

PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Nature's Self: Our Journey from Origin to Spirit, by Robert S. Corrington. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996. Pp. viii + 187. \$21.95 (paper).

"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," Robert Corrington's most recent work, *Nature's Self*, is an exploration of the human process from within the logic of his system of ecstatic naturalism. The book richly explores the self's place in nature and its levels of conscious and unconscious awareness of the wound which emerges and reveals itself in innumerable ways to the self in both its individual and social dimension.

Ecstatic naturalism is a boldly original attempt to describe nature and the human role in it. It insists upon the oneness of nature as existing entirely separately and meaningfully apart from the human process, which is relevant in only certain regional aspects of nature. While Corrington is fully aware that we can only know our world by interpreting it from a limited and historical standpoint, he is equally firm that the poststructuralist tendency to reduce nature to a human construct is a one-sided hermeneutical strategy. Rather than being drawn into an endless vortex of Derridean discourse, Corrington is content to diagnose the deconstructionist approach as a "peculiar sickness which unfortunately . . . runs far deeper" than the academy (p. 151). Deconstructionism, Corrington asserts without apology, is "shaped by those who, following their own reasonings of Nietzsche, insist that nature is primarily concerned with hiding its secrets from the withdrawn self" (p. 151).

Corrington's ontological realism is based upon the work of his mentor Josiah Buckler, but Corrington's development of what he calls ecstatic naturalism depends upon Buckler's highly original, though cautious, descriptive philosophy, both recover the importance of metaphysics for philosophy, but Corrington's explorations take both cosmological and psychological directions, following his desire to draw philosophical theology into dialogue with the new physics, on one hand, and with psychoanalytic literature, particularly of Jung and Kristeva, on the other.

I. Cosmological Dimensions of Ecstatic Naturalism

One of Corrington's most important contributions to contemporary philosophical and theological thought is his renewal of the use of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. While others have used these terms in a superficial manner, Corrington, like Spinoza, draws these categories to the center of his system. They form the dialectic between his theological and philosophical language and strongly inform his extremely valuable discussion with contemporary science and psychology.

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The human order is no further (nor nearer) to its generative source in nature naturing than any other order. It shares with the other orders a mutual "knowingness" into the world, through which meanings and purposes are constantly emergent within our temporal experience.

II. Psychological Dimensions of Ecstatic Naturalism

As products of nature naturing, we discover ourselves as "spots of nature" cast into a world neither of our choosing nor making. It is a semiotic world, and our attempts to discover meaning within the world of nature naturing are thoroughly semiotic. Following Kristeva, Corrington suggests that we have a melancholy for the lost object, the material maternal, which Corrington equates with nature naturing, which generated us. Nature naturing, however, is pretemporal and present to us only through a regress of signs. Corrington uses the language of the abyss as that which lies between nature naturing and nature naturing, a chiasm which yawns before us. The ontological difference between these two—the generative and the generated—means we cannot find the way of return to that which created us. Melancholy results. We long for the material maternal, for which the rich seriousness with which nature naturing is never sufficient of itself to satisfy us. We may hear traces of Augustine crying faintly in this description. So, too, Corrington asserts, we are not abandoned entirely within closed and repetitive sign systems within nature naturing. Heidegger too is echoed in this description. We are not abandoned entirely within closed and repetitive sign systems within nature naturing. Heidegger too is echoed in this description. We are not abandoned entirely within closed and repetitive sign systems within nature naturing. Heidegger too is echoed in this description.

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Ecstatic naturalism is a boldly original attempt to describe nature and the human role in it. It insists upon the realism of nature as existing entirely separately and meaningfully apart from the human process, which is relevant to only certain regional aspects of nature. While Corrington is fully aware that we can only know our world by interpreting it from a limited and historical standpoint, he is equally firm that the poststructuralist tendency to reduce nature to a human construct is a one-sided hermeneutical strategy. Rather than being drawn into an endless vortex of Derridean discourse, Corrington is content to diagnose the deconstructionist approach as a "peculiar sickness which unfortunately . . . runs far deeper" than the academy (p. 131). Deconstructionism, Corrington asserts without apology, is "shaped by those who, following their own misreadings of Nietzsche, insist that nature is primarily concerned with hiding its secrets from the will-driven self" (p. 131).

Corrington's ontological realism is based upon the work of his mentor Justus Buchler, but Corrington's development of what he calls ecstatic naturalism expands upon Buchler's highly original, though cautious, descriptive philosophy. Both reassert the importance of metaphysics for philosophy, but Corrington's explorations take both cosmological and psychological directions, following his desire to draw philosophical theology into dialogue with the new physics, on one hand, and with psychoanalytic literature, particularly of Jung and Kristeva, on the other.

I. Cosmological Dimensions of Ecstatic Naturalism

One of Corrington's most important contributions to contemporary philosophical and theological thought is his renewal of the use of *nature naturing* and *nature natured*. While others have used these terms in a superficial manner, Corrington, like Spinoza, draws these categories to the center of his system. They form the bond between his theological and philosophical language and strongly inform his extremely valuable discussion with contemporary science and psychology.

Corrington describes nature in its innumerable orders which are products generated from nature naturing. He moves beyond terms like species, which radically reduce our concepts of nature to rather narrow biological and zoological categories. Nature is something much more vast. Following Buchler, he uses the concept of natural processes, orders or complexes. We may refer to humankind as the human order, but the term "order" itself is not to be equated with species. Any product of nature—a yawn, a gesture, a volcano—is as much a temporal and/or spatial order of nature as any particular order that produces it. This flexible language offers a highly original way of re-perceiving the human process and its relationship with nature. Thus we are presented with a vast canvas upon which, like a Caspar David Friedrich oil, the human process is re-presented as occupying a small and chastened spot on the horizon facing into the vast powers of a real and overwhelming cosmos, the orders of which, with few exceptions, are entirely unimpressed by the human attempt to inscribe its signature upon its world. It is not coincidental that Corrington's first exposition of ecstatic naturalism, *Nature and Spirit* (1992), displays Friedrich's *Ziehende Wolken* on its cover.

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II. Psychological Dimensions of Ecstatic Naturalism

As products of nature naturing, we discover ourselves as "ejects of nature" cast into a world neither of our choosing nor making. It is a semi-otic world, and our attempts to discover meaning within the world of nature natured are thoroughly semiotic. Following Kristeva, Corrington suggests that we have a melancholy for the lost object, the material maternal, which Corrington equates with nature naturing, which generated us. Nature naturing, however, is pretemporal, and present to us only through a regress of signs. Corrington uses the language of the abyss as that which lies between nature naturing and nature natured, a chasm which yawns before us. The ontological difference between these two—the generative and the generated—means we cannot find the way of return to that which created us. Melancholy results. We long for the material maternal, for which the rich semiosis within nature natured is never sufficient of itself to satisfy us. We may hear tones of Augustine ringing faintly in this description. So, too, Corrington asserts, we are not abandoned entirely within closed and opaque sign systems within nature natured. Heidegger, too, is echoed in Corrington's imagery, for there are powers of disclosure at work within nature which pierce the opacity and expand our semiotic horizons. Corrington describes these disclosing powers within nature in the language of natural grace and the spirit-interpreter.

Nature itself is "self-fissuring" (p. vii), and we, as products of nature, experience the fissure within ourselves. This internal fissure manifests itself

primarily between the conscious and unconscious self. In this regard, Jungian psychoanalytic interpretation deeply manifests itself through Corrington's work. In the course of the book he offers an extended interpretation of a dream and a Jungian biblical exegesis. The unconscious plays a critical role in shaping and forming self-identity, despite the tendency to privilege the "more manageable codes of the domains of nature natured" over the self's residual awareness of "the presemiotic rhythms of nature natured" (p. 6).

Hence the exploration of the unconscious, which has too often been "domesticated" according to Corrington, brings us into closer contact with the abjected aspects of the material maternal. Corrington explores oedipal and matricidal aspects of the psyche and relates them to the ontological wound which he assumes is universal, though by no means identically experienced, in the human process. The wound opens itself "like a poison flower that permeates all dimensions of the self" (p. 31), a metaphor which reveals both Corrington's own deep ambivalence about the human place within natural processes and his refusal to follow the Emersonian tendency to eulogize nature. Corrington speaks of nature more characteristically as "dark and taciturn, even though it hungers for an incarnation of power and meaning within certain semiotic orders" (p. 13). He courageously faces into the deep ambiguities of both the self and nature. Yet it is a confrontation which is never bereft of hope for the deep emergence of meaning from within nature.

He is influenced increasingly by Schelling's and Schopenhauer's explorations into the darker possibilities of being. But Heidegger and Tillich balance Corrington's position in their affirmations that authenticity remains a human potentiality. "We are caught in a kind of vortex that pulls us more and more away from our authentic possibilities of transcendence" (pp. 74-75). The hope for transcendent possibilities, which are never supernatural in ecstatic naturalism, leads Corrington to a description of many intangible workings of nature far beyond a purely materialist or empirical metaphysics.

III. *Transcendence, Teleology and Appetite*

Consciousness, while privileged in the western philosophical tradition, is incomplete and self-limiting. It is "by definition, perspectival and finite. It grants light while casting its own internal and external shadow" (p. 76). To overcome these limitations we require the deeper, but more hidden, insight of the unconscious. Corrington claims that "without the development teleology of the unconscious, the self could not participate in the deeper aspects of transcendence" (p. 76). Insofar as transcendence is a human possibility, the unconscious is the door through which we must enter; the unconscious has a power unavailable to consciousness, which is still preoccupied with the more material sign-systems of nature natured.

Corrington's privileging of the unconscious and nature natured appears a rather platonic move, from a focus upon the embodiment of nature natured to a speculative domain behind and beyond it by means of the unconscious. Corrington seems to consider nature natured at a remove from that which it generates. Within the limitations of spatial and temporal metaphors, Corrington asserts that nature natured is pretemporal and abysmally distant from the generated world of nature natured. He seems to make this move deliberately: "Unlike a kind of built-in entelechy that will unfold according to encoded and antecedent principles, developmental teleological structures are deeply responsive to current shifts in surrounding conditions" (p. 76).

Peircean entelechy (which I prefer to call "immanent teleology") refers, for example, to the "built-in" biochemistry of a seed which already contains within itself that which it will become. Similarly, a leaf contains within itself the deeply responsive ability to move towards light. Corrington supercedes this spatial and temporal teleological understanding with a more mysterious "developmental teleology," in which is manifest a longing within nature natured to be known. His approach represents a startlingly novel semiotic theory, one quite unlike most contemporary Peircean or Saussurean systems. Such an appetitive approach appears to lose sight of the necessity that there must first be an interpreter before anything can become semiotic. While semiosis is by no means limited to human interpreters, it is certainly primarily an aspect of human understanding within its world. In this view, neither signs nor objects hunger for one another, but an interpreter hungers for meaning by means of the sign and the object to which it points.

While Corrington rejects process philosophy's panpsychist tendency to see "all orders as to some degree mental" (p. 1), he nevertheless defends his own strongly anthropomorphic and appetitive language. For example, he resists the notion that sign series are intentional or conscious yet uses appetitive metaphors which verge on suggesting they are both. Similarly, Corrington at times suggests that nature is beyond good and evil and "absolutely indifferent to human prospects" (p. 119), yet they "hunger" to be known.

A degree of ambiguity arises as a result, which seems to resolve in the direction of platonism whereby "the great fissure at the heart of nature" emerges as "a continual present/absence that can be felt in any complex of the world, insofar as that complex is compelled to reveal its presemiotic traces, as these traces point to the dark cleft from which all things, even God, come" (p. 87). Hence we move behind nature natured to an eros at work in the presemiotic dimension, the awareness of which provides us with the possibility of transcendence over the limited perspectives of the semiotic self. It is sometimes uncertain where Corrington finally stands on these issues.

While Corrington's is a chastened notion of transcendence, one which makes no extra-worldly claims, it nevertheless seems to lead back to mod-

ernist claims of knowledge beyond the semiotic particularities of any effective historical consciousness. Corrington anticipates this criticism, however, by his insistence upon our limited place in nature. As a result, transcendence may be a human possibility of seeing more insightfully beyond the semiotic density which normally crowds our habitual horizon, but it does not afford a God's eye view or a view from nowhere, as Nagel has put it. "Transcendence is not more real or more positive for the self, even if it does transfigure many aspects of finitude" (p. 23). It does not "lift us out of the waters of semiosis" (p. 65). Corrington speaks of "fitful transcendence" to suggest its uncontrolled and often short-lived character. Ecstasy, then, as Corrington uses it, is not a state of bliss, but "the momentum of self-transcendence in which an antecedent state welcomes an internal transfiguration in which its plenitude is enhanced . . . Unlike the melancholy that corresponds to the loss of meaning, ecstasy moves forward into the power of the not yet" (p. 63).

IV. *The Semiotic Self, Natural Grace, and the Spirit-Interpreter*

The self is not a substance, nor is it an empty term. It is not a social construct alone, nor simply a "clearing in which signs of the world merely play out their roles in detachment" (p. 5). Rather, it is an unlimited sign series, multipositioned with a cumulative directionality which does not deny the possibility of "sheer semiotic drift and inertia" (p. 5), but which asserts the relevance of the concept of identity, however fitful that identity may appear. Because the self is an unlimited sign series, any description of human relation to itself, to other selves, to other orders, and to the overall concept of nature itself, is always inexhaustible. While we cannot speak of a grand purpose, Corrington claims, we may correctly speak of innumerable purposes that serve to enhance the human process.

However, we are constantly at odds with complexes which bind the self within semiotic systems prone to closure. The complex has its own purposive structure, which the self must be able to name in such a way as to alter the power relation between itself and the complex. Heidegger's description of the naming process is valuable here. The naming "helps to bridge the abyss between nature naturing and nature natured" (p. 84). The disruptive powers of the complex may appear to emerge from the heart of nature itself: "The complex, and its archetypal core, stem from elusive powers within the surging rhythms of nature naturing. It is to these rhythms that consciousness must turn if it is to find its wholeness amid the powers of the world" (p. 85).

But the consciousness, if it is to discover these healing powers, is not fully capable in and of itself to break free of the complex powers and semiotic codes which hold the self in partial thrall. The self must enter into the reverberation of new liberating rhythms, which first have the power to deposition the bound self. The liberating power at work in the world is described by Corrington as the spirit-interpreter that "hovers in and around signs and sign-users" (pp. 85-86). Corrington suggests that Kristeva is not

open to this enriching power at work between and among signs. The momentum of the spirit is that energy which "moves signs and sign series into the encompassing and healing power of the not yet" (p. 86). Like Heidegger, Corrington finds redemptive power in the future-orientation of the eschatological present which is capable of deposing previous binding semiotic habits. Without the possibility of facing into the anxiety and hope of the future, we would possess no means by which the present could be transfigured.

Corrington attempts not to personify the spirit-interpreter. It is not a consciousness or eternal mind (p. 52) but is described, instead, as a clearing within which a person can find healing and new semiotic momentum, a re-oriented telos or newly-emergent purpose. The spirit is within the others of nature as their "enabling condition for any and all meaning within the world" (p. 53). Corrington is indebted to Peirce's concept of ground, which the latter, in his 1866 Lowell Lectures, suggests corresponds within Christian theology to the Holy Spirit (p. 53).

As with other elements of Corrington's ecstatic naturalism, there are times when his descriptions of the spirit appear substantialist or intentionalist. For example, the spirit-interpreter "fills each produce with some sense of ultimate import and value" (p. 59), it "hovers" in and around signs and "moves" and "coaxes" the orders. This anthropomorphism is not so much a mistake within ecstatic naturalism, however, as a reminder that Corrington's philosophical description lies on the forward edges of language. He is attempting to describe concepts broken open by the creative interplay of his philosophical and theological predecessors and carried forward by his own deeply insightful and bold exploration at the interstices between theology and philosophy. The creativity of his language has itself the power to create a clearing for the reader to discover new ways of apprehending the human relationship within nature. It is a language which is influenced by both Buchler and Heidegger, but is derivative of neither. As a result, ecstatic naturalism offers an enriching and empowering momentum for philosophical theology and deserves careful critical attention, offering as it does a strongly relevant corrective to "glottocentric" philosophical approaches which fail to admit the real human confrontation with nature.

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Being and Value: Toward a Constructive Postmodern Metaphysics, by Frederick Ferré.
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\$24.95

To do "metaphysics," says Ferré, is to endeavor to construct a "theory of reality in general." The "postmodern" attitude, however, is famously