, I believe Kealey interprets the Empedoclean thesis too strongly in moral terms. The formulation of Empedocles in the extant fragments characterizes love's contest with strife as the internal principle for the generation of the cosmos and the composition of bodies. The struggle of love and strife is arguably a metaphysical principle for this philosopher more than it is a moral or humanistic one. Whereas, Kealey suggests Empedocles' concept of love functions akin to *The Tree of Life*'s moral precept of grace. Even setting this issue aside, it is not at all clear that grace in *The Tree of Life* is anywhere near the same thing as Empedoclean love, or that the film's concept of nature has anything to do with Empedoclean strife. The chapter by editor Justin Beever begins with a great premise, to re-evaluate the world-historical concept of the *Tree of Life* in terms of the modern notion of 'networks,' citing Deleuze and others in order to suggest that historical and cultural networks of representation better reflect the paradigms in which human beings understand themselves. Beever makes this case by highlighting elements of the film that reveal a human-centric representative framework, such as the controversial early scene depicting an empathic dinosaur. Beever's approach is very attractive insofar as it gives a critical, inventive reading of the film's guiding concept while also remaining true to the

film's aims. Yet, his central argument is only robustly formulated at the end of the chapter, after rapid diversions into the work of Bergson, Heidegger, James George Frazer, Darwin, Joseph Campbell, Sartre, and others. One gets the impression of slightly too many invocations of primary source texts, where perhaps more direct argumentation and analysis might be in order.

Shawn Loht, Baton Rouge Community College