



# laetus in praesens

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## Paradoxes of Engaging with the Ultimate in any Guise

### Living Life Penultimately

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## Introduction

There is a curious dependence on the "ultimate" in a variety of forms. This may be related to anticipation of an ultimate experience, whether in the form of a theory, a spiritual revelation, an encounter with another, a global strategy, or the like. The expectation is that this will be "ultimately" transformative in ways which can only be intuited, but whose consequences are much anticipated.

Of particular significance is the manner in which the term is used in a variety of contexts to "qualify" that which is most valued, or to which humanity most aspires -- or of which it is most afraid. Use of "ultimate" thus tends to imply a conflation of qualities from the contexts with which "ultimate" is associated.

The concern here is with assumptions regarding how the ultimate might be recognized -- if this is possible -- and with the manner of engaging with it, given its extraordinary nature. Also of concern is how the ultimate for one person may be of little significance to another -- despite all efforts at communication. This is especially relevant to assumptions regarding the possibility of global consensus on an ultimate remedial strategy for the world's problems, as previously discussed (*The Consensus Delusion: mysterious attractor undermining global civilization as currently imagined*, 2011). This could be seen as related to any anticipated ultimate emergence of an effective global leadership for the world in its present condition -- or perhaps some corresponding insight or discovery.

These considerations suggest that -- to the extent that the ultimate may be essentially elusive or inaccessible -- it may be more fruitful to explore ways of "living life penultimately". Given expectations of the ultimate collapse of global civilization -- even if not imminent -- living life in this way would be consistent with the injunction of [James Lovelock](#) (*The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning: Enjoy It While You Can*, 2009).

## Forms of the Ultimate as imaginatively anticipated (Cluster 1)

The following represents an effort to identify -- from web references -- the variety of ways in which "ultimate" tends to be used and "qualified". This is understood as a means of giving a sense of the significance variously attached to "ultimate" for different reasons and by different constituencies. It offers a "flavour" of "ultimate" from a variety of perspectives on the assumption that these are conflated to a degree in what is understood or implied by "ultimate". The following might then be considered as a form of "market survey" with regard to use of "ultimate" -- as this may prove relevant to appreciation and uptake of a global strategy.

- **Ultimate strategic plan:** The implication that an ultimate plan or strategy could emerge from current international discourse is a primary concern of this exploration (as noted above). Such a plan might be understood as a kind of "silver bullet" in response to the complex of crises faced by the planet. A useful distinction can be made between strategies favoured by a given constituency and those whose problematic existence is suspected (as with the probability of hidden agendas of opposing constituencies).
  - **Ultimate global strategy:** Efforts of the international community, most notably through the United Nations, may be understood as seeking to elaborate an ultimate global plan -- as a "last chance" to save the planet or some problematic situation (conflict, endangered natural resources, etc).

This has notably been associated with the possibility of achieving a condition of "ultimate peace" in many contexts. For

Woodrow Wilson: *We are glad, now that we see the facts with no veil of false pretence about them, to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world...* (*War Message to Congress*, 2 April 1917). Of relevance with respect to the Middle East, emergent agreements have shunned all questions of a nonmilitary nature, which were expressly postponed to "ultimatepeace"negotiations, as argued by J. C. Hurewitz (*Arab-Israel Tensions, Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, 1952).

Recent examples include the various [Earth Summits](#): United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro 1992/2012 (Suzanne Goldenberg, *Rio+20 Earth summit is too important to fail, says Ban ki-Moon*, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2012; Yang Fangyi, *Not humanity's last chance*, *ChinaDialogue*, 13 June 2012). The intervening UN event evoked similar "last chance" commentary (*Insights for the Future from the Change of Climate in Copenhagen*, 2010)

Many international groups formulate comprehensive global plans and endeavour to implement them, as notably profiled in the [Global Strategies Project](#). Associated with the capacity to formulate and implement any such strategy are assumptions regarding the nature of an "ultimate authority" (in secular terms) capable of overseeing the articulation and implementation of such a plan. Some may assume that "[we the peoples](#)" are the most appropriate ultimate authority, raising questions as to how "we" are to organize ourselves to perform the ultimate functions expected -- and to deal with those who undermine those efforts. How is the assumption of ultimate authority to be understood with respect to capacity to issue an [ultimatum](#).

- **Ultimate nefarious plan:** This cluster could be used to group strategies considered to be of a questionable nature, notably those associated with a hypothetical [secret government](#). The possibility of an associated "ultimate secret plan" is a theme variously explored by [conspiracy theorists](#) suspicious of the nature of [New World Order](#) (Soylent Green, *The Ultimate Plan of the Global Elite; Illuminati Divide And Conquer -- The Ultimate Plan*; Mark Dice, *The New World Order: Facts and Fiction*. The Resistance, 2010; Jonathan Duffy, *Bilderberg: the ultimate conspiracy theory*, *BBC News*, 3 June 2004; James McCumiskey, *The Ultimate Conspiracy: the biomedical paradigm*, 2008).

Various efforts have been made to clarify the nature of the "ultimate conspiracy" (Gary Brown, *The Ultimate Conspiracy Guide*, 2011; Chris Thomas, *Project Human Extinction: the ultimate conspiracy*, 2009).

- **Ultimate solution:** The most notorious is of course the "[final solution](#)" envisaged by the Nazi regime, which gave rise to the Holocaust. Considered less controversial is the prospect of unilateral technocratic approaches to global issues, as with some proposed applications of geo-engineering (*Geo-engineering Oversight Agency for Thermal Stabilization (GOATS)*, 2008). Questionable strategic initiatives may also be framed in these terms (*'Globalization': the UN's 'Safe Haven' for the World's Marginalized: the Global Compact with Multinational Corporations as the UN's 'Final Solution'*, 2001).

The phrase "ultimate solution" is however widely applied to particular technical problems, such as weight loss, dysfunctional behaviour, and the like (cf. James B. Richards, *Breaking the Cycle: the ultimate solution to destructive patterns*, 2003).

- **Ultimate leader:** Especially from a religious perspective, there is an expectation of an "ultimate leader" or "ultimate teacher", or "ultimate guide" -- in the light of associated prophecies regarding a coming [messiah](#), as an "ultimate saviour" (cf. Todd A. Phillipy, *The Ultimate Leader*, 2010; Eric James, *God is the Ultimate Leader*, *Transformed Daily*, 6 December 2008; L. Ken Jones, *The Ultimate Leader*, 2002). This is readily extended to the possibility of a world political leader -- where the inadequacies of current leadership are a preoccupation. The phrase "ultimate leader" may be used in the promotion of leadership programmes (cf. Heather Buckley., *Qualities of the Ultimate Leader*, *Self-Growth.com*)
- **Ultimate discovery:** There is an expectation that a scientific or technological breakthrough -- an "ultimate invention" -- will provide the ultimate solution to the problems of humanity. In technical jargon this is the possibility of the ultimate "[killer app](#)". This expectation may be extended to psychosocial possibilities (Rico Tice, *Christianity Explored: the ultimate discovery*, 2001). Contact with extraterrestrials can be understood in these terms.
- **Ultimate weapon:** Speculation exists regarding the development by particular groups of weapons against which there is no defence (Charlie Jane Anders, *10 Most Awesome Ultimate Weapons*, *io9.com*, 8 March 2011; Harlan Girard, *Bio-electromagnetic Weapons: the ultimate weapon*, *Global Research*, 29 May 2007; Jonathan Gottschall, *Why Storytelling Is The Ultimate Weapon*, *Co-Create*, May 2012; Jerry E. Smith, *Haarp: the ultimate weapon of the conspiracy*, 1998)
- **Ultimate supernatural plan:** In a context of faith-based governance, the following frameworks merit a degree of careful consideration (*Future Challenge of Faith-based Governance*, 2003), despite vigorous assertions from atheists regarding their potentially misleading nature (cf. [Richard Dawkins](#), *The God Delusion*, 2006).
  - **Ultimate plan of God:** There has long been religious speculation on the nature of a [Divine Plan](#), notably through Christian interpretation of relevant scriptures (cf. Mike Clute, *God's Ultimate Plan for Humanity as Revealed in Revelation 21 and 22*; Rick Joyner, *God's Ultimate Plan*, *The Morning Star Journal*, 5, 1996, 4; Herb Mueller, *God's Ultimate Plan*, *Witness, Mercy, Life Together*, 2012; James May, *God's Ultimate Plan*, *SermonCentral.com*, March 2006; Daniel LeEarl Hall, *The Great Mystery: The Ultimate Plan of God*, *TowerWatch Ministries*, 2008). It is in this context that God is considered representative of "ultimate good" (the [sumum bonum](#)), even of the "ultimate positive". Of particular contemporary

relevance is the understanding of "ultimate peace" presented through the arguments for [just war theory](#), namely the fundamental distinction between the ultimate peace of the "heavenly city", which has an absolute value although not directly attainable, and the partial, temporary, and imperfect peace available to sinful humanity (cf. John Langan, *The Elements of St. Augustine's Just War Theory*, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 1984)

- **Ultimate plan of Satan:** Corresponding to speculations regarding the plan of God, are those relating to Satan (Bob Deffinbaugh, *Satan's Part in God's Perfect Plan Study*; Bible.org; D. J. Love, *Satan's Plan of Destruction*, *Shamar Briyth: the covenant keepers*, 2002; *Satan's Plan for Humanity and the Great Tribulation*; *Satan's Plan to destroy the family is succeeding*, *Cutting Edge*, 2 July 1999). It is in this context that Satan is considered representative of "ultimate evil" (the *summum malum*), even of the "ultimate negative". As argued by Michael P. Levine: *That theism itself regards evil as penultimately mysterious is often overlooked by those who think that evil is, for example, simply to be explained in terms of the free will which human beings have and which an omnibenevolent God gave us Pantheism, theism and the problem of evil*, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 35, 1994, 3, pp. 129-151).
- **Ultimate judgement:** Consideration of the nature of divine jurisprudence (cf. Emmanuel Ebah, *The Ultimate Judgement*, 7 vols.; Jacob Soliman, *The Return of Our Lord and the Ultimate Judgement Day*, 2012). The possibility has long been associated with some form of "meeting one's maker".
- **Ultimate crisis:** The current global civilization is now being faced with a crisis of crises as originally recognized by John Platt (*What We Must Do*, *Science*, 166, November 1969). The moment has apparently now been recognized by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon who recently declared:

We are living through an era like no other. There are multiple crises: a food crisis, fuel crisis, flu crisis and financial crisis... Each is a crisis we have not seen for many years, even generations. But this time they are hitting the world all at once. We have never seen any era when we have been hit by all these multiple crises at the one time... Peacekeeping has experienced serious setbacks. Today we face mounting difficulties in getting enough troops, the right equipment and adequate logistical support. This supply has not kept pace with demand. (*United Nations peace missions in peril*, *The Guardian*, 8 July 2009)

This provides a context for consideration of the nature of an ultimate crisis -- possibly of complex of such crises:

- **End of the universe:** The [ultimate fate of the universe](#) is a subject of speculation by rival scientific theories. It includes futures of both finite and infinite duration.
- **Ultimate environmental collapse:** The collapse of the global ecosystem, in the light of various [doomsday events](#), has been variously predicted as a consequence of shifts in ocean currents, global warming, environmental pollution, asteroid strike, super-volcanoes, and the like. This is the focus of the argument of [James Lovelock](#) (*The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning*; *Enjoy It While You Can*, 2009).
- **Ultimate disaster:** This may be conflated with the previous item or treated as distinct from it, perhaps framed as the "ultimate crisis". As "ultimate disaster" it has been the theme of a [National Geographic video presentation](#) (see also [The Ultimate Disaster Site](#); Graham T. Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: the risks and consequences of the ultimate disaster*, 2006; Eugene I. Chazov, *Nuclear War the Ultimate Disaster*, 1985; *Nuclear Darkness, Global Climate change and Nuclear Famine: the deadly consequences of nuclear war*).
- **Ultimate collapse of civilization:** This is recognized as inevitably following from environment collapse, but also a likely consequence of [human-induced scenarios](#). It is also a theme explored in the light of the ultimate fate of past empires and civilizations ([Jared M. Diamond](#), *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, 2005). Beyond the current civilization, the theme has been explored, notably in science fiction, in terms of the "ultimate fate of humanity".
- **End times:** Understood in terms of prophecies of [end-times scenarios](#), as recognized by some of religious persuasion, as previously discussed (*Spontaneous Initiation of Armageddon: a heartfelt response to systemic negligence*, 2004). *Wikipedia* also indicates:
  - [Library of Date Setters of The End of the World](#): with over 200 predictions
  - [The Ending World](#): from a Christian perspective.
  - [Religious Tolerance](#): a list of different groups claiming to predict the end of the world prior to 2000.
- **Ultimate problem:** Rather than being framed as a complex of crises or problems, focus may be given to a single problem such as "sin" or "greed" -- or an "ultimate threat" (Bella DePaulo, *The Ultimate Threat to Single People: You'll Die Alone*, *Psychology Today*, 23 January 2009; *Pope: Gay Marriage Ultimate Threat To Humanity*, *Religious Freaks*, 10 January 2012).

As noted above, a strong focus is currently given to nuclear warfare or terrorism (*Is the ultimate threat to mankind a rogue asteroid, or the ticking countdown to Satan's final act of his reign of terror?* *Godlike Productions*, 21 December

2011; Fred Charles Iklé, *Annihilation from Within: the ultimate threat to nations*, 2006). Barack Obama has declared nuclear terrorism to be the ultimate threat (*US President Barack Obama warns of nuclear terrorism*, *BBC News*, 12 April 2010).

Classical examples of this perspective are the *Ultimate Problem of International Jurisprudence* articulated by [James Lorimer](#), or the *Le Problème des Problèmes* articulated by [Paul Otlet](#) (*Monde*, 1935). The latter helped to frame the profiling of problems in the [World Problems Project](#), each potentially distinguished as "ultimate" by the concerned international constituency.

- **Ultimate catharsis:** Disasters may be variously considered as offering a form of [catharsis](#) -- if only through the protests they elicit (*Protests: The Ultimate Catharsis*, *Interview with a Feminist*, 14 June 2011; Robert A. Baron, Catharsis: does "getting it out of one's system" really help?, *Human Aggression*, 2004)
- **Ultimate insight:** The possibility of some such insight would seem to inspire many distinct framings.
  - **Ultimate explanation:** This clusters implies emergence of an extraordinary degree of conceptual clarity:
    - *Ultimate truth:* One website offers *Truth Contest: What is the Ultimate Truth?* -- an answer to the "big questions of life". *Wikipedia* offers a clarification of the Buddhist [doctrine of the two truths](#) differentiating between two levels of truth in Buddhist discourse: relative or commonsense truth, and absolute or [ultimate truth](#) (which describes the ultimate reality as [sunyata](#), empty of concrete and inherent characteristics). It is to be expected that many religions and philosophies would offer understandings of ultimate truth, associated with the particular insight they favour. For the spiritually inclined, its comprehension may be associated with the experience of an "ultimate revelation".

There is huge irony in the fact that:

- for the sciences (whatever their disciplinary differences), religious preoccupations are "ultimately wrong", or completely misguided (at best). Science is of course persuaded that its methodology will prove to be "ultimately right".
- for the religious (whatever their differences), science is "ultimately wrong", or completely misguided (at best). Religion is of course persuaded that its preoccupations will necessarily be proven to be "ultimately right".

Neither science nor religion seemingly has either the capacity or the desire to transcend this condition, which the future will no doubt frame as both "ultimately laughable" and "ultimately tragic" -- given the current crisis of humanity. The situation has been well summarized by [Nicholas Rescher](#) (*The Strife of Systems: an essay on the grounds and implications of philosophical diversity*, 1985):

*For centuries, most philosophers who have reflected on the matter have been intimidated by the strife of systems. But the time has come to put this behind us -- not the strife, that is, which is ineliminable, but the felt need to somehow end it rather than simply accept it and take it in stride.*

- [Ultimate reality](#) is a term used in philosophy to indicate the underlying nature of reality
- *Theory of Everything*, this hypothesized final theory of [theoretical physics](#) would fully explain and link together all known physical phenomena, and would predict the outcome of any experiment that could be carried out in principle. [It is beyond the scope of such a theory to predict what theoretical physics would subsequently do, once the theory had been elaborated to their satisfaction]
- [Ultimate causation](#), is distinguished in philosophy, by contrast with a proximate cause, namely an event which is closest to, or immediately responsible for causing, some observed result. As framed by *Wikipedia*, a proximate cause exists in contrast to a higher-level ultimate cause (or distal cause) which is usually thought of as the "real" reason something occurred. The distinction is of particular relevance to analysis of global crises in which the systemic focus is typically on proximate causes. This has been highlighted by the treatment of the current global financial crisis as an ultimate cause thereby avoiding analysis as to how it was engendered. A similar point can be made with respect to current focus on "shortage" of resources, thereby avoiding identification of the "longage" of overpopulation by which they are engendered, according to the neologism offered by [Garret Hardin](#), as discussed separately (cf. *Scientific Gerrymandering of Boundaries of Overpopulation Debate*, 2012). For the spiritually inclined, particular understandings of ultimate cause may be cited (cf. *Is God the ultimate cause of all things, evil included?* *Bible.org*; *Ultimate Cause*; Swami Krishnananda, *Tracing the Ultimate Cause of Any Experience*).
- *Ultimate excuse:* This is typically used to frame misleading explanations as to the nature of any "ultimate cause" (cf. *Heightened Security. The Government's Ultimate Excuse. No Guns for You!; Environmental Crisis: The Ultimate Excuse (Lie) for Eugenics, Depopulation and World Governance; Are First Amendment Rights Becoming The Ultimate Excuse For Bad Behavior?*). For William Haegel: *The ultimate excuse, entailing a complete denial of responsibility, is the "accidental discharge" (How Police Justify the Use of Deadly Force*, 1984). Terror is now

being used by the U.S. and its enemies to condone savagery, according to Robert Scheer (*'Terror' as the Ultimate Excuse*, *AlterNet*, 31 March 2003). As with the remark regarding "ultimate causation", it is striking the manner in which "the crisis" is now used as an "ultimate excuse" (comparable to a natural disaster) to avoid consideration of human responsibility. For the religious, either God (through "God's Will") or the Devil may be readily presented as the "ultimate excuse".

- *Ultimate statistic*, as offered by George Bernard Shaw (*Death is the ultimate statistic, one out of one of us dies*)
- **Ultimate surprise:** For individuals, such a surprise may be recognized with respect to relationships (falling in love, betrayal, or infidelity) or to fatal illness (cf. Jacqueline P Jones, *The Ultimate Surprise*, 2009). As for individuals, the natural disasters and major accidents may constitute such a surprise. Of special concern to countries are the consequences of surprise attacks, especially when the principal source of the surprise is the incorrect information used to justify the attack (as in the case of the UN-approved attack on Iraq). Surprise may also be engendered by the revelations of whistleblowers, as with the contents of the [US diplomatic cables released in 2010](#) by [WikiLeaks](#). More generally the consequence of ultimate surprise is a focus on the [Black Swan Theory](#) developed by [Nassim Nicholas Taleb](#), notably to explain the disproportionate role of high-impact, hard-to-predict, and rare events that are beyond the realm of normal expectations in history, science, finance and technology (*The Black Swan: the impact of the highly improbable*, 2007). This also addresses the psychological biases that make people individually and collectively blind to uncertainty and unaware of the massive role of the rare event in historical affairs (see also: Karen A. Cerulo, *Never Saw It Coming: cultural challenges to envisioning the worst*, 2006).
- **Ultimate mystery:** This phrase offers a framework for insights from quite different perspectives:
  - *Science:* This may be framed in terms of the mystery of the universe in the light of a possible unified theory (cf. [Stephen Wolfram](#), *The Ultimate Mystery of the Universe*, *BigThink*, 21 December 2010). For [Max Planck](#): *Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature. And that is because, in the last analysis, we ourselves are a part of the mystery that we are trying to solve.*
  - *Spirituality:* Thomas Keating: *Every seeker of Ultimate Mystery has to pass through interior death and rebirth, perhaps many times over* (*Seekers of Ultimate Mystery*, *iJourney.org*, 2012)
  - *Death:* This may be framed as the [ultimate enigma](#) (*Death: The Ultimate Enigma*, 1998)
  - *Sexual attraction:* The reason for such attraction is one of the many mysteries in life. The attraction of one human being to another has been responsible for wars, broken relationships and has also created happiness and peace the world over. Science has been trying for many years to determine what causes one person to feel sexually attracted to another for many years (cf. William Regelson, *Pheromones: Understanding the Mystery of Sexual Attraction*, 2002; Richard L. Doty, *The Great Pheromone Myth*, 2010). The possibility of "ultimate sexual attraction" is a long-standing preoccupation, notably cultivated in product marketing.
- **Ultimate question:** This is a long-standing preoccupation of philosophy, if not fundamental to philosophical discourse (*Asking Ultimate Questions*). It has been explored in relation to science (Michael Mulkey and G. Nigel Gilbert, *What is the Ultimate Question? Some Remarks in Defence of the Analysis of Scientific Discourse*, *Social Studies of Science*, 12, 2, 1982, pp. 309-319). It is commonly evoked in relation to the origins of the universe (William Lane Craig, *The Ultimate Question of Origins: God and the Beginning of the Universe*, *Astrophysics and Space Science*, 269-270, 1999, pp. 721-738). It has notably been highlighted through humour by [Douglas Adams](#) (*Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything* in: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*).

The question has been framed as fundamental to business by Fred Reichheld (*The Ultimate Question: Driving Good Profits and True Growth*, Harvard Business Press, 2006). Richard G. Niemi, *Relationship between Votes and Seats: The Ultimate Question in Political Gerrymandering*, *UCLA Law Review*. 33, 1985-1986); With the increasing development of supercomputers, it might be asked whether there are "superquestions" appropriate to such technology (*Superquestions for Supercomputers: avoiding terra flops from misguided dependence on teraflops?* 2010).

In a context of spiritual development, Zen is renowned for its use of the [koan](#) as a paradoxical question to trigger insight. Catholicism is better known for its past use by the Inquisition of "putting people to the question" (using a process of [water torture](#)), purportedly as a means of "saving their souls". [A variant, in the form of [waterboarding](#), is currently in controversial use by security services in the USA].

- **Ultimate illusion:** In Hinduism and Sikhism, [Maya \(illusion\)](#), is the principal concept which manifests, perpetuates and governs the illusion and dream of duality in the phenomenal Universe. According to Hindu [advaita](#) philosophy, illusion is something which is neither true nor false. Whereas in general usage it is common to assume that illusion is false, Hindu philosophy makes a distinction between Maya (illusion) and falsehood. In terms of this philosophy maya is true in itself but it is not true in comparison with the truth. Of relevance to the discussion below, David Burns asserts that: *Perfection is man's ultimate illusion. It simply doesn't exist in the universe... If you are a perfectionist, you are guaranteed to be a loser*

in whatever you do (*Nobody is Perfect!* American Psychological Association, 1985).

- **Ultimate dream:** Such a dream is held to have been articulated by [Martin Luther King](#) (*I Have a Dream*, 1963). It is perhaps characteristic of many social reformers. A case is made that: *Mankind is at a crossroads. Humanity faces a decision: embrace the dreams of the universe and the fact that humanity is special and has potential, or succumb to the death of domination by a predatory elite* ([Humanity's Ultimate Threat and Greatest Hope](#), 7 July 2012)
- **Ultimate joke,** framed, through the humour of [Monty Python](#), as the deadly "killer joke". Also potentially to be understood through the laughter of the god's (cf. Albert Einstein: *Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of Truth and Knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods*; James Martin: *Between Heaven and Mirth: why joy, humor and laughter are at the heart of the spiritual life*, 2011).

## Forms of the Ultimate as imaginatively anticipated (Cluster 2)

- **Ultimate experience:** Experience may be variously qualified as "ultimate":
  - **Ultimate aesthetic experience:** Reference may be made to the experience associated with a piece of music, a song, a poem, a painting, or a performance. More generally this may be associated with design and a sense of beauty. A place may be qualified as "magical" as a consequence. A view may be held to be "ultimate", notably as promoted by tourism and real estate agents (cf. Lonely Planet, [1000 Ultimate Experiences](#)).
  - **Ultimate encounter:** An encounter with a person may be qualified as the "ultimate" relationship of a lifetime. This is most evident in the case of a romantic encounter -- especially with a "soul mate" (cf. [John O'Donohue](#), *Anam Cara*, 1997; [Johann Wolfgang von Goethe](#), *Elective Affinities*, 1809). The focus may be on the life-determining intellectual or ideological implications (encountering a creative genius or a charismatic revolutionary). There are many descriptions of ultimate spiritual encounters, as with meeting a (charismatic) guru. The nature of an encounter with "The One" is the theme of the *Highlander* media franchise. The possibility of an ultimate encounter with extraterrestrials is the subject of the [SETI Project](#), extensive commentary and fiction -- currently of relevance with the quest for life on Mars.
  - **Ultimate transformative experience:** Whether an aesthetic experience, or one associated with an individual, an experience may be framed as ultimately transformative. This could be primarily associated with an extraordinary happening, sexual intercourse (the ultimate orgasm), *duende* in the tradition of Spanish performing arts, (manipulative) "love bombing", or use of [psychoactive drugs](#)
  - **Ultimate existential experience :** The transformative nature of the experience may be indistinguishable from an "existential" form, notably as highlighted by the focus in Christianity on being [born again](#) (cf. *Varieties of Rebirth: distinguishing ways of being "born again"*, 2004). This may be associated with an "ultimate revelation" -- and even with ultimate freedom from the "wheel of rebirth", according to some Eastern traditions. Of relevance is the aspiration in many traditions to some form of "ultimate peace of mind"
  - **Ultimate health:** This is a much-sought goal whose achievement many processes claim to enable. It is readily associated with the quest for [eternal youth](#) and [immortality](#). Some may however be exposed to "ultimate pain" -- itself an existential experience -- whether as a consequence of illness, accident, or its deliberate infliction with the science of [enhanced interrogation](#).
  - **Death as the ultimate experience:** Whilst necessarily understood as "ultimate", the prospect of death naturally encourages reflection on its implications (cf. [Arthur Koestler](#), *Dialogue with Death*, 1942; [Stanislav Grof](#), *The Ultimate Journey: consciousness and the mystery of death*, 2006; Winston L. King, *Death Was His Koan: the Samurai-Zen of Suzuki Shosan*, 1986). Contemplation and daily meditation on death and impermanence are regarded as fundamental in Buddhism (cf. Pende Hawter (*Death and Dying in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition*, 1995). Death may be explored as the [ultimate construction of reality](#) (cf. Chris Claremont, *Life is the ultimate adventure, and Death, the prize that awaits us all*. Wolverine). Prison authorities worldwide offer those incarcerated the possibility of such reflections, notably those subject to enhanced interrogation or on "death row" (Ernest van den Haag, *Punishment: a defense*, *Harvard Law Review Association*, 1986)
  - **Ultimate horror.** This is notably recognized in connection with systematic massacres and perversity, typically associated with evil. It may however also be anticipated in relation to global disaster, nuclear war, and the like -- explored in the greatest detail in media presentations, widely savoured as entertainment.
- **Ultimate achievement:** There is considerable focus on such achievements, whether in sport (as at the Olympic Games, or in [extreme sports](#)). The achievement may be associated with adventure, discovery, or heroism of some form -- possibly in response to tragic circumstances.
- **Ultimate risk:** Aside from the high levels of risk associated with extreme sport, the levels accepted unwisely within financial institutions were a primary factor engendering the ongoing financial crisis (cf. Raj Nathan, *The Ultimate Risk: flawed liquidity*

*risk management*, *Wall Street and Technology*, 27 October 2010; David A. Moss, *When All Else Fails: government as the ultimate risk manager*, 2002; Adam Raphael, *Ultimate Risk: the inside story of the Lloyd's Catastrophe*, 1995).

- **Ultimate extremes of intelligence**

- **Genius:** The notion of "ultimate genius" has featured as the theme of various competitions (see *List of prizes known as the Nobel of a field*). Notions of "ultimate intelligence" have been discussed in relation to the future development of **artificial intelligence**. This contrasts with the potential of "spiritual intelligence" as explored by **Danah Zohar** (*Spiritual Intelligence: the ultimate intelligence*, 2001). The possibility features in self-development programmes (Stillpoint Institute, *The 13 categories to Awakening the Ultimate Intelligence*; ChabadWorld.net, *Ultimate Intelligence*). The possibility of an "ultimate genius" is associated with that of an "ultimate discovery" (as noted above).
- **Ignorance:**
  - For **Paul Weiss**: *The domain of metaphysics is the realm of ultimate ignorance, profound and inexhaustible* (*Metaphysics: The Domain of Ignorance*, *The Philosophical Review*, 1934)
  - For T. W. Heilke: *Ultimately, "this situation of ignorance with regard to the decisive core of existence is more than disconcerting: it is profoundly disturbing, for from the depth of this ultimate ignorance wells up the anxiety of existence* (**Science, philosophy, and resistance: on Eric Voegelin's practice of opposition**, *The Review of Politics*, 1994)
  - For Anna L Peterson: *Founding our moral acts on ignorance can remind us that the future is open, despite what "common sense"... claims to know. Tillich addresses this in his nuanced argument for a critical utopianism as ground for hope. This utopianism rests on an admission of ultimate ignorance, combined with an unwavering commitment to continue regardless of knowledge or outcome* (**Ignorance and Ethics**. In: Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson, *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge*, 2008, p. 133)
  - For Jingjing Zhao and Nelson Edmondson: *Plato's imagined rulers, like various modern despots in reality, claim the mandate of absolute knowledge; our envisaged rulers would have the opposite mandate, that of consciously acknowledged ultimate ignorance* (**Conscious Recognition of the Limitations of Human Knowledge as the Foundation of Effective Intercultural Communication**, *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 8, 2005)
- **Foolishness:** Religious commentators offer a mix of references to both the ultimate foolishness of failing to believe in God, as well as to the nature of God's own foolishness (Vince Gerhardy, *God's Foolishness*, *Lectionary.org: The Foolishness of God*, Christian Fellowship Devotionals, 9 December 1997). Atheists would of course consider any belief in divinity a matter of ultimate foolishness. **Crazy wisdom**, also known as holy madness, is recognized in various traditions as a manifestation of certain spiritual adepts characterized by unconventional, outrageous, or unexpected behaviour (Chogyam Trungpa, *Crazy Wisdom*, 2001; Wes Nisker, *The Essential Crazy Wisdom*, 2001; Wes Nisker, *Crazy Wisdom Saves the World Again!: Handbook for a Spiritual Revolution*, 2008)

- **Ultimate resource:** This can be variously interpreted:

- **Intangible:** Understood as the last resource on which humanity can depend, this might variously be seen (according to philosophical preferences) as God, human ingenuity, cooperation / solidarity, (folk) wisdom, and the like.
- **Tangible:** As being essential to life, such resources include energy, agricultural productivity and other non-renewable resources. The argument that humanity is running out of natural resources has been challenged by **Julian Lincoln Simon** (*The Ultimate Resource*, 1981). Nuclear fusion, as the "power of the Sun", has been framed as one of the ultimate resources on which civilization might depend.
- **Information:** For a knowledge-based civilization, the ultimate resource could be understood as the accessibility of all human knowledge by which new possibilities can be engendered. This has been explored in descriptions of comprehensive libraries -- whether in fact (Library of Congress, **Library of Alexandria**, etc), or in fiction, as with the University **Library of Trantor** (at the centre of the **Galactic Empire** described by **Isaac Asmov**), or those imagined by **Jorge Luis Borges**. The availability of previously unimaginable quantities of information via the web and its search engines is clearly a new variant, with its possible future development yet to be imagined -- as in speculation regarding an emergent "global brain" (**Peter Russell**, *The Global Brain*, 1982) and discussed separately (**From Information Highways to Songlines of the Noosphere**, 1996).

- **Ultimate marketing:** The qualifier "ultimate" is very extensively used in marketing of products, services and travel locations.

An understanding of "ultimate marketing" has formed the basis of marketing motivational programs and related initiatives (cf. *Ultimate Game of Life*; Daniel Kennedy, *The Ultimate Marketing Plan*, 1997; Per E Åsberg, *The Ultimate Marketing Alliance: how a unique union of market leaders cut market research costs in the shadow of the recession*; Nicole B. Simpson, *The Ultimate Plan: A Financial Survival Guide for Life's Unexpected Events*, Tate Publishing; Donald Mitchell, *The Ultimate Competitive Advantage: secrets of continually developing a more profitable business model*, 2003).

Extensive use is made of the phrase "ultimate guide" in the promotion of educational materials and resources.

Of particular interest is the use of "ultimate" in titles of comic books and their heroes, most notably [Ultimate Spider-Man](#). In such terms, less than "ultimate" is clearly less than desirable. With "impact" a major preoccupation of marketing, the approach is extended to include "ultimate impact", as in the case of fulfilling the [Great Commission](#) of Christian evangelism (cf. *Ultimate Impact: making, mentoring, maturing and multiplying disciples*)

- **Ultimate... miscellany**

- *Ultimate problem*: As distinct from this reference above, various disciplines, most notably mathematics, recognize particular intellectual problems as being "ultimate". Ethical and spiritual disciplines notably focus on values such as "greed", "corruption", or "sin"
- *Ultimate death cross*: Technical analysis of the financial markets uses terms such as "golden cross" and "death cross". The death cross is a crossover resulting from a security's long-term moving average breaking above its short-term moving average or support level. Recent concerns at market trends have resulted in debate on the nature of the [ultimate death cross](#) (Albert Edwards, *The S&P Is On The Verge Of The Ultimate Death Cross*, *Business Insider*, 16 July 2012; Doug Short, *And Now For Something Completely Different: The 'Ultimate' Death Cross*, *Business Insider*, 18 July 2012; Katy Barnato, *S&P 500 Nears 'Ultimate' Death Cross*, *SocGen*, *CNBC.com*, 17 Jul 2012; Jamie Chisholm, *Beware S&P 500's 'ultimate death cross'*, *FT.com*, 17 July 2012)
- *Ultimate failure*, namely the breaking of a material as understood by mechanical engineering

## Engaging with the Ultimate

The variety of understandings of "ultimate" presented above offer a framework through which to consider how it is possible to engage with the quality thereby implied.

- **Recognizing the Ultimate**: Whether or not "ultimate" is merely used for (temporary) rhetorical purposes, how is "it" to be recognized? By comparison with lesser instances? Through whether it "does it for me?"

Especially challenging is whether one has the capacity to recognize it -- or to understand its "ultimate" significance. This is made evident in situations where others are not similarly impressed, or one is not similarly impressed by what others qualify enthusiastically as "ultimate" -- as when used in what is judged to be propaganda, marketing hyperbole and puffery.

More sobering is any subsequent ("post-appreciative") sense of not being able to understand what one "saw in it" -- as with relationships previously qualified as "ultimate". Romantic relationships offer the most classic examples, with others evident in conventional employment, social networks, or sects. Also sobering is the possibility that the "truly ultimate" is not an "it" to be explained or understood through conventional frameworks.

These remarks from an individual perspective illustrate the challenge with respect to any global strategy, framed as the ultimate response to a single crisis or a crisis of crises. Who will appreciate the "ultimate" nature of the plan? Who will contest its significance? These questions are evident from current debate with regard to responses to climate change or to the global financial crisis. Clearly the quality of being "ultimate" is then elusive and readily contested. Given the challenges of faith-based governance, the "ultimate" insight -- unquestionable for one region -- is only too readily challenged by another.

The issue might be framed otherwise in that comprehension of the "ultimate" may well involve an intrinsically "inconvenient" truth -- the term used with respect to climate change by [Al Gore](#) (*An Inconvenient Truth*, 2006) -- as separately discussed (*An Inconvenient Truth about an Inconvenient Truth*, 2008).

- **Comprehending the Ultimate**: A distinction can perhaps be usefully made between "recognizing" the ultimate -- however and by whomever it is presented -- and "comprehending" it to some degree. Importance may be acknowledged but implications may well not be fully appreciated as with the process of awarding medals for "ultimate courage" -- when the nature of the experience for the recipients may well be "denatured" by the medal. This distinction is variously captured in levels of education and experience, or in the many understandings of "initiation" (*Varieties of Rebirth distinguishing ways of being "born again"*, 2004).

The matter may be framed in terms of complexity or appropriateness (*Comprehension of Appropriateness*, 1986; *Dynamics of Symmetry Group Theorizing: comprehension of psycho-social implication*, 2008). The problem is evident in the very limited appreciation that one discipline has for another -- let alone for anything of an "interdisciplinary" or "transdisciplinary" nature. It is unlikely that the Ultimate will be well and fully expressed through any one discipline or framework. As indicated by [Gregory Bateson](#), it is more likely to take the form of a connecting meta-pattern -- just as likely to be expressed, to a degree, through poetry or music.

- **Explaining the Ultimate**: The examples above make it clear that explaining what is held to be "ultimate" is exceptionally problematic and inconvenient -- if not ultimately so!. Every effort at representation may be readily contested. Whilst this might be comprehensible in the case of religion, the example of climate change makes it clear that "facts" are themselves only too readily challenged. How would the "ultimate" challenge of an imminent asteroid collision be rendered credible by comparison? How is that

process to be compared with other foreseen disasters consequent on resource overshoot? How are proffered explanations to be distinguished from the spurious -- as proved to be the case with [weapons of mass destruction in Iraq](#), declared to be an "ultimate threat".

This raises the interesting question of the status of an ultimate Theory of Everything -- which is liable to be beyond the comprehension of most, especially if it relies upon a multiplicity of dimensions (or universes). How to "explain" the recognition of *a world in a grain of sand. And heaven in a wild flower* (William Blake)?

Why is it so readily assumed that the arguments of an "ultimate leader" or an "ultimate teacher" could be "heard"? For those of religious persuasion, there is clear evidence of the inability of many to hear the "message" -- despite (evidential) claims of miracles. The problem is evident in the marketing of any product promoted as "ultimate", if not "miraculous". The climate change debate has provided a number of instances in which the message of the highest authorities -- whether political or academic -- is not clearly heard.

- **"Grasping" an Ultimate insight:** Any effort to "grasp" the Ultimate is the subject of cautions in traditional lore and mythology, as with the Arthurian tale of the [Fisher King](#) and the nature of the [Holy Grail](#). There is even the possibility that any engagement with ultimate reality may call for an attitude reminiscent of "courtship" rather than "discovery" (*Beyond Harassment of Reality and Grasping Future Possibilities: learnings from sexual harassment as a metaphor*, 1996).

The nature of the reluctance of the Ultimate to being "grasped" may be partially suggested by the challenge of any encounter with a famous artist, scientist, politician or guru. After perfunctory expression of appreciation and admiration, the potential for further exchange is a challenge in its own right. More fruitful interaction may be achieved through the unexpected -- as characterized by humour (*Humour and Play-Fullness: essential integrative processes in governance, religion and transdisciplinarity*, 2005; *Requisite Childlike Cognition for Integration of "Heaven"?* 2012).

Given the integrative coherence implied by the Ultimate, there are related concerns regarding the possibility of "ultimate dialogue" (*Evaluating Synthesis Initiatives and their Sustaining Dialogues: possible questions as a guide to criteria of evaluation of any synthesis initiative*, 2000; *Enacting Transformative Integral Thinking through Playful Elegance A Symposium at the End of the Universe?* 2010).

- **"Penetrating" the Ultimate:** As with the previous caution, it is possible that the nature of the Ultimate is resistant to "penetration" and calls for other modes of engagement. As previously discussed (*Eliciting a 12-fold Pattern of Generic Operational Insights: recognition of memory constraints on collective strategic comprehension*, 2011), these merit consideration in relation to the articulation by Steven H. Cullinane (*The Geometry of Logic: finite geometry and the 16 Boolean connectives*, 2007). How might these be related to the 12 (of 16) "complex" archetypal interaction morphologies identified by [Rene Thom](#) (*Structural Stability and Morphogenesis: an outline of a general theory of models*, 1975, p. 307): capturing, sending, crossing, "almost", fastening, giving, rejecting, failing, taking, stirring, emitting, cutting?
- **Recognizing oneself in the Ultimate:** Various arguments have been made for the fundamental significance of self-reflexivity. In the light of arguments for (self) reflexivity ([Hilary Lawson](#), *Reflexivity: the post-modern predicament*, 1985; M. S. Archer, *Making Our Way Through The World: human reflexivity and social mobility*, 2007; M. Ashmore, *The Reflexive Thesis*, 1989; S. J. Bartlett, *Self-Reference: Reflections on Reflexivity*, 1987; Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*, 2007). There is a case for considering that the very attraction of the Ultimate may derive in part from the manner in which one is reflected or mirrored in it -- as considered in various philosophical and traditional uses of the mirror metaphor. Is it then a question of "dancing" with it in some way? Is the Ultimate the ultimate [mirror test](#) of self-awareness, as previously explored (*Self-reflective Embodiment of Transdisciplinary Integration (SETI): the universal criterion of species maturity?* 2008).
- **"Enclosing" the Ultimate:** The conventional approach to an unknown tends to seek means of enclosing it in explanation and predictability, better to engage with it ([Hilary Lawson](#), *Closure: a story of everything*, 2001). There is a case for considering that the Ultimate may deliberately elude such closure and that what is intrinsically valued may correspond more to a dynamic rather than to a static form, as separately discussed (*Freedom, Democracy, Justice: Isolated Nouns or Interwoven Verbs? Illusory quest for qualities and principles dynamically disguised*, 2011). The Ultimate may then be better understood as a verb (cf. Jason Derr, *God Is a Verb*, *The Huffington Post*, 29 July 2010; R. Buckminster Fuller, *God is a Verb*, *Whole Earth Catalog*, Fall 1968; David A. Cooper, *God Is a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism*, 1998). This is consistent with understandings of the Universe by physicist in terms of system dynamics.

Any encounter with the Ultimate may be better framed by the Zen proverb: *Before Enlightenment, chop wood, carry water; after Enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.*

## Persuasion -- and conversion of others to the Ultimate

- **"Conversion" to the Ultimate:** Any encounter with the Ultimate necessarily implies consequences -- perhaps best understood as a form of conversion. This is evident in the case of exposure to the marketing of a product or service promoted as "ultimate". It invites dissociation from lesser products and engagement with the new product. In the case of a belief system or methodology, this could take the form of conversion or adherence -- or surrender to its leadership.

So framed the process may be perceived as alienating. However efforts to "market" and "promote" global remedial strategies may well seek precisely this response -- understood as desirable "impact". This underlying agenda may well be precisely what proves to be alienating to many exposed to an ultimate strategy.

- **Persuasion of others:** Religion has a long tradition of endeavouring to persuade others -- for the good of their souls -- of its particular message regarding the Divine as being the Ultimate. In the Abrahamic religions, this may take the form of a particular obligation -- the [Great Commission](#) of Christianity, for example. Science is currently preoccupied with the importance of persuading the world of its particular truth -- and the deluded nature of the supernatural truths promoted by religion.

The longer history of religion then merits reflection as offering learnings for the path science may choose to follow -- or for any effort to promote a global strategy in response to the problematic human condition. Religion has experimented variously with: missions, church planting, demonizing non-believers, placement of bibles in hotel rooms, tele-evangelism, censorship (as with respect to evolution and family planning), shunning, regular gatherings of the faithful, *fatwas*, inflammatory sermons, use of an inquisitorial process, and militancy (as with the [Church Militant](#) and [Jihadism](#)).

To what extent are there already echoes of these processes with respect to technocratic policies (such as geo-engineering,, bio-engineering, etc) and the framing of political opponents? (cf. *Us and Them -- Relating to Challenging Others: patterns in the shadow dance between "good" and "evil"* 2009). Does science need to persuade the peoples of the whole world of its insights -- for their own good? Might this take the form of a technocratic ultimatum?

- **Time constraints:** Recognition of the ultimate in any guise typically requires time. Ensuring access to attention time is a major concern of marketing -- if not the primary concern -- in the promotion of an "ultimate product". Beyond simple exposure, recognition may require an extensive period of learning, possibly measured in years -- if not a lifetime. However the challenges of information overload -- whether in the form of printed material, emails, videos, or news feeds -- severely restricts attention time. People are necessarily busy if not overwhelmed, especially when faced with challenges of survival -- suggesting an implicit switch from "business models" to "busyness models". Priorities may preclude attention to what others claim to be of ultimate importance. A case can be made for convergence on a singularity (*Emerging Memetic Singularity in the Global Knowledge Society*, 2009).

The above review of web resources is necessarily selective. The review is not helpful in highlighting the extent to which "ultimate" is used in promotion of products and services, in the titles of blog commentary, and in videos. The example of its extensive use in comics was cited.

Especially interesting is how "ultimate" is used as an ultimate qualifier in unexpected contexts where such usage might otherwise be considered improbable -- but nevertheless provides a valued focus for the popular imagination. It might be described as the ultimate form of marketing hyperbole -- a celebration of coolth!

## Awaiting the Ultimate vs. Living Penultimately

As suggested in introducing the above review, "ultimate" would seem to hold a conflation of values and expectations -- whether of the highest values to which humanity can aspire, or of the conditions most feared. There is however a curious degree to which the "ultimate" is descriptive of the unrealized and the unresolved. This even characterizes the promotional marketing of products described as "ultimate" -- something to be experienced, but only if the product is purchased.

**Awaiting closure:** Whatever the promises implied by "ultimate", the situation might be caricatured experientially in terms of waiting for a lottery ticket to "win". In that sense "ultimate" is intimately associated with an "ultimate hope" of a desired future outcome -- or a hope that a feared "ultimate outcome" does not result.

Such remarks apply most readily to individual engagement with "ultimate". The caricature can however also be applied to collective preoccupations -- as with hopes for the resolution of evident crises through an "ultimate strategy", possibly enabled by an "ultimate leadership". Again there may be hope that the "ultimate crises", foreseen or otherwise, will not come about.

The process of awaiting the ultimate might be seen as illustrated by the absurdist play written by [Samuel Beckett](#) (*Waiting for Godot: a tragicomedy in two acts*). Appropriately for this argument, this has been voted "*the most significant English language play of the 20th century*". In it two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait endlessly and in vain for the arrival of someone named Godot. Godot's absence has led to many different interpretations since the play's premiere. Beckett has explicitly denied that he intended "Godot" to represent "God", although some have valued this possibility. For the purpose of this argument, and enriching it, the "Ultimate" could usefully be represented by "Godot", given the dynamics of the play.

**Anticipation and time:** As evident from the examples cited above, use of "ultimate" has strong implications of time -- together with anticipated resolution through a form of transcendence and synthesis. However this tends to imply a very linear understanding of time, with "ultimate" then being somehow at the end of (normal) time -- "beyond the last telephone pole".

The question this then raises is the appropriateness of engaging psychologically in dependence on such anticipation. With respect to collective strategy, is it healthy for the individual to be encouraged to await on the "ultimate" outcome of political promises -- or of those made by other authorities? To what extent is this comparable to the comfort offered by the Jewish [Yom Kippur](#) service and the [Passover Seder](#) in concluding with recitation of the phrase "*Next Year in Jerusalem*"? Or of a "life hereafter", as promised in other traditions?

**Anticipation of death:** Living in anticipation becomes especially poignant in the case of those facing death -- as an experience widely

(and necessarily) acknowledged to be "ultimate". This applies as much to those who can expect to die "normally" at an appropriate age, as to those with a terminal illness, or to those on "death row". It applies to those from whom sacrifice is expected, as with the workers repairing the Fukushima nuclear reactors -- recalling the Roman gladiatorial salute to imperial representatives: *Nos Morituri Te Salutamus*. However it also applies to those who may well die prematurely from an accident -- an "ultimate surprise" in tragic contrast to the life they had anticipated living.

**Fulfillment in cyclic time:** When is hoping for the "ultimate" fruitful and when is living for a hypothetical future simply dysfunctional? In what way might it be fruitful to recognize that the "ultimate" is not going to "happen" -- especially in the form one has been encouraged to expect? Realistically, is life to be experienced "to the full" -- but in practice, "not quite" -- as with reaching "Jerusalem"? And would the "ultimate" be recognized if it did "happen" -- especially if it is a "verb", for example (as argued above)?

Anticipation framed by a linear sense of time merits a degree of challenge, given the radical insights offered by physics into the nature of time in relation to space. It can however also be challenged by worldwide understanding of the cycle of seasons. How is the sense of "ultimate" then held within cyclic time? Only by "breaking the cycle", as might then be implied by climate change?

**Ungrasping sustainability:** Using a geometrical metaphor, is the "ultimate" somehow associated with the "centre" of a cycle -- as with the planets circling the Sun? This metaphor then emphasizes the sense in which the "ultimate" is unreachable in any conventional sense -- and certainly problematic to "grasp". Is it possible that the insights offered by "nothingness" to physics are to be fruitfully related to the most fundamental insights of spirituality -- and to intuitive understandings of the "Ultimate" (cf. *Emerging Significance of Nothing*, 2012; *Import of Nothingness and Emptiness through Happening and Mattering*, 2008; *¿ Embodying a Way Round Pointlessness ?* 2012; *Orbiting Round Nothingness across Communication Space*, 2012).

Is the acclaimed goal of sustainability to be understood as a desirable "ultimate" achievement for humanity? Given the recognized emphasis on cycles and recycling with respect to sustainability, is there a sense in which it is futile and inappropriate to endeavour to "grasp" the centre of such cycles as some kind of endpoint? Is there a "point" to sustainability?

Are there more inherently viable possibilities through seeking to engage more appropriately with cyclic time, as separately discussed (*The Isdom of the Wisdom Society: embodying time as the heartland of humanity?* 2003; *Strategic Embodiment of Time: configuring questions fundamental to change*, 2010).

**Penultimate living:** It is in this sense that this argument has been subtitled *Living Life Penultimately*. Even if the Ultimate may well be about to happen -- or may not -- is living "now" best experienced as living "penultimately"? Rather than awaiting manifestation of the Ultimate, is there a manner in which life can be lived by "circling" the Ultimate -- at an appropriate "orbital" distance? The "penultimate" is then dynamically tangential to the "ultimate" -- effectively "periultimate", avoiding the closure implied by the linear interpretation. Is this the essential insight of *voluntary simplicity*? (cf. *Duane Elgin, Voluntary Simplicity*, 2010). How might this relate to the sense in which "ultimate peace" is not to be attained in that "we only live in the process of peacemaking", as Louis Kriesberg notes that some have argued (*Conflict Resolution Applications to Peace Studies, Peace and Change*, 1991)?

How would reflection on global policy shift if it was not based on achieving the Ultimate -- "getting to the Sun" -- but rather on living in recognition that this was not going to happen? Would this shift help to ground policy in reality rather than unrealistically projecting it into a virtual world of spin and promises made to be broken -- as with recent Earth Summits? It is clear that the Sun is not something it is fruitful to seek to live "on" or "in". The metaphor does however offer recognition of the manner in which the Sun can be fruitfully lived "with" as a vital central reference point.

**Engaging with a process reality:** Further to the case for exploring *process reality*, of potential relevance to this argument is the presentation by Christopher Martin Klinger (*Process Physics: bootstrapping reality from the limitations of logic, Scientific Commons*, 2005) who describes the development and evolution of a new paradigm, a radical information-theoretic modelling of reality. He demonstrates the viability of looking outside the current paradigms of quantum theory and Einstein's relativity by showing that "process physics" yields: *unified emergent phenomena that permit an understanding of fundamental processes and penultimately motivate both quantum theory and relativity as relevant higher-level descriptors within their respective domains*.

Especially for the individual, reframing dependence on the Ultimate acknowledges a degree of subtlety of lifestyle, with which many are necessarily familiar, as discussed separately (*Living as an Imaginal Bridge between Worlds: global implications of "betwixt and between" and liminality*, 2011). Rather than seeking to "enclose" the Ultimate in explanation and predictability, it emphasizes the partial comprehension well illustrated by orbiting the Sun (*Towards the Dynamic Art of Partial Comprehension*, 2012; *Living with Incomprehension and Uncertainty: re-cognizing the varieties of non-comprehension and misunderstanding*, 2012).

In response to the above argument **Jeff Vander Clute** remarks:

It seems there is always an unfolding nextness -- notwithstanding the apparent finality of death -- and that the present moment is always both all we apprehend directly and in a constant state of ending (as well as coming into form). Thus the present moment is a kind of penultimate. Where I "end" up in this moment is that the term "ultimate" isn't all that useful; and 'penultimate' can serve as a bridge from the cul-de-sac of ultimateness to floating and flowing in the present moment. It's interesting how much energy goes into thinking about and planning for the future (i.e. the ultimate), including present concerns about climate change. Although those seem completely justified, I wonder whether the ever-co-arising reality is vastly more malleable and can "turn on an atom," particularly when we loosen our ideas about causality and future?

**Living "penultimately" in relation to death:** This is then consistent with the encouragement of various traditions to reflect on the nature of the Ultimate with which death is associated -- if only as a challenge to understanding the paradoxical relationship between the

illusion of permanence and the nature of "eternal life" (cf. Dalai Lama, *Advice on Dying*; Pende Hawter (*Death and Dying in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition*, 1995). Insights into the processes of the "art of dying" merit similar consideration from a collective perspective. as explored by various cultures (cf. the Christian *Ars moriendi*; the Tibetan *Bardo Thodol*, and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*). Potentially of considerable relevance is the possibility of new insights into the as yet unresolved relationship between "short-term" frameworks and "long-term" relationships as they might apply to sustainability.

One useful approach to "death" in a collective context is through the death of discourse as explored by Loyal Rue (*After the Death of Discourse*, *U. Cin. L. Rev.*, 64, 1277, 1995-1996). The author asks:

Which things matter ultimately? Which things matter penultimately? And which things matter proximately? ... The central point, however, is that survival is in a very general way an objective value for all life forms, humans included.

**Death of the penultimate:** Another approach is through the much-commented line of Stéphane Mallarmé *La Penultime est morte* -- given his emphasis on the "*non dit*" and the "*autrement dit*" implying a willful vagueness about the magnitude of its consequence (cf. Judd D. Hubert, *A Post-Mortem on "The Penultimate"*, 1988; Jean-Michel Rabaté. *La pénultième est morte: spectrographies de la modernité*, 1993; Marvin Richards III, *The Demon of Criticism: Mallarmé and the Prose Poem*, 1995). As argued by David A. Powell (*"La Penultième," or Next-to-Last What? A musical approach to Mallarmé's "Démon"* 2001):

To name, or to attempt to name, the next-to-last thing would contradict Mallarmé's intentions... One area of interest for Mallarmé where a next-to-last position carries meaning or importance is music. This system emphasizes the penultimate sound, which either heralds or satisfies the end. The question remains: Why should the element die? What is the effect of its death? [Powell] explores the possibilities of absence and/or reflexivity, stability, essence, and meaning in relation to this pivotal line, to music, and to the orchestration of both in *Le Démon de l'Analogie*.

As a form of "slogan" for the condition against which this argument is made, the "death of the penultimate" could be interpreted as a loss of capacity to live in the penultimate as a consequence of obsessive focus on the ultimate and achievement of closure -- despite its elusive nature. By "enlivening" the penultimate, possibly understood as enactivating it, "space-time" for a viable habitat is engendered (cf. *Walking Elven Pathways: enactivating the pattern that connects*, 2006). Rather than current preoccupation with the limitations of living globally, emphasis is shifted to the toroidal dynamics of the planetary orbit vital to the seasons, as variously argued (*Complexification of Globalization and Toroidal Transformation*, 2010; *Enabling Governance through the Dynamics of Nature*, 2010; *Implication of Toroidal Transformation of the Crown of Thorns*, 2011; *Exploring the Hidden Mysteries of Oxfam's Doughnut*, 2012)

Ironically the failure to achieve the ultimate, with its global connotations ("global domination", etc) obliges people to live penultimately without realizing or appreciating it fully -- effectively "living on borrowed time" (*Summer Rally In Stocks Living On Borrowed Time? Forbes*, 17 August 2012; *Italy Living on Borrowed Time, Wall Street Journal*, 31 August 2011; *Living on borrowed time: Morsy's political economics, Egypt Independent*, 16 July 2012), The situation can be exploited, as with the repackaging and sale of toxic assets as derivatives, which engendered the current global financial crisis. The art of such exploitation then lies in the capacity to be the penultimate holder of such assets -- leaving the ultimate holder to bear the loss, when their toxicity becomes apparent.

**Engaging with impermanence:** This argument recalls the illusion of permanence cultivated in all empires and civilizations as being effectively "eternal" (cf. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 1970; *Tausendjähriges Reich*). As with the reflection recommended by Buddhism for the individual, are there insights of relevance to sustainability and survival "after death" then to be gleaned from reflecting more coherently on the ultimate death of civilization as conventionally understood (cf. Johan Galtung and Sohail Inayatullah, *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians: perspectives on individual, social, and civilizational change*, 1997; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 2006). Is living penultimately the means by which the eternal sweep of such history becomes meaningful to the individual in the now (cf. *Engaging Macrohistory through the Present Moment*, 2004).

Paradoxes of ultimate cyclic completion (as articulated between the final two hexagrams of the daoist <i>I Ching</i> cycle)	
After Completion ( <i>Chi Chi</i> #63)	Before Completion ( <i>Wei Chi</i> #64)
The transition from confusion to order is completed, and everything is in its proper place even in particulars. This is a very favorable outlook, yet it gives reason for thought. For it is just when perfect equilibrium has been reached that any movement may cause order to revert to disorder. Indicative of a time of climax, which necessitate the utmost caution.	Indicative of a time when the transition from disorder to order is not yet completed. The change is indeed prepared for. While the preceding hexagram offers an analogy to autumn, which forms the transition from summer to winter, this hexagram presents a parallel to spring, which leads out of winter's stagnation into the fruitful time of summer
Indicative interpretation for Policy and Lifestyle	Indicative interpretation for Policy and Lifestyle

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