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Nature and Spirit: An Essay in Ecstatic Naturalism. By Robert S. Corrington. New York: Fordham University Press, 1992. Pp. xiii + 207. \$30.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

print article

This is a brilliantly imaginative, serious book of systematic philosophy, dealing in roughly equal parts with the self, community, world, and God. Corrington has developed a genuine system here based on what he calls the method of ordinal phenomenology. Whatever its deficiencies, the system is able to articulate and acknowledge things other systems cannot and, while being sensitive to fashionable critiques of systematic metaphysical philosophy, demonstrates by an *esse to posse* argument that metaphysics is still possible.

Although it is almost a travesty of careful philosophy to attempt to summarize a system in a few paragraphs, a beginning is made by noting that Corrington develops Peirce's theory of signs into a theory of the self relating to other things through processes of interpretation and also developing itself, or "selving," through interpretation. Peirce scholars will remember that Peirce left his theory of the self as a complex of sign-series, "man's glassy essence," rather undeveloped and will appreciate Corrington's advances. The major theme for the self is the tension between sign-processes that proceed from one's origins and open sign-processes that make for possibilities of transcendent improvement in the future. For Corrington, sign-processes of origin, for selves and everything else, tend toward rigid habits and stultifying, conservative, often wicked, self-seeking and conformity; these bespeak finitude. Sign-processes open to the future bespeak transcendence because they allow for novelty and greater justice. Why Corrington does not thematize the possibilities for greater evil and narrowness in future transcendence is unclear, especially in light of his recognition of the wickedness of this century's totalitarian utopias; throughout he reflects a radical reconstructive ideology that advocates breaking settled habits of self and society, indeed of world and God, in favor of change.

The discussion of community is the most insightful and innovative in the book. Beginning again with Peirce's theory of signs, Corrington develops an elaborate theory of how communities are constituted by sign-processes of origin and those of expectation. Even more influential than Peirce on his thought is Justus Buchler whose ordinal metaphysics provides fascinating resources for interweaving sign-process extending into non-human natural processes with human semiotics. By virtue of this, Corrington makes a decisive break with the European philosophy that takes concerns for self and culture to be radically distinct from nature, which it relegates to objects of physical science. Corrington sides with the naturalism of American pragmatism, process philosophy, and Buchler.

But Corrington does not dismiss the European tradition; more than most naturalists he attempts to use phenomenological ideas such as *horizon* to provide founding metaphors for his metaphysics. Most of his arguments are doubled: first a phenomenological or "how it is for human process" account, and then a metaphysical one. Following Buchler in claiming that there is no superorder that constitutes the *world*, he develops the idea of *worldhood* as, not the horizon of horizons, but the sum of horizons and the orders they contain. This he likens to *natura naturata*, which of course sets up a dialectic with *natura naturans*.

Corrington's treatment of God is least complete of the discussions in the book. God has four dimensions: a numinous potency of origins occasionally expressed in finite things, a push for limited transcendence occasionally expressed in finite things as the lure for justice, that potency among other potencies which sustains all determinate orders (the Being behind *natura naturata*), and that which faces *natura naturans* as the encompassing within which even God has room to grow. No arguments are given why the first two dimensions are seriously divine rather than merely spooky and secularly moral, respectively. Nor is an argument given for why the various orders of the world, temporal and non-temporal, need sustaining. Corrington asserts that finite orders need pre-formal potencies, contrary to Buchler's doctrine that there are always orders which emerge from one another, and he identifies Spirit with these potencies. But there is no persuasive argument for extra-order potencies except for a kind of phenomenological appeal to vibrancy and plenitude. As to the fourth dimension, he says, "God is a product of nature naturing, yet the ground of nature natured" (188), a kind of novel Gnosticism. Whereas the ancient second-rank creative Gnostic God was nasty, Corrington's is politically correct but otherwise uncannily like the ancient model. Why not

worship nature naturing, the "encompassing," as Corrington calls it, and eliminate middling gods?

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If one wants to be a philosophical naturalist, the move from Peirce to Buchler is a retreat (though Buchler saw it the other way; but then he thought naturalism is the denial of God or supernaturalism); Buchler's allegedly neutral metaphysical categories all derive from the functions of discrimination, and hence he surreptitiously epistemologized Peirce. Corrington's addition of phenomenology to this mix, and Spinoza, further compromises Buchler's naturalistic principle of ontological parity by giving what Buchler would call ontological priority to both wider concentric circles (toward the Encompassing) and deeper potencies than orders themselves. Although I myself believe this is an improvement, it requires a stronger defense of ontological creativity than Corrington allows; a gutsy Spinozism of *natura naturans* cannot be sustained by a phenomenology of potencies alone and *creatio ex nihilo* is ruled out by ordinality. These are insider quibbles, however, that call for another book from Corrington. *Nature and Spirit* is a work to be highly honored by vigorous debate.

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