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# CONVERSION IN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

*Exploring the Practice of Transformation*

ROGER A. WARD

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ROBERT CORRINGTON AND THE  
TRANSFORMATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Robert Corrington approaches the transformation of American philosophy from the side of cosmogenesis, inquiring into the origin of the emergence of order within nature. Human spirit reflects the impulses of the universe, the openings and resistances, and follows these openings as an invitation to probe into the reality of the order of the universe. There is no foundation, no authoritative guide, and no promise of security in this discovery. Confidence in this path of discovery emerges from the fact that the Christian tradition and all religious traditions are living communities flowing out of this probing activity. Corrington, like Peirce, refuses to make Kant's transcendental deduction, focusing instead on following out philosophical traces of reality as they imprint on religious, philosophical, and psychological practice.

Corrington, although comfortable and familiar with religious notions of transformation, resists conversion language as dangerous because it represents a closing down of possibilities of the interaction with the underconscious of nature and the "selving" activity indicative of human thought. In conversion probes are limited, novelty eliminated by a conception of the soul that is determined prior to its emergence. Corrington latches on to Peirce's notion of a "real" as an invitation to probe without *a priori* determination. The discovery of the real is an exercise of ecstasis for Corrington, a standing apart from the continuum of nature. Such work of ecstasis reflects the best of religion. Not that we must strive to be good without God, like Rorty, for that simply covers over a self-loathing and absence that will reemerge and devastate an individual. Rather, Corrington holds that the reality ingredient in the universe corresponds to human ecstasis, opening toward it but not requiring or demanding human transformation.

From this openness met with activity, ultimate meaning and purpose may emerge. Corrington, in my terms, proposes a transformation of conversion from a response to a defining content to the indeterminate content of ecstasis. His philosophical program, then, revolves around converting religion and philosophy to this expectation of ecstasis—and I think both uses of "conversion" here carry much of the same meaning. In this program Corrington follows Peirce's lead, but realizes he must go beyond this beginning. The final word on ecstatic naturalism is that it is

unstable in just the way Corrington resists the stability of Peirce. He must always be beyond himself philosophically, for any repetition becomes a liability to collapse into representation. The question we will resolve toward is whether an argument for ecstasis avoids the same hegemony as "the" correct formulation of human transformation. I break Corrington's work into three main headings: (1) ecstasis and consciousness, which begins with Peirce; (2) semiotic limits and interpretive community, which emerges in relation to Royce; and (3) the underconscious of nature and the Encompassing. These three headings correspond to firstness, secondness, and thirdness, except that Corrington's third, the underconscious of nature, recurs strongly to Peirce's firstness with the additional content of religious "foldings" that provide Corrington the material for differentiation and identity within the indeterminate ground of the Encompassing.

#### *Ecstasis and Consciousness*

In some ways Corrington reflects Edwards's path in the *Religious Affections*, discovering the rules for the ways we are transformed. The massive difference between them, though, is that Corrington proceeds apart from the security of a tradition like Edwards, and he includes the discoveries of the depth psychologies of Freud and Jung. The blending of psychology and semiosis has a proper beginning in Peirce, but Corrington has to reorient our understanding of Peirce away from the brilliantly odd logician and Scholastic realist. In Peirce Corrington finds a man dislocated emotionally and intellectually, a melancholy man.

Peirce was a master of the art of advanced forms of signification. He could enter into several distinctive semiotic systems and codes with great ease and always find pathways for connecting them. Yet in doing so he pulled further and further way from the ground of signification, perhaps originally presented to him by his mother. I am persuaded that Peirce remained haunted throughout his life by a sense of melancholy loss, a loss felt on the fringes of all of his daring analysis of the basic structures of the world.<sup>34</sup>

Peirce struggled to find himself in relation to his founding culture of Harvard elitism and the dimensions of his distracted personality. Peirce, for Corrington, is an example of a person who blazes a novel way into understanding human spirit. This novel and trailblazing character supports further probing development of Peirce's thought. Identifying the

tensions internal to Peirce's cosmology and semiotic psychology sets up Corrington's own novel moves. "Peirce," Corrington says, "vacillated between the kind of conversion hysteria that paralyzes all symbolic and linguistic functions, and the abjection or melancholy denial that flies into a hypersymbolic activity as if to fill the universe with signs so that the maternal and its sensed loss is drowned."<sup>35</sup> This struggle with conversion is central to Peirce, and indeed to Corrington as well.

For Peirce the multidimensional character of the self is metaphorically described as a lake. The self is a matter of depth, amorphous like water, a surface that appears above a vastness within which gradients of reality are found by settling down into places that resist peering looks. From this womblike image, Corrington pictures the self emerging by pressing up and out of this indefinite character. Again, he follows Peirce; "Ontologically, self-control is what it is because of the depth structures of cosmic habit within the universe as a whole. . . . The human process derives its energies and vector directionalities from the universe. . . . But this process is a healing one in which the individual welcomes the larger community into its self-constitution."<sup>36</sup> This point seems exactly right. The puzzle for Peirce, Corrington, and me, however, is how the human process derives these universal energies toward reconstitution, and what object or content makes this reconstitution possible and necessary. From this passage we see how the self remains powerful in Corrington's thought; the self is key. For Rorty philosophy remains key, for West the community is key. For Corrington the key is the self and the process of selving, although later we will see why Corrington removes the Augustinian metaphor of healing from his conception of the self.

This aspect of the evolving and emerging self in Peirce's cosmology comes to the fore in an extended rejoinder to Paul Carus, who attacked Peirce as a necessitarian. Carus took Peirce's argument for "real and general" law as a declaration of determinative regularity. Peirce clarifies that his sense of law is *not* that to which "the phenomena of nature *always* conform, or to which they *precisely* conform" (CP 6:588). Peirce locates the openness for this imprecise conformity in a passage that becomes centrally important for Corrington. Peirce first denies that absolute chance is "something ultimate and inexplicable," stating that the chaos to which he recurs is so irregular that existence does not express this merely germinal state of being. "Even this nothingness, though it antecedes the infinitely distant absolute beginning of time, is traced back to a

nothingness more rudimentary still, in which there is no variety, but only an indefinite specificability, which is nothing but a tendency to the diversification of the nothing, while leaving it as nothing as it was before" (CP 6:612). Corrington develops this further,

The true originative power of the universe is a deep nothingness that is more of a tendency than an actual pool of diversified possibilities. We could call this the domain of nature's potencies. . . . The potencies of nothingness are ontologically prior to the possibilities that obtain in what we could call the "lesser" nothingness. Lesser nothingness is the domain of nothingness of cosmic possibility and variety. This is a kind of possible objects and events. . . . Lesser nothingness is the cosmic soup of possibilities that can become actualized whenever emergents take on habits. Deeper down is the greater nothingness that provides the metaphysical goad for cosmogenesis.<sup>37</sup>

This statement is the ground of Corrington's ecstasis, the standing apart possible within the "cosmic soup" that is the primordial origin of meaning and reality. His probe into Peirce's insight of the internally distinguishing fluctuations of greater and lesser nothingness constitutes his trajectory outlined in the next sections of this chapter. Corrington states the object of his inquiry clearly:

What inner logic determines the movement from greater nothingness (the potencies) to lesser nothingness (the possibilities) to the nascent world of generals (the forms)? Is God the agency within or behind this process, or is God too a product of this process? Peirce downplays the concept of divine majesty which would entail that the purpose of the world and its creatures is to worship its creator. Instead, he makes a case for human autonomy, arguing that God is concerned with establishing independent creatures who do not seek to become part of an all-absorbing divine presence.<sup>38</sup>

Corrington's transformative reading of Peirce begins from this distinction of autonomous selves and the movement of the universe. Corrington is conscious of this transformative reading, and I think we philosophers all read with a similar transformative goal. This is how I have sought to read Edwards, Peirce, James, and Dewey. These readings are the places where disagreements are possible, and thus this is the location of my problem with Corrington's reading. He privileges both the demand for autonomy above any law, which I do not think coheres with Peirce, and the notion that the ground of this autonomy can only be the

primordial soup of nothingness. I take the soup of nothingness to mean "that out of which" law emerges, and God, as the mystery of that generation, as having a complement in human autonomy converging on the divine character of agapism, that also emerges out of the relative "nothing" of firstness. In relation to law, the origin is this abyss of indeterminacy. But Peirce is clear that law, not indeterminacy, is the path toward an explanation of how things work. I am not sure what Peirce would think about making firstness the locus of origin for emergent meaning. He might react as Kant did when he denied that anything productive can be said about noumena. In opposition to Corrington, then, I think there is a sense of reverence of the sacred in Peirce. Otherwise we are hard pressed to understand Peirce's desire to subordinate himself to the "Master" and enter communion as anything but a lapse of judgment.

#### *Semiotic Limits and Interpretive Community*

In this section I follow Corrington's consideration of a community that emerges from the potentialities described above in the cosmic soup of firstness. Corrington claims that community is not an outgrowth of consciousness, but a mode of responding to a lawlike real emerging from greater to lesser nothing. Hence, community is a feature of the transformation from dependence on consciousness to the recognition of the role of nature. Corrington develops this notion of community in opposition to the philosophical understanding that community is more like a consciousness or more like a text than an emergent character of nature. "Once nature is reduced to a secondary status," Corrington says, "the supremacy of human textuality takes over. The metaphysical ineptness of this devaluation of nature is evident in the pantextualism that sees everything, whether a person or an event, as a text for which there are no stable or reliable interpretations."<sup>39</sup> The fight between textuality and community leads through the prospect of an interpretive community that is not based on a "text" in the way that privileges consciousness. Only if a community emerges within the interpretive act can text-consciousness be overcome in a positive way.

Corrington develops Peirce's rejection of foundationalism and Cartesian introspection connected with first principles. The failure of this introspection leads Peirce to the character of thought as signs. From this platform Peirce arrives at the notion that intuition must be exceeded with communal acts of interpretation. "Signs form living communities,"

Peirce says, and all human thought collects around God as a "living sign" that makes humanity one community through the self-critical advance of scientific inquiry. This is not the living community Corrington claims since he does not accept Peirce's panpsychism—that all that is, is mind. Instead, Corrington proposes that the living sign can only have as its interpretant the human community, for this is all that can be properly claimed from the origin of nature that Peirce turns away from. For community to be possible, according to Corrington, it must emerge within the semiotic flow from nature, and here he follows Royce's development of Peirce's assertion that "all hermeneutic acts are communal."<sup>40</sup>

Royce moves beyond Platonic knowledge about experience, and James's dependence on experience, to a third kind of cognition; interpretation. "It is to this third cognitive process that, following the terminology which Peirce proposed, we here apply the name 'interpretation.'" Interpretation, Royce says, is the main business of philosophy. Its goal is the production of the Beloved Community, which functions to unite diverse hermeneutic acts through the (Holy) Spirit of loyalty. The Beloved community is "the Universal Church, the body of Christ" which is the paradigmatic community of interpretation. Royce completes his thought; "to interpret is to strive to see the world as God sees it and as we would see it in the ideal kingdom."<sup>41</sup> Loyalty in the act of interpretation is Royce's idealized form of the Beloved community that invests the thought of Walter Rauschenbusch and Martin Luther King with practical power.<sup>42</sup>

Royce says in *The Problem of Christianity*, "The World is the Community. The world contains its own interpreter. Its processes are infinite in their temporal varieties. But their interpreter, the spirit of the universal community—never absorbing varieties or permitting them to blend—compares and through a real life, interprets them all."<sup>43</sup> This expression of a world containing its own interpreter is the ground for Corrington's naturalized community. The community of interpretation functions as the horizon and perspective through which all signs "pass on their way to interpretive transparency."<sup>44</sup> Corrington is still after transparency, which entails avoiding consciousness since there is no way for transparency to emerge within such a mediating abstraction. He says, "By shifting the burden of semiotic theory in this direction, Royce made a bold advance beyond Peirce."<sup>45</sup> Corrington thinks Royce also draws toward the same insights as Gadamer while avoiding his language of mysticism. For Royce the goal is not language but community. Setting

aside the locus of language, Corrington suggests that he can follow Gadamer, who "links the hermeneutic process to the evolution of human understanding toward a practical evocation of the Good with the life of the community. Understanding is not limited to texts but drives toward interhuman communication. Rhetoric and dialectic receive their grounding in the hermeneutic process of discussion, which allows individuals to enter into horizons not their own."<sup>46</sup> This movement into "horizons not their own" is an essential distinction for Corrington. Science cannot accommodate this movement. Explicit description cannot work the conversion from one horizon to another. Moving between horizons is essential for interpretive cognition, and this movement requires dislocating oneself from any single form or ground of reference.

The finite interpreter is not somehow added to an already preconstituted community as one more member but derives his or her very meaning only through those intersubjective transactions that enrich the scope and contour of the community. . . . A mind thus becomes an interpreter whenever the traits of self-reflection, temporality, and intersubjectivity function together to secure the ongoing hermeneutic process.<sup>47</sup>

Interpretation is an end in itself since this is the only stable ground of the community. Therefore, loyalty to the interpretive community entails breaking beyond horizons. This keeps the process moving, but still the question remains about what drives the interpretive urge. Corrington's charge against neopragmatism emerges with the following statement: "[I]ndividual liberty does not constitute a sufficient condition for the hermeneutic community. Some form of conscious convergence must also prevail as the locus of future aspiration for the members of the social order."<sup>48</sup> A conscious convergence is an emergent character within interpretive communities, but it cannot be preconstituted or dogmatic, and neither can it be the result of unconstrained liberty.

Corrington acknowledges the power of Christian symbols as aspects of the conscious convergence in "movement toward the Encompassing." The Encompassing is the final dimension of the sign function and it brings the sign relation into the sphere of religion. The Encompassing depends on no ontological ground, yet it "exerts its uncanny lure for human existence."<sup>49</sup>

The symbol of crucifixion specifically denies that any human or communal value can be attached to this reality. The cross curiously inverts itself whenever we try to fill it with further human content. In its self-negation,

the cross breaks open to that which vastly outstrips human categorial projections . . . whether or not the cross is the most radical symbol of the Encompassing, it fulfills its role whenever emptiness takes the place of semiotic density. This emptiness is not a nihilistic absence of meaning but a radiant evocation of a different kind of meaning not circumscribed by the signs of the community and its interpreters.<sup>50</sup>

Meaning that is not circumscribed by the community appears to fall outside of Roycean loyalty. But Corrington's point, I think, is that interpretive acts, like the one related to the cross, are examples of the ecstasis that escapes the language horizon of Gadamer without becoming disloyal. Such hermeneutic acts tend toward expanding the richness of the symbols rather than their destruction, and only with this movement away from "semiotic density" is the ongoing process of interpretation preserved in the long run. The crux of human transformation is discovering this origin of an interpretation that opens out within the community, unconstrained by the community, but oriented toward the community. Again, a Christian image is important for Corrington: "For Royce, Paul was among the first of Western thinkers to probe into the dynamic structures of community and show how these structures are animated and deepened by the presence of the Holy Spirit as the agency of Christ through time. Paul's vision of love, as the divine/human expression of loyalty became the ethical core for his understanding of the community as the body of Christ."<sup>51</sup>

The ground of the community is loyalty, and Spirit (or spirit, in Corrington's view) is the principle of interpretation that is the sign of that loyalty. Loyalty "brings us to a new knowledge of the self and its community."<sup>52</sup> But what is the end of this knowledge? What is it for? Loyalty to an interpretation translates into habits of action that still seek teleological ground in ways that we will explore next. Corrington bridges from this understanding of the interpretive community to a method of avoiding both foundationalism and pietistic models of Jesus as the guide for life. The interpretive community Corrington describes manifests a universal movement toward "transparency" with what is in the world.

#### *Underconscious of Nature: The Encompassing*

The last stage of Corrington's reorientation of Peirce's philosophy appears in *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy*. In this book Corrington resolves many of his theoretical probes toward firstness and

nature, and the community that emerges through this transformation. Corrington blends together semiotic and psychological expectations,

Instead of trotting out the old grammar of pathology and normalcy, it is far more illuminating to talk of a dialectic involving closure and selving. The former term refers to the perhaps innate need to freeze meaning horizons where they stand so that the functioning self is not brought into thematic awareness. Forms of local control and the tribal assume priority. The concept of "selving," on the other hand, denotes a much more complex process of living in the spaces where awareness encounters the unconscious of the self and the underconscious of nature. Jung's concept of "individuation," while somewhat heroic and narrow, provides an analogue to the selving process. Selving lies at the heart of the human process and, while deeply ambiguous, is a force leading to species enhancement.<sup>53</sup>

The creative aspect of this process is the discovery of this momentum through reflection on the selving process. The platform of selving Corrington describes collects impulses into a process without (as Royce said) blending interpreters, while providing sufficient ground for the resistance of the individual to emerge, like Edwards's notion of entity. The selving process reaches back to the discovery of a primal (if not originary) momentum within nature. Naturalism becomes *ecstatic* when it probes into its own "somber tone" to find an even deeper momentum within nature that also yields its own categorial array. So Corrington's philosophical inquiry retains Peirce's logic but with a different tone. Corrington emphasizes the "world melancholy" (which he says is "far more stoic than a romantic *Weltschmerz*") that forms the necessary foreground for a participation in the ecstatic potencies that are emergent from the underconscious of nature, as mediated through the unconscious of the self. "One of the central tasks of semiotic cosmology is to describe or evoke the traces within the products of the self to gauge how they may, or may not, point to the ever-receding, yet ever-spawning, abyss of *nature-naturing*."<sup>54</sup>

Corrington's discovery of the melancholy of Peirce now makes sense, because in that character he sees the outline of participation in the emergent character of the self. He is careful here to respect Peirce's hesitation to locate a principle of individuation that is positive in terms of the structure of the self or understanding; hence the underconscious of nature is the ground of the unconscious of the self. Both reflect the limit of secondness, which cannot produce or reveal categories. In one sense

the real abyss in the semiotic structure is brute experience or secondness—there is no way out or forward. Corrington says, “The category of secondness, as the name implies, refers to brute dyadic interaction that is prior to signification or fulfilled meaning. . . . Resistance (a form of secondness) in the human order is rarely fully self-conscious, and part of the endless comedy and tragedy of the human process can be seen in our struggles to find clarity out of the sea of projections that emerge from us and return to us.”<sup>55</sup>

But secondness is not easily left, and while Peirce moves from secondness to thirdness, and Corrington from secondness back to firstness, I think the resistance of secondness holds much more significance for both their semiotic structures than they admit. Indeed, Corrington depends on an argument from resistance to overcome Peirce. He says that what Peirce failed to grasp was the “sheer otherness of the unconscious, even if he had a partial sense of the underconscious of nature with his primal category of ‘firstness.’ His doctrine of panpsychism made the unconscious too conscious in the sense that mentality is a trait found throughout nature in a vast continuum admitting only of degrees of instantiation.”<sup>56</sup> What Peirce fails to consider is the secondness of unconsciousness, and with this evaluation Corrington dismisses his philosophical father. While Peirce charts a trajectory toward a reality that is far different from its origin (nature-to-mind), Corrington answers both sides of this transformation with a single term, nature, that acts as both origin and *telos* in producing the contours of consciousness. Corrington proposes a path of reflective returning that is a rejection of getting beyond the limits of nature. Yet within this return all the complexity usually associated with a divine or ontologically separate content remains:

Ecstatic naturalism clearly sides with the second trajectory, that which speaks of the holy or numinous that represents a fully natural process of sacred semiotic folds impacting on the human unconscious. Further, ecstatic naturalism remains friendly to those feminist theologies that also want to become free from vertical patriarchal language and to probe into the ways in which nature’s own pulsations contain religious seeds. The deconstruction of the male language of neo-orthodoxy, where god is envisioned as speaking *von oben* (from above) to sinful humankind, is absolutely essential to a renewed semiotic cosmology in its religious dimension.<sup>57</sup>

Corrington merges the religious dimension of reflection with the turning toward firstness through ecstatic naturalism—the religious seeds give this turn to the abyss of nature—naturing a modicum of warrant via the hope of a satisfying transformation. My interest here is the way this emulates a kind of conversion, albeit one *away* from other forms of conversion. Corrington says the ecstatic naturalist does not respond to a word from above, presumably like Edwards would hold, and not from experience that privileges consciousness, nor from tradition like we see in West that reflects patriarchal patterns. Rather, the turn must be accomplished from a set of infinities discovered in the process of interpretive selving, moving from the actual infinite of things, to a prospective (hermeneutic) infinite, to an open infinite, and finally to a sustaining infinite, like Tillich's "ground of Being":

[T]he sustaining infinite is neither religious nor anti-religious; it is not creator, nor is it an agent in history or otherwise. It obtains prior to the distinction between good and evil, and prior to any axiological distinctions such as those aesthetic distinctions so prized in process forms of naturalism. . . . Thus the sustaining infinite lives on the cusp of the ontological difference between the two primal dimensions of nature. It does not sustain what lies "below" it, but lives horizontally, as it were, in the world of innumerable signs and sign systems. . . . It sustains, nothing more, and nothing less. . . . The sustaining infinite provides the clearing within which both identities and scopes can unfold or not unfold. But it is directly relevant to neither.<sup>58</sup>

This sustaining infinite is also the generative ground from which both selving and the interpretive community emerge. The intersection of the community and individual, participating in the mutual aspects of selving, extends from religious ground to the work of social reconstruction:

[F]or a fragile and nascent interpretive community the self will be a precarious founding that must raise its head and social body above the inertia of the conditions of origin that make it possible. Interpretive communities, whether they emerge from the social elite or the marginalized, are those communities that challenge the inert self-signs that are perpetuated by natural communities. If this process of critique moves into a postmodern horizon, the self actually becomes derailed and loses its emancipatory energies in an ersatz horizon that only *seems* liberating. But if the interpretive self reaches back into its conditions of origin in a creative way, and brings forth emancipatory energies *from* and *through* these prehuman conditions, the prospects of democratic reconstruction are heightened.<sup>59</sup>

While there is care here, the impulse of the sustaining infinite is negative to Royce's Spirit that at least implies a constructive image of the self. Rather, for Corrington, "the spirit simply is its clearing away; it is not a consciousness in its own right that actively goes after persons and their projections," and "[t]here is no centered consciousness in the spirit that could be addressed by human consciousness, even though the spirit can be met in an I-Thou relationship. Lacking consciousness, it must be seen as a gradient that goes where there is a gap or opening in the semiotic world that needs to be transformed."<sup>60</sup> Corrington moves us toward the Encompassing by virtue of its tendency to interpretation; but there is nothing here but a clearing. Conversion from nothingness to nothingness appears to be the only way Corrington can answer a transformation "from above."

With this description Corrington arrives at a significant moment in his struggle to transform Peirce, especially his susceptibility to conversion language:

Peirce argued that without some form of novelty, habits could not be broken and new laws could not emerge. Hence, for him, novelty is a necessary feature in personal and cosmic evolution. From the standpoint of the self, novelty is necessary for the fulfillment of the selving process as the novel irruption of signs can compel a new self-organization that encompasses past signs and brings them into a new configuration. Yet there is also the tendency to stress the novel traits too much, thus ignoring or abjecting the necessary antecedent conditions for their emergence. This abjection process can be seen most starkly in certain forms of religious conversion which abject the preconverted self as being no longer relevant to the new self that has emerged. Psychologically this is a dangerous move as it utterly ignores the continuing power of unconscious complexes to intrude in the life of the so called "born-again" self. Again, all novelty is novelty in certain respects and not others.<sup>61</sup>

In this passage, we see again the opposition Corrington finds in conversion that has a structure independent of a unique self. Corrington's objection is revealing, because conversion is much closer to what he aims at than he perceives. What he is arguing for is not very far from the ineffable demand for a change to an ineffable character that resists all rational depiction except as that which the self cannot control. The movement toward an "opening" here is not for some articulable good other than matching the selving impulse with the spirit ingredient in the

human unconscious. Corrington senses this absence and elides the effect of the transformed sense of religious community with social reconstruction: "The utopian hope that can move our religious community past the stage of compassion into a stage of political and social action is a product of the conjunction of the selving process and the spirit. . . . It is almost as if a gap opens up that has its own vacuum energy, drawing the self toward those centers of distorted energy that must be transformed through democratic transformation."<sup>62</sup> Overcoming socially distorted energy depends on the selving that originates individuals without consciousness. In this way democratic transformation is a demand for continuing openness and interpretation, not for some good intrinsic to social reality itself.

The coordination of the roles of the nutrient religious community and selving impulses leads Corrington to conclude that "if we were to combine the best of the Greek with the best of the Hebrew worlds, we could say that 'sacred folds' of nature are in some sense responsive to our own semiotic and moral probes, and that there are energies that are extra-human that can aid us in the process of moral growth." These powers are not "extra-natural, nor are they in a 'position' to give us a moral blueprint. Yet without their powers, we are truly at the mercy of semiotic inertia and blind habit."<sup>63</sup>

Corrington evades conversion, as his objection to "born-again" language makes clear, in order to describe a different kind of conversion. Like Peirce, Corrington knows the structure of the self is a clue to the transformative potency in the universe, although Corrington rejects the content Peirce finds in God and his choosing to turn away from the abyss of firstness. Corrington seeks to correct Peirce's failure of nerve by displaying how it is precisely this turn toward the abyss of firstness that provides access to truly transformative ground for both individuals and communities. Corrington is more like James in this respect of turning toward mystery without closure, but Corrington is more systematic than James in seeing this turn as a rejection of all connection to consciousness, no matter how much common sense must be overcome. Corrington has Peirce's community without its ground in God, and he has James's mystery without his ground in the self-adjusting self. He is, in a way, mediating an old conflict between friends. Corrington locates an agreement between Peirce and James that transformation must extend from nature and reconnect with it, albeit with a change of content or

form. Such a return needs an inbreaking content to overcome the inertia of habits. But Corrington's model does not carry us beyond the transformation that is immanent in nature. I think this is why "born-again" language shows up in this account—he still yearns for this kind of rebirth and reformation. Indeed, to be taken up by the momentum within nature, as Corrington describes, where habits are broken without imposing another content, would be a rebirth to an expectation that there is no separate dimension to be overcome for serving or interpretation to obtain. This absolute immanence contains ecstasis, and therefore conversion is a moment *of* nature that cannot, need not, move beyond itself. Corrington arrives at a dyadic conception of transformation; our conversion is not nature's conversion; nature is the self-same. This is a kind of stoicism, as Corrington admitted earlier, that fully rejects the Neoplatonic lift from fragmentation to the one.

What I appreciate about Corrington is his sensitivity to the fact that conversion is a fundamental aspect of all metaphysics and cosmology, just as metaphysics and cosmology are fundamental to philosophy and theology. Where I have difficulty with his inquiry is the reliance on absence as the category of personal understanding and individuation. He produces an equivocation of spirit as stillness and spirit as the vacuum that draws attention toward the places of semiotic openness and need. Unlike Royce, Corrington cannot abide the Spirit of Christ, only the spirit of Heideggerian absence.

#### CONVERSION AND ITS EVASION

Richard Rorty, Cornel West, and Robert Corrington exemplify the continuing relevance of conversion for American philosophy. In these philosophers we have seen active resistance to conversion, using conversion as a platform from which analysis extends, or recasting the ground of conversion. In response to these "evasions," I have tried to show the difficulties that emerge within these philosophies taken on their own terms. My argument is that the absence of engaging conversion is not a failure of moral will or the rejection of a standard; it is a kind of philosophical failure to face a challenge of the philosopher's peculiar strength. The challenge of conversion is that standing apart from this critical test reason flounders on a beach of its own making.