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## WINDOWS ON THE ECSTATIC: Reflections on Robert Corrington's Naturalism

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IN THE AMERICAN pragmatic philosophical tradition, Robert Corrington has developed a descriptive system that he calls ecstatic naturalism.<sup>1</sup> He draws both from the continental thought of Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hegel, and from the American tradition of Charles Peirce, William James, and Justus Buchler. His metaphorical language is inspired by Heidegger, Tillich, and Buchler, with his own very evocative style.<sup>2</sup> As a system, ecstatic naturalism is a form of theonomous naturalism, drawing from both philosophy and theology. It is my intention here to display some of the chief features of Corrington's highly original system, and to question some of his assumptions by contrasting them with alternative models in order that further insights might emerge. The conclusions presented here attempt to reformulate some of Corrington's findings, especially his notion of the divine, and its relation to nature naturing, and to lay out reasons for moving toward a fuller, more coherent concept both of the divine and of nature. Corrington's originality lies both in his concepts and in his language. Both aspects of his work offer valuable challenges to current theological and philosophical discussion.

It is upon Peirce's phenomenological and semiotic groundwork that Corrington chooses to build. John Deely, in the introduction to Corrington's *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World*, writes that "Insofar as he is trying to tell us that the world is this way, Corrington's book is a work of metaphysics. Insofar as he reveals that what the world is is a natural totality that achieves its orders ('nature natur'd') by semiotic modalities, his book is a work of semiotics."<sup>3</sup>

At the time he wrote this essay, Roger A. Badham was Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Meredith College. He passed away on April 25, 1999.



Any form of theistic naturalism holds that humankind is incorporated fully within nature, not simply associated with it. For nature encompasses all possible and actual existence. Concepts of human spirit are therefore understood as aspects of human possibility within nature, rather than posing the familiar dualism of a supernatural human spirit within an otherwise natural order. Following Tillich's anti-supranaturalist thought, Corrington states that:

by locating God or divine agency outside of nature . . . supernaturalism reduces the metaphysical status of nature. . . . Ironically, "such a move locates the divine natures too far outside of the orders of the world and thus alienates God from the very nature that is allegedly supported by divine agency."<sup>4</sup>

Corrington's form of theonomous naturalism seeks to re-envision the relationship between God and nature. It seeks to describe the "divine natures" ontologically as within nature rather than as supernatural, transcendent forms. The attempt to unite two systems of thought, naturalism and theism, which have historically been considered irreconcilable, requires a bold philosophical strategy that will be considered in the latter part of this paper.

In describing the genealogy of ecstatic naturalism, Corrington depicts naturalism under three general headings.

1. Descriptive naturalism (Dewey, Santayana, and Corrington's teacher Justus Buchler).
2. Honorific naturalism of two types: (a) that which focuses on spirit (Schelling, Emerson, Heidegger) and (b) that which focuses on creativity (Whitehead, Teilhard, Hartshorne, Neville).
3. Ecstatic naturalism (Peirce, Tillich, Bloch, Jung, Kristeva, Corrington).

Ecstatic naturalism is that form of thought which

recognizes its self-transcending character. . . . The movement from a presemiotic potency to a signifying structure or a signifying position is ecstatic insofar as the potency stands outside of itself and gives birth to its own self-other as a sign or sign-system.<sup>5</sup>

This move from the presemiotic condition as a potentiality within nature naturing, which Kristeva refers to as the "*chora*," to the "thrownness" of semiotic existence as one of nature's orders,



as an aspect of nature natured, is central to the distinction between ecstatic and other forms of naturalism.

Corrington's use of the term "ecstatic" points to the dynamic and self-transcendent possibilities within the orders of nature. The future-orientation is drawn from both Heidegger and Tillich without simply recapitulating their themes, for Corrington moves purposely beyond the anthropocentrism of German existentialism. Buchler's influence is particularly strong in the break with anthropocentrism, yet Corrington pushes beyond Buchler too. Buchler's work is focused upon developing an adequate descriptive language of the complexes of nature natured, while Corrington seeks to use this language to push further into the speculative, into the creative center of nature naturing. Ecstatic naturalism incorporates aspects of both descriptive and honorific naturalism. It is "deeply fragmented and fraught with internal tensions" because the thinkers named by Corrington were not members of any unified school or system.<sup>6</sup> Rather, they dared to be at play in the fields of philosophic mystery across the "ontological difference" between nature naturing and nature natured.

#### HUMAN EMBEDDEDNESS IN NATURE

Peirce's triadic semiotics moves far beyond the purely dyadic linguistic semiosis of the continental tradition and offers an architectonic theory for speaking of the whole of nature, of everything that is, in its possibility and actuality. Rejecting the Derridean language of human construct and its "glottocentrism," Corrington embraces a thoroughgoing realism. He writes that "the human process actualizes semiotic processes that it did not make and that it did not shape. Our cultural codes, no matter how sophisticated and multi-valued, are what they are by riding on the back of this self-recording nature."<sup>7</sup>

Cultural codes are insignificant in this radical realism, for "the human process gives shape and texture to innumerable orders of relevance."<sup>8</sup> Humankind ("the human order") cannot avoid imprinting its own procession of selves upon nonhuman orders, and only in the twilight of a waning modernity has it begun to consider the quality of its imprint. But it is hubris to imagine that humans are the only ones doing the impressing, for the other orders of nature press upon one another and upon humans in ways that humans do not. The poststructuralist reduction of the



world of nature to a text is a move in exactly the wrong direction, for it makes nature nothing but an object of human interpretation, a continuation of modernist ideality. We are embedded within the vast and innumerable structures of nature; we are structures of nature ourselves; we are inseparable from many other structures, and would have no being apart from them; they are "strongly relevant" to us. Yet the human order is irrelevant ("weakly relevant") to many orders within nature, just as many orders are only weakly relevant to humankind.

"Human process [is] fully embedded within a nature that is forever beyond its own making."<sup>9</sup> Humans enjoy an ecological niche within the orders of nature, from which we recognize not only our impress, for good or ill, upon those other orders, but their impress upon us and one another. As the human order is acted upon by nonhuman orders, our passivity comes into focus, often overlooked in earlier phenomenology. Corrington is influenced by Buchler's implied ordinal phenomenology which differs from more traditional forms of Husserlian phenomenology "in its insistence that phenomena often co-constitute the human process and give it its unique shapes."<sup>10</sup> These earlier systems have paid insufficient attention to the potencies of nature and their sheer independence from, and indifference to, human potencies.

For example, human efforts to restore ecological balance and harmony to the partially disrupted systems of nature, when viewed from the cosmological perspective of ecstatic naturalism, are vital in undoing the damage caused by human activities. We must seek ways of entering into a new harmonious coexistence with the other orders, as one order among a great community of orders. Yet "nature" (which cannot properly be spoken of as a singular entity) eventually guarantees the end of all orders of nature in this solar system. This star will die. If the end of a single solar system is minuscule in the history of the cosmos, then human extinction is certainly of no account to the vast majority of the innumerable potencies of nature. All the extinct species that result from human cultural folly are likewise of no account in this broadest of perspectives; they are as nothing when compared with the vastness and wonder of the spatio-temporal universe.<sup>11</sup>



Corrington nuances the human role within nature by stressing that nature is humankind's "enabling ground and goal."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, he asserts that "nature is that which is most radically other to the human process." There is a double paradox here: nature is our enabling ground, our support, but it nevertheless promises both our death and extinction. If we tend to speak eulogistically of "Mother Nature," it is of a mother who both gives life and takes it away: "Nature destroys its offspring."<sup>13</sup> A "terrible grace" is at work.<sup>14</sup>

To posit nature over against human process is thus fallacious, for nature cannot be other to a part of itself. As a natural order, we are as distant from nature in the abstract as any other order; i.e., there is no such ontological category as nature that may be posited over against anything else, for nature is that which begets the sum of all its orders. It is, in this sense, a pre-category, it is an ideal, not a real term. "Nature is not some kind of superorder that can be mapped by phenomenological description but the seedbed of innumerable potencies that are not yet themselves orders of relevance."<sup>15</sup> However, unlike the metaphorical seedbed, or tilled earth, from which plants emerge as orders distinct from that seedbed, all orders that emerge "from nature" remain fully part of that from which they emerge. It is no surprise therefore that Corrington uses Averroes's and Spinoza's familiar terms to articulate his imagery.

The enabling ground is what we name abstractly, nature (as *natura naturans*, or nature naturing) from which the nonabstract (but not necessarily concrete) orders of nature are "born" (*natura naturata* or nature natured). In the American pragmatist tradition, Corrington prefers English to Latin terms.

Metaphors of birth remain inadequate; one gives birth to another, which is no longer part of that one. The new-born may then surpass and outlive that which gave it birth. The metaphor of conception is better suited, as the DNA of the sperm and egg are replicated in every cell of the new "product." A new order which emerges from the potencies of nature takes on distinctive qualities that are different from other emergent potencies and orders, but, like them, it remains fully encompassed as one more *extension* of nature. As orders emerge, nature is increased in its distinguishable characteristics: It is more diverse. Likewise, as orders die out, as with the extinction of a species, distinguishable



characteristics are lost and nature is decreased. It becomes less diverse.

Yet even the metaphor of sperm and egg is open to misunderstanding, for the term "orders of nature" designates far more than living, reproducing species. It refers to any differentiated aspect of nature natured, including non-living material and non-material "mind." Mind is not privileged over matter in ecstatic naturalism. Matter is not "effete mind" as in Peirce's objective idealism.<sup>16</sup> Thoughts, intellect, emotion, perception are also orders of nature and can be described using Buchler's concept of ontological parity (which opposes itself to Heidegger's concept of ontological priority).

Any order of nature that creates beyond itself in any way is a mediator of the processes of nature. Those particular human qualities that make us so radically different from other species do not make us any more or less natural, but they do make us more versatile. So much so that we have historically assumed a radical discontinuity with nature, even though the continuities are far deeper, as evolutionary theory insists. Continuity between the orders of nature has been a central and most important feature of American naturalism. The possibility of meaningful interaction with, and interpretation of, nature is based upon this assertion, which has been developed semiotically in Corrington's system.

The desire to discover meaning "within" or "behind" phenomena which represent transcendent possibilities or purposes beyond the routine of human experience betrays the phenomenological tendency to privilege "consciousness and its alleged transcendental and constitutive acts."<sup>17</sup> Transcendence in Buchler's ordinal metaphysics is not that which is hidden behind the natural phenomenal orders of nature, but is an integral potency deeply embedded within various orders. Ordinal metaphysics is, therefore, critical of those forms of Hegelianism which represent spirit as synonymous with freedom, privileging its value over against embodied finitude. This metaphysics shares Reinhold Niebuhr's criticism of idealistic philosophy for "identifying the universal perspective of the self-transcendent ego with universal spirit."<sup>18</sup>

Many contemporary feminist and postmodern thinkers are seeking to correct this modernist problem by eliminating the categories of transcendence. This Corrington considers an equally



dangerous error, and he attempts to address the problem by stressing the possibility of transcendence within the bounds of natural process, following the American philosophical tradition of Emerson. He seeks to escape Hegelian dualism without losing either immersion in nature or transcendence as a human possibility. Transcendence is a potency of nature realized within and through the human process, whereby the full reach of human process is pushed to new horizons beyond the pre-established patterns of the self or the community. So in this context, Corrington argues that "spirit" speaks out of the very heart of the natural process in the language of eschatological hope. He argues that it is a lure from those "powers of origin" which limit the self's reach and "mark it for death."

#### EXCURSUS: MECHANICAL MODELS OF NATURE

The thoroughly organistic language of ecstatic naturalism, as it develops out of process thought and that of Buchler, is very welcome, particularly in the recognition of the sacred as an aspect intrinsic to nature. Martin Buber wrote that "spirit is nature's blossom," but the sacred as an aspect of nature has been overlooked in most naturalist systems because of materialist rejections of religious possibility within the orders of nature.<sup>19</sup> E.O. Wilson, following the mechanistic tradition of Descartes, Leibniz, and Ryle, continues to speak primarily in terms of the mind as "an epiphenomenon of the neural machinery of the brain."<sup>20</sup> This metaphor of machine is a complex one that has affected both science and philosophy in profound but unnatural and increasingly unhelpful ways. The modeling of human processes upon those of machines, although convincing and powerful enough in modernist thought, is nothing but an inversion and perversion of the original organic model. For, originally, all machines have been modelled upon organic patterns. No machine has ever been designed that does not in some profound way mimic organic abilities, yet in specialized and enhanced ways. From the spinning wheel to the computer, machines are fingers, hands, arms, and minds based on organic prototypes. Cars are faster horses, with pumps for hearts and circulation systems filled with water and oil. The electron beam accelerator simply seeks to "throw" and "break" in more specific and more powerful ways



than can be achieved by any organism (although bio-engineering threatens to reverse even that trend).

Machines lack the generalized skills of the organism with its other myriad qualities, possibilities, and perceptions. As these non-machine aspects were increasingly devalued within the world of Newtonian-Cartesian dualism, an inversion of models occurred; humans were found to be remarkably like fabulous machines, and the universe was found to work like one too. The problem of inverting the pattern is its reductionism, as all non-mechanistic qualities of the organism were increasingly overlooked and denied. Whereas Peirce speaks of three dimensions of organic evolutionary constitution, the mechanistic being but one, Wilson insists that "only hard-won empirical knowledge of our biological nature will allow us to make optimum choices among the competing criteria of progress," but his concept of biological nature is mechanistic in extreme. He makes it clear that the brain's capacities to select concepts relating to spirit

must have arisen by . . . mechanistic process. They are either direct adaptations to past environments . . . or at most constructions thrown up secondarily by deeper, less visible activities that were once adaptive in this stricter biological sense.<sup>21</sup>

By means of this consistent devaluation, Wilson is able to dismiss religion because "beliefs are really enabling mechanisms (*sic*) for survival."<sup>22</sup> But at the same time, he speaks in positive terms of the "reflective person," assuming that the adaptive mechanism of self-reflection is a positive feature of human adaptation and that it is rationally opposed to holding "beliefs." For Wilson, therefore, the reflective person is the one who rejects all other possibilities but the findings of a reductive scientism. His confidence seems not only absurd but also obscene in a post-Holocaust world. Was not the totalitarian desire for an efficient and well-ordered state, striving with a single purpose towards a single goal, built upon the mechanistic model?

Process thought and the language of ecstatic naturalism offer much richer models for imagining our world. Organic models resist the possibilities of mechanistic totalities. As models of humankind and of society, they are never as clean or immediate as mechanistic models.

In a recent essay on Whitehead, John Cobb has written that



the modern mind has sought to understand in more limited spheres, and it is satisfied with less ultimate answers. With this model in mind, the university divides reality into segments, and it studies each as if it existed in separation from the others and could be understood in that separation. Little attention then needs to be given to distinctive characteristics of the whole.<sup>23</sup>

In similar kind, Buber speaks of the I-it objectification that things as mere objects are "primally alien outside and inside you."<sup>24</sup> The familiar attempt to be the value-free neutral observer, unaffected by the mute object under observation, functions at the utilitarian level, the object remaining a resource for manipulation. This imperial model rejects the "usefulness" of an appreciative consciousness, which Buber describes as "an acceptance of otherness."<sup>25</sup> In rejecting the bifurcation and fragmentation that comes from the mechanistic model, Whitehead spoke of "the disastrous metaphysical doctrine of physical matter . . . [as] devoid of self-enjoyment."<sup>26</sup> Ecstatic naturalism, with its strongly original metaphorical structures, seeks a re-organization of our worldview and finds value in Whitehead's holistic process approach. The language of ecstatic naturalism stands powerfully against mechanistic reductionism. Corrington has successfully developed a careful vocabulary of nature intended to open new horizons of possibility for his readers.

#### POWERS OF ORIGIN, POWERS OF TRANSCENDENCE

The concept of the powers of origin is central to Corrington's thesis. These powers are the potencies that connect us, positively, and bind us, negatively, to that which has preceded the present moment. As the self is born, it is "indebted" (Buchler) to the semiotic achievements of the past. Emancipatory potencies can be found "still slumbering in past products," and "the flight from origins is the flight from embodiment and finitude."<sup>27</sup> Transcendence is the process at work "within and against these powers of origin," which, for Corrington, are deeply ambiguous in their characteristics. So, to the degree that transcendence is awarded a positive aspect, origin is negative.

One's horizons are determined by the powers of origin, and the extent to which they can alter is dependent upon transcendence, when our historical determinants become "permeable to some sense of radical expectation" (whether for the individual, for groups, for nations, etc.). Powers of origins form us and limit



us, and our boundaries often become too fixed by the semiotic structures which explain our world. Transcendence is necessary at every point where our boundaries are too rigid, for it alone opens up a hermeneutic clearing in which we can expand beyond the semiotic structures of origins and discover newness. Corrington therefore describes transcendence as a gift of the spirit.

Heidegger's stress upon the primacy of the future is strongly relevant for Corrington's work; the positive aspect of the formative powers of origin fades quickly. But contrary to the nostalgia in Heidegger and Gadamer for a pristine past, origin generally takes on a profound negativity for Corrington. It is linked to a sense of historical inertia or oppression. Historical progress is interpreted as the result of the potencies of life, or of transcendence, while the inert or oppressive forces of history are interpreted as the result of the powers of origin. His progressivist desire causes him to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to all origins.

However, Corrington's decision to equate origin with oppression and transcendence with liberation and/or spirit places these powers within ethical categories and in a somewhat Hegelian orbit. The powers of origin, Corrington claims, limit the self. The metaphorical associations in his text make the concept of origins heavy, burdensome, a power to be escaped. On the other hand, Corrington views the powers of transcendence within positive ethical categories, equating them with Kant's kingdom of ends. Although Corrington means to have us understand transcendence and spirit as natural, they nevertheless seem to float "above" and "higher" than finitude/origins. A separation is implicit that sails perilously close to privileging self as nonfinite and transcendent in the face of embodiment and death, both of which retain implicit elements of being evils to transcend.

This attitude toward origins stands in uneasy tension with a thoroughgoing naturalism in which embodiment and finitude are qualities that are ends in themselves, and in which death, a nontranscendable limit, is as natural as birth. In such a naturalist system, although death can be tragic and a deep source of grief, it cannot be treated as an evil. Thus, Corrington's assertion that the powers of origin mark the self for death reinvests death with



a moral dimension, a step back from a thoroughgoing naturalism.

In a naturalistic system in which nature is understood as non-moral at its "heart," origins and transcendence must surely be freed from ethical categories and understood as powers, in all the ambiguity of that concept. So, against Corrington, I think that powers of origin are interwoven with oppressive and emancipatory sign-systems in our past.

Very few people would claim that every formative power in their lives was oppressive, even if many were. The very ambiguity of origins points towards the equal ambiguity of the "content-free realms of transcendence," which seek to press against limitations and move towards new horizons. Certainly transcendence can be form-shattering, but it may as easily shatter previously liberated and liberating forms as oppressive forms. Enlightened forms can be destroyed by newer oppressive forms of transcendence. Possibility is always profoundly ambiguous. The human desire for transcendence from origins can become as easily demonic as the opposite desire to resist liberating possibilities. The demonic erupts within both the powers of origin and transcendence. *Liberté* and *égalité* can always issue into a Robespierrian reign of terror. It is an illusory idealism that makes transcendence synonymous with progress, or that links change unreflectively with goodness and virtue.

Corrington is at least partially aware that he is in danger of privileging mere possibility. He points out that any content-specific utopian plan becomes "inflated with an illusory form of empowerment to compensate for its lack of intrinsic power."<sup>28</sup> He also admits that forms of coercion emerge from content-specific strategies and thus may function demonically. But what he means by a non-content-specific transcendence remains unclear. He fails to offer sufficient warning that transcendence is laden with both good and evil possibilities. Tyranny is never far off, and ecstatic naturalism would do well to heed the warnings of Niebuhrian realism to avoid its tendencies toward the illusion of optimism.

#### A "THEODICY" OF NATURE

Corrington's naturalism, in ascribing moral goodness to the spirit at the *coeur*/core of nature, asserts eschatological hope as



the ground structure of the human process, the most necessary lure by which the human may withstand and overcome the tyranny of evil. Hope is the natural grace that comes "to the human process from the self-giving of worldhood."<sup>29</sup> It lures the human process beyond the limits of its semiotic structures into the new possibility, the new hermeneutical clearing. Here Corrington transfers Peirce's concept of agapastic evolution, explained by Peter Ochs as "the objective reality of love in the universe," into one of hope.<sup>30</sup> If idolatry is a clinging to previous horizons — a refusal of the eschatological not-yet of the spirit — hope is the power of the spirit that releases us from those false limits into further fulfillments of being.

Can Corrington be right? Is the spirit more deeply connected with eschatological hope than with final despair? What reasons do we have, within the purview of naturalism, to assume that a hope in goodness is primary at "the heart of nature" given the prevalence of immense evil in the world? Can it be sufficiently demonstrated that evil does not stand equally at the "heart"?

Corrington presumes the primacy of a morally good universe plagued by the irruption of the demonic within its orders, although he is not at all unfriendly to Schopenhauer's philosophy. Corrington replaces the idea of evil at the heart of nature with the idea of "woundedness." His use of the term "ontological difference" suggests a radical discontinuity within nature, and his imagery is of a violent "thrownness" of nature's offspring from the material maternal, as nature naturing "ejects" its orders into the world. He suggests that the orders of nature therefore experience a longing for the material maternal.

"At the heart of the self is a cleft, a wound that emerges with the first dawn of consciousness and remains with the self until its death."<sup>31</sup> This melancholic longing, which emerges from the wound within each order, is at the heart of all the orders of nature, including the divine order.

As a form of naturalistic theodicy, this remains insufficient. I believe that a Kierkegaardian-Tillichian theodicy offers a far more promising solution for ecstatic naturalism. The possibility of freedom always implies the possibility of sin. Human freedom is the basis both for the possibility of good or evil and for the possibility of responsibility in choosing good over evil. For God, "not permitting sin would mean not permitting freedom," Tillich



writes; "this would deny the very nature of man, his finite freedom."<sup>32</sup> Only those orders of nature invested with any degree of freedom of action may be said to be capable of evil. Evil does not stand at the heart of nature, nor is it a loose cannon erupting unpredictably within the orders of nature.

Death cannot be posited as evil in any form of naturalism, nor is it meaningful to ascribe evil, a moral category, to events that are not connected with freedom of action. A storm that kills innocent people is not an evil, though it remains a terrible disaster, whereas an individual who intentionally kills even one innocent person commits evil. Natural disasters are not acts of God, and humans alone are responsible for the evil that is acted out in their world, not God or any intermediate powers.<sup>33</sup> Evil is one potency within some orders of natural complexes. It is not contradictory in any theistic system to posit the goodness of God over against the existence of evil. It is freedom that is "willed" by God in classical Christian thought, not its possible results.<sup>34</sup> The question, "why does God not prevent evil?" is synonymous with, "why does God not revoke human freedom?"

On these terms, God is the author of evil only insofar as God is the author of freedom. I believe that this form of existential analysis of evil when synthesized with the phenomenology of ecstatic naturalism holds enormous promise for describing the orders of nature and the human's place within nature.

However, if arbitrary cosmic forces of evil contend with other potencies, as Corrington asserts, hope remains forever ungrounded. There remains real cause for fear that the demonic may be finally more powerful than those potencies in which we find hope. Schopenhauer's assessment that God must be evil and that the world must be forever indifferent to human need was formed upon such observations, and final despair is the logical result of such a belief. It was not only his failure to win students from Hegel's classroom in Berlin that left Schopenhauer bitter in his latter days! Classical Christianity has traditionally upheld the ultimate power of God over other potencies, and has refused to allow that God could be other than omnipotent. The theological risk that God may not win the battle against evil was too profound. Hence the Church, believing in evil as a cosmic force, has vigorously upheld the paradox that the divine is all-powerful and yet permits evil without itself being evil. It is Tillich rather



than Whitehead who most nearly resolves the issue of theodicy, whether naturalist or theistic.

#### THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF GOD: FOUR DIMENSIONS

Corrington's understanding of God is a radical departure from previous descriptions. For Hartshorne, "God is that than which nothing greater can be thought but is, in itself, selfsurpassable."<sup>35</sup> But for Corrington, God is an order of nature — the most powerful order of relevance in nature and also the ground of all other orders, with its own self-surpassing characteristics and lures.<sup>36</sup> Despite his use of Spinoza's categories, Corrington refuses any pantheistic or panentheistic identification between God and nature naturing or God and nature. His evolutionary naturalism rejects the traditional doctrine of an uncreated God who created nature, either *ex nihilo* or from primordial "stuff," either in the beginning or through time, and who is, therefore, in some sense "above" or "beyond" nature, transcendent. Yet with classical theism he defends the distinct integrity of the divine over against the other processes of nature, and with process theology he retains a thoroughly immanent concept of God, fully embedded in nature. He develops a highly original possibility of a God, or a "divine process," which is fully emergent from nature naturing as a natural order. Yet as the most potent order, it stands in unique relationship to nature naturing, stretched across the ontological difference, the divide between nature naturing in its potentialities, and nature natured in all its actualities. Corrington describes the possible evolving traits within the divine process phenomenologically. "God is ontologically unique in being both a complex within nature and the ground for the sheer prevalence of all complexes. The divine natures participate in both sides of the ontological difference."<sup>37</sup>

Corrington identifies four dimensions of divine being — four aspects for appreciating both the continuities and the discontinuities between God and the orders of nature. While Whitehead stresses continuities, and Barth discontinuities, Corrington mediates the complex relationship between God and nature by appealing to this radically non-monistic model, which may perhaps be understood as drawing creatively (and unconsciously?) upon the genius of the doctrine of the Trinity: One God in four



dimensions, transcendent and immanent, knowable and unknowable, made and not made.

In the first dimension, God is a natural complex within nature natured, though "plurally located." Like any natural complex, the divine emerges out of nature naturing and is strongly or weakly relevant to other orders of nature. Epiphanies of power experienced within nature by humans are traceable to this dimension of the divine natures. God is available (thus process thought) to the human process as a fragmented origin. It is fragmented insofar as we may remain opaque to signs of the divine. These signs are, broadly understood, sacramental in quality. In this dimension Corrington speaks of moral characteristics of God such as sympathy and frustration.

In the second dimension, God is still understood as a natural complex, yet in terms of fragmentary goals, is a lure "to move selves beyond the opacity of origins" and "to move the community toward a sense of ontological parity."<sup>38</sup> It is here that justice emerges in the divine-human eschatological dimension. An *alpha-omega* dialectic emerges between origin and goal in these first two dimensions, bearing a superficial resemblance to Whitehead's primordial and consequent natures of God. But, while Corrington is partially receptive to Whitehead's concept of the consequential nature of God, he rejects the primordial mind of God as both Platonic and anthropomorphic.

The third dimension is correlated to nature naturing, but Corrington is not willing to lose the distinction between them. God in this dimension can be understood as the ground of being, in Tillich's language, yet without becoming the Schellingian "All" or "One." "God sustains the complexes of the world, but is not the creator of the world itself . . . but is, itself sustained by nature."<sup>39</sup> There is no realm in nature from which God is absent, natural grace being Corrington's language for this omnipresence. While in the first two dimensions, the divine may be opaque to human knowing, natural grace in this third dimension infuses all being, yet without interacting or altering any traits of any orders. That is the work particularly of the second dimension. God is pretemporal in the third dimension, in contrast to process thought's sublation of all things under time. Corrington locates creativity in this dimension. This creativity is linked to nature naturing and to the sustaining power within nature natured.



Hence God in this third dimension is stretched across the ontological difference between nature naturing and nature natured.

Finally, in the the fourth dimension, God faces into the encompassing of nature, which is both part of, and beyond, the divine natures. Hence, "both God and the human process live with some sense of the encompassing potency of nature."<sup>40</sup> The encompassing, which Corrington considers as synonymous with nature naturing, is "the ultimate 'not-yet' for the divine life."<sup>41</sup> Corrington applies Hartshorne's evolutionary notion of the self-surpassibility of God here, but without embracing panentheism. For ecstatic naturalism there is always that within nature to which God remains other, i.e., every other order.

These four dimensions of divine nature reveal a unity within ecstatic naturalism which Corrington does not make plain, yet they offer further insights by way of analogy into his articulation of the dimensions of God. In offering this interpretation, I am engaging in what Corrington elsewhere approvingly describes as "emancipatory re-enactment" — the reading of a previous work in such a way as to find new possibilities within it. So perhaps we can appropriate the description of the divine process to discover that the human process, and indeed, any order of nature, can also be considered according to these four dimensions. The human process is embodied as a natural complex within the powers of origin and faces into the futurity of goals (the first and second dimensions), yet within the human process is that generative and sustaining potency of nature naturing, without which all the orders of nature natured would have no further dynamic possibility. Nature naturing, after all, is not located somewhere other than the orders of nature which derive from it. It is the very generative process from which all orders derive without being separate from them. Yet the human process, while thus facing into the generative potencies of nature naturing, does not by any means encompass them, for they are also omnipresently located in all other orders of nature.

Thus the human process, too, is stretched across the ontological difference between being an order of nature and being engaged in the generative process itself (of any thought, feeling, or act in which we engage, to say nothing of the more obvious regenerative organismic characteristics which emerge more obviously from the potencies of nature naturing). As God can be



equated in the third dimension with nature naturing, so we, in our third dimension, can be equated with nature naturing to the extent that its potencies are fulfilled in and through us. Still in this third dimension we can be described as the ground of being to all the orders of nature which have being as a result of our being. This involves the mitochondria, bacteria, etc., to which we play host (see Lewis Thomas's engaging portrayal in his *Lives of a Cell*<sup>42</sup>), as well as all orders which emerge from us, like thoughts, words, deeds, gestures, etc.

We are the ground of being to all that humans produce, from the grunt to the sonnet, the wheel to the compact disk, the cave painting to Andy Warhol (progress is not guaranteed). In the fourth dimension, we face into the encompassing, that which stands beyond the horizons of our own experience of all that is, both part of us and beyond us within nature, the not-yet of the human life. In this dimension we are self-surpassable, a feature already acknowledged by Corrington.

Whether the four dimensions offer us a model for understanding the human process after the analogy of God, or for understanding God after the analogy of the human process, is really not important, nor does such an *analogia entis* need to be understood as reducing a theological model to either anthropomorphism or anthropocentrism. Austin Farrer rightly considered that every human perception is always a projection of self-understanding, and the American pragmatists, *par excellence*, understand that we cannot stand outside our place in the story.<sup>43</sup> Corrington's descriptive language of four divine natures leans upon Jungian categories (the perfection of four) and a creative subjective projection of the psyche's imaging power cast outwardly in metaphysical terms upon the cosmos.

"God is a product of nature naturing, yet the ground of nature natured. Nature naturing fulfills its own plenitude in the creation of a God that is both finite and infinite."<sup>44</sup> Just as the Trinity can only rightly be understood in tension with the affirmation of the unity of God, so these four dimensions are phenomenologically-described facets through which we can receive deeper illumination into the unity of the divine; they are not four compartmentalized substances which constitute God. However, unlike those who hold the classical doctrine of the Trinity, Cor-



rington is able to embrace the limitations and frustrations within the divine natures for which process theology has prepared us.<sup>45</sup>

Yet it remains possible to draw lines of relationship between the theological model of the Trinity and Corrington's four dimensions. Indeed, there may be possibilities for rich crossfertilization here requiring significant exploration. Following the trinitarian model, we might suggest that the self-surpassing fourth dimension which transcends the orders of nature is the dimension of the Father; the third dimension is the dimension of Spirit, stretched across the ontological difference, while the first and second may be thought of as the immanent christological *alpha* and *omega*.

We begin to see at this point some of the continuities and discontinuities of ecstatic naturalism in comparison with other philosophical and theological models. Within the four dimensions there is a creative play among some major theological theories: classical trinitarian theology influenced by Moltmann and Pannenberg, evolutionary process theology, and Tillich's brilliant synthesis of Heideggerian existentialism and Schellingian essentialism.

#### SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF GOD

If there are orders in the world, each of which has some degree of power and relevance, or selfhood in the broadest sense, then Corrington agrees with Hartshorne that it is absurd to speak of omnipotence as pertaining to any one order. He opposes Hartshorne's panentheism, in which God is understood as the "individual integrity" of the world. Hartshorne writes that "simply outside of this super-society and super-individual, there is nothing."<sup>46</sup> Perhaps influenced by Whitehead's bifurcation between God and creativity, Corrington rejects God as the creator of all that is. For Corrington, God, as product of nature, is the most powerful of the orders so produced, yet is not synonymous with spirit, which he describes as the spirit of nature, not of God, although the spirit relates to the divine in the third dimension as "beneath" all orders of the world. The spirit, in the sense that it is neither a process nor an order, but "the potency that makes worldhood possible" sometimes appears synonymous with nature naturing.<sup>47</sup> Its identity remains ambiguous in terms of its relationship with the divine process and with nature naturing.



Corrington is one of the few philosophical theologians today exploring in depth the evocative notion of nature naturing and nature natured. He is radical in partially decoupling God from nature naturing, while affirming that God is an order of nature. He breaks with both panentheist and classical theist models with this affirmation. My central criticism against his current position can be put in the form of a question: What is the role of a God that is a product of nature and its ground, and yet not its producer? As we have seen already, in ecstatic naturalism, the role of creator is ascribed not to the divine natures but to nature naturing.

However sophisticated the theological concept, ecstatic naturalism's God is in danger of becoming a linguistic cipher bereft of even symbolic relevancy or potency, no longer the ascription for that than which nothing else is greater, nor more worthy of worship: a God, the worship of which is inevitably idolatry. "God" is linguistically emptied out, and it is to nature naturing and spirit that one must look for "the unconditional," *das Unbedingte*, in Tillich's words, to which a worshipping community might wish to address itself in terms of ultimate concern. It is here that naturalism and the concept of God seem least capable of reconciliation. This *kenosis* can be experienced as a form of negative theology which may indeed be a powerful Jasperian lure for us to break with traditional models which are proving extremely problematic.<sup>48</sup>

While Justus Buchler was prepared to speak of God as a natural complex insofar as "whatever is, in whatever way, is a natural complex," without raising the issue of ontological "is-ness," Corrington's is a thoroughly ontological God. Buchler warns of the dangers of speaking of God when he writes that

translation presupposes an "original"; so that when a philosopher wishes to use and adapt the concept of God, but fails to grasp the sense of the schematic requirement and fails to grasp the compulsion behind it, he achieves not the metaphysical or poetic perception he might have sought, but a somewhat hollow categorial freedom.<sup>49</sup>

If the compulsion behind the theological concept of God is best described in terms of that which creates and recreates us and that is worthy of our worship, then the God of ecstatic naturalism may not yet be compelling. It is a danger of metaphysical



contemplation that it commonly strands its disciples between the God of monotheistic religion and that of the philosophers. Emmanuel Levinas, aware of this risk, warned in his Talmudic reading, "The Temptation of Temptation," given at the 1964 Colloquium of Jewish Intellectuals in Paris, that "in my commentary, the word 'God' will occur rarely. It expresses a notion religiously of utmost clarity, but philosophically most obscure."<sup>50</sup> That clarity has to do with religious commitment to the ultimate focus of worship.

The obscurity of a noncreator God is that it shares only a few of the features of the one to whom the honour of worship is due. Within ecstatic naturalism, God is partially displaced and phenomenological descriptions of nature naturing and spirit have to satisfy the human demand to comprehend that from which all else comes. Paul Ricoeur says of the biblical tradition:

the word "God" does not function as a philosophical concept . . . Even if one is tempted to say . . . that "God" is the religious name for being, still the word says more . . . To understand the word "God" is to follow the meaning of the word. By the direction of the meaning I mean its double power to gather all the significations which issue from the partial discourses and to open up a horizon which escapes from the closure of discourse the function of the preaching of the Cross and Resurrection . . . [which] give[s] to the word "God" a *density* which the word "being" does not possess.<sup>51</sup>

The central problem is that the model of a non-creator God raises too many questions about its own relevance. Rather than becoming transparent, it is in danger of becoming self-absorbed, opaque. Yet despite these reservations, ecstatic naturalism has a profound inner potency to act as a dramatic goad for future philosophical and religious speculation. For what has become unsatisfactory about classical theism, to which Corrington is indirectly responding, is that the concept of supranatural activity within the orders of nature is unconvincing without a strong fideism that is able to seek out the hidden acts of God that occur separately from nature, acts hidden from all but the eyes of faith. Barth's strong reconstitution of this transcendent God has strained to the breaking point the relationship between the religious faith and scientific understanding.

The true communicable grace within ecstatic naturalism resides with the divine only through its confrontation with the self-disclosure of nature naturing, as a result of which the spirit is



encountered. Self-disclosure, and the pervasive sense of fecund joy in the very plenitude of nature echoes Leibniz. The dialectic which Corrington desires to retain at all costs is that between the *eros* within the orders of nature natured and the unconscious momentum within nature naturing. Yet he has suggested that nature naturing *hungers* to manifest itself in the orders of nature. It is appetitive, "eager" to disclose, and the spirit is the spirit of disclosure (using Pannenberg's language). Corrington, who straightforwardly rejects panpsychism or panexperientialism, nevertheless appears to share some of its insights at this point.<sup>52</sup> The appetitive language which Corrington uses of nature naturing itself nevertheless raises questions of its internal characteristics which remain unresolved.

If God cannot be spoken of as synonymous with nature naturing and spirit, then my rather brazen suggestion (especially brazen coming from a theist) is that Corrington would do well to unburden the logic of his system by doing away with the concept of God altogether and seeking instead to demonstrate the redemptive and sustaining potencies of nature insofar as they can be shown. I am not the first to make this suggestion. Buchler claims that privilege, and Robert Neville has written of *Nature and Spirit*, "Why not worship nature naturing, the 'encompassing,' as Corrington calls it, and eliminate middling gods?"<sup>53</sup> Corrington speaks of "self-disclosure" as a fundamental energy-event of nature naturing within the sheer proliferation of nature's overwhelmingly fecund orders. This is reminiscent of the idea of disclosure in Gadamer (leaning upon Heidegger's term *Erscheinung*); that the inner element of the work of art, its truth "shines forth," it "presents itself."<sup>54</sup> If self-disclosure be considered as an element within the orders of nature which point back to their source, and this source of every order of nature can thus be understood as the *chora*, the womb from which all has sprung forth, then what need is there for claiming an ontological divine order?

#### SUMMARY

In describing Corrington's work, its influences, and its linguistic and conceptual creativity, I have attempted to bring into sharper focus the philosophical theology of a vital new voice deserving of wide attention. Corrington's appropriation of the in-



sights of American pragmatism, especially of Peircean semiotics, his critique of the "glottocentrism" of the continental hermeneutical tradition, and his creative rethinking of our and God's place in the cosmos, offer a rich and powerful instrument for further constructive philosophical and theological work. Ecstatic naturalism is unapologetically metaphysical, unhindered by so many contemporaneous attempts to eclipse speculative questioning. By raising the largest of cosmological and metaphysical questions, it faces the findings of contemporary scientific knowledge and dares to think about God, and at the same time, it questions the divine process in the most fundamental and courageous ways. In this regard, Corrington is firmly in the tradition of American pragmatism, richly indebted to Peirce's architectonic thought and opposed to the artificial continental divide between the human and natural sciences, and the current fashionable allergy to metaphysics. As a result, Corrington's system expands our thought about our place in the cosmos, but still wrestles with the particular manifestations of the powers which affect us in particular ways.

Through the transformation of language and symbolic imagery, Corrington seeks to open new "hermeneutic clearings" for the future. In ways reminiscent of both Schleiermacher and Tillich, he seeks to provide new wineskins as well as new wine.<sup>55</sup> And like Peirce, he seeks to generate new habits of action or belief. Through this creative recasting, antecedent linguistic-symbolic meanings are transformed, most dramatically in the attempt to reformulate our concepts of the divine. These concepts, in turn, may be of immense value in expanding constricted religious categories beyond their current limited horizons and pointing toward new, transformative clearings of the spirit. For that reason, while I am critical of some aspects of Corrington's work, I find his ecstatic naturalism fresh and immensely promising for further philosophical, theological, and ecological thinking.



## NOTES

1. Corrington understands his work to be very much "in progress" and his ideas continue to evolve concerning his conception of ecstatic naturalism. His books include *The Community of Interpreters: On the Hermeneutics of Nature and the Bible in the American Philosophical Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1987, second edition with new preface, 1995); *Nature and Spirit: An Essay in Ecstatic Naturalism* (New York: Fordham UP, 1992); *An Introduction to C.S. Peirce: Philosopher, Semiotician, and Ecstatic Naturalist* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993); *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World, Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994); *Nature's Self: Our Journey from Origin to Spirit* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); and with Robert C. Neville, *Nature's Religion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997). In addition, he has written over forty essays and articles. Among the more important ones for our current context are, "Toward a Transformation of Neoclassical Theism," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 27.4 (Winter 1987): 391-406; "Ecstatic Naturalism and the Transfiguration of the Good," *Empirical Theology: A Handbook*, ed. Randolph C. Miller (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1992) 203-21; and "Nature's God and the Return of the Material Maternal," *The American Journal of Semiotics* 10.1-2 (1993): 115-32. For a further analysis of Corrington's work, see Todd A. Driskill, "Beyond the Text: Ecstatic Naturalism and American Pragmatism," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 15.3 (1994): 305-23.
2. For a discussion of Buchler's use of the concept of natural complexes, see Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, ed. Kathleen Wallace and Armen Marsoobian, with Robert S. Corrington (Albany: State U of New York P, 1990); and *Nature's Perspectives: Prospects for Ordinal Metaphysics*, ed. A. Marsoobian, K. Wallace and R.S. Corrington (Albany: State U of New York P, 1991), especially Richard J. Bernstein, "Buchler's Metaphysics," 29-47.
3. *Ecstatic Naturalism* ix.
4. *Ecstatic Naturalism* 17.
5. *Ecstatic Naturalism* 18- 19.
6. *Ecstatic Naturalism* 19.
7. *Ecstatic Naturalism* ix.
8. *Nature and Spirit* 10.
9. *Nature and Spirit* 13.
10. *Nature and Spirit* 10.
11. See Roger A. Badham, "Images of Creation: An Ecological Theology," *Becoming Persons*, ed. Robert N. Fisher (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1994).
12. *Nature and Spirit* 22.
13. *Nature and Spirit* 41.
14. Corrington, *An Introduction to C. S. Peirce* 213.
15. *Nature and Spirit* 8.
16. Charles Peirce, "The Architecture of Theories," *The Essential Charles Peirce*, ed. N. Houser & C. Kloesel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1992) 293.
17. *Nature and Spirit* 25-26.
18. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1964) 1:75.
19. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) 76.
20. Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978) 195.



21. Wilson 7, 2.
22. Wilson 3.
23. John B. Cobb, Jr., "Alfred North Whitehead," *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State U of New York P, 1993) 167, 170.
24. Buber, *I and Thou* 83.
25. Martin Buber, "Distance and Relation," *The Knowledge of Man*, ed. M. Friedman; trans. M. Friedman and R. G. Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 69; see also in Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992) 28.
26. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967) 212; see also in David Ray Griffin, ed., *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1993) 14.
27. *Nature and Spirit* 48-49.
28. *Nature and Spirit* 177.
29. *Nature and Spirit* 136.
30. Peter Ochs, "Charles Sanders Peirce," *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State U of New York P, 1993) 75.
31. Corrington, *Nature's Self* 1.
32. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1957) 2: 61.
33. This need only be qualified by the assertion that to the degree that any order of relevance possesses freedom of interaction, it possesses a commensurate ability to do evil. It is therefore possible to consider, for instance, that the exiling of a particular animal from a pack to its detriment may be an act of evil by the pack as it exercises its freedom negatively.
34. A further elaboration, with an exploration of the concept of innocence is to be found in my paper, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Construct of Human Nature, Its Indebtedness to Kierkegaard and Its Feminist Critique," American Academy of Religion Eastern Region, Université du Québec à Montreal, April 22-23, 1994.
35. *Nature and Spirit* 187.
36. The encompassing is a refinement of Jaspers's use of the term. See especially *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. E. Ehrlich, L. Ehrlich, and G. B. Pepper (Athens: Ohio UP, 1986).
37. *Nature and Spirit* 162.
38. *Nature and Spirit* 173, 176.
39. *Nature and Spirit* 180.
40. *Nature and Spirit* 186.
41. *Nature and Spirit* 186.
42. Lewis Thomas, *Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* (New York: Viking, 1971).
43. Roger A. Badham, "Conti's Reclamation of Farrer's Cosmological Personalism: A Pragmatist's Response," *The Personalist Forum* 12.1 (1996): 18-34.
44. *Nature and Spirit* 188.
45. See for example, Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1984), especially ch. 1.
46. Hartshorne 59.
47. *Nature and Spirit* 35.
48. *Nature and Spirit* 189.
49. Justus Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, ed. Kathleen Wallace and Armen Marsoobian with Robert S. Corrington (Albany: State U of New York P, 1990) 7.



50. Emmanuel Levinas, "Temptation of Temptations," *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 32.
51. Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *The Journal of Religion* 54.1 (1974): 71-85.
52. For a description of panexperientialism in process thought, see *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State U of New York P, 1993) 10.
53. Robert C. Neville, rev. of "Nature and Spirit: An Essay in Ecstatic Naturalism," by Robert S. Corrington, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 34.4 (Dec 1994): 504-06.
54. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 443; see also in Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1992) 28. For both Heidegger and Gadamer the term "disclosure" is a rendering of the Greek *Ἀλήθεια* (*aletheia*), literally "not-concealing," hence something revealed, or dis-covered.
55. For further discussion of Schleiermacher's linguistic method in his early works, see my two articles: "World Spirit and the Appearance of the God: Philosophy of Religion and Christian Apologetic in Schleiermacher's Early Thought," *The New Athenaeum* 5 (1995); and "Performative Hermeneutics: Interpreting the *Speeches* with Reflections upon Schleiermacher's Hermeneutical Theory," in *Schleiermacher and Contemporary Theology, Proceedings of the International Schleiermacher Society*, ed. T.N. Tice, C.J. Kinlaw & J.C. Pugh (Chicago, 1994).