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BEYOND THE TEXT: ECSTATIC NATURALISM AND AMERICAN PRAGMATISM

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I. The Contemporary Pragmatic Context

A revival of pragmatism is taking place among American and, to a lesser extent, European philosophers. Most often the renewal of pragmatic thought has taken a "linguistic turn" in the direction of a neo-pragmatism such as that of Richard Rorty.[1] In Europe, Karl-Otto Apel's work[2] on C. S. Peirce's move from pragmatism to pragmaticism has demonstrated the value of pragmatic thought for hermeneutical philosophy even as it has challenged and enriched the German hermeneutical tradition. Cornel West[3] has fashioned an historicist-prophetic version of pragmatism which issues in a public philosophy or a kind of cultural criticism with religious and moral overtones. Finally, Peter Ochs[4] is cultivating a rabbinic pragmatism that holds great promise for philosophers who are seeking ways to do post-critical philosophical theology from within religious traditions. Surely pragmatism is once again a viable, fruit-bearing philosophic option for contemporary philosophers.

The revival of pragmatism among the younger generation of American scholars can generally be characterized as anti-metaphysical, public-praxis oriented, and postmodern or post-critical. Furthermore, the various forms of contemporary pragmatism typically demonstrate an allegiance to one or more of the three principal American pragmatists: C. S Peirce, William

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[1] Among Rorty's many publications I want to single out his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). The essays that comprise this book seem illustrative of Rorty's version of neo-pragmatism.

[2] Karl-Otto Apel, *Charles S. Peirce: From Pragmatism to Pragmaticism*, trans. John Michael Crois (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981).

[3] Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

[4] Perhaps the work most representative of Ochs's position in relationship to the historical context I am describing is his "A Rabbinic Pragmatism" in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with Geogre Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990).

James, or John Dewey. However, few if any of the younger pragmatists are fashioning a philosophical system that upholds and opens out a natural philosophy whose roots are firmly planted within the American pragmatic tradition. Drawing upon the ideas of both American and Continental philosophers, Robert S. Corrington[5] has constructed a unique version of American naturalism that issues in a philosophical theology via a somewhat chastened metaphysics that celebrates the semiotic plenitude of nature. Corrington's project, which is still underway, is an effort to reclaim philosophical space for a metaphysics that is as deep as it is wide in scope. Even though my own philosophical and theological inclinations are quite different from Corrington's, I find that his semiotic metaphysics raises questions which cannot be easily by-passed by anyone who wants to make sense of the revival of American pragmatism.

This essay is primarily explanatory rather than expository. A purpose for writing this piece is my desire to inaugurate a public dialogue between Corrington and other American naturalists, or a dialogue between the Peirce and the Dewey wings of American pragmatism. Therefore, I am not presenting a critical analysis of Corrington's work. Furthermore, my interest is not that of supporting Corrington's move "beyond the text." Instead, my task has been to understand Corrington's work on the basis of a careful reading of his texts and to submit that understanding to readers who can respond to Corrington in ways that I cannot. If American pragmatism can be said to represent a "community of interpreters," then this essay may be viewed as an attempt to provide a starting point for the kind of substantive discussion of the differences between Corrington and other naturalists.

Perhaps the question with which to begin a constructive dialogue among American pragmatists is the leading question that arises from Corrington's revisionary metaphysics: is metaphysical inquiry a legitimate philosophical enterprise? Within the present American philosophical context a seemingly escalating debate is taking place between neo-pragmatists and so-

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[5] Corrington has published four books: *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), *An Introduction to C. S. Peirce* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1993), *Nature and Spirit: As Essay in Ecstatic Naturalism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), and *The Community of Interpreters: On the Hermenetutics of Nature and the Bible in American Philosophical Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987).

called "paleo-pragmatists."[6] The debate revolves around inheritance: each party is claiming to be a legitimate heir to the central ideas of classical American pragmatism. Of course, there has never been one and only one mode of pragmatic thought. Instead, there have been three principal variations on a single theme, variations presented in the writings of Peirce, James, and Dewey. Any attempt to establish a single legitimate heir to classical American pragmatism is a fruitless venture. Likewise, any attempt to discredit and even disallow metaphysical inquiry by appealing to the writings of the three principal American pragmatists is simply wrong. We may, from our late twentieth century, allegedly postmodern perspectives, believe that systematic metaphysical inquiry is useless, hence, meaningless, but not because the principal American pragmatists "tell us so." For they do not tell us so.

John E. Smith, in his *Purpose and Thought* and *The American Philosophical Vision*, persuasively argues against those persons who would have us believe that the principal American pragmatists were anti-metaphysical. Smith's writings plainly reveal the metaphysical work and interests of Peirce, James, and Dewey. Corrington's ecstatic naturalism, which admittedly radicalizes the "classical" versions of American pragmatism, may still be placed within American philosophical naturalism. His work is, by and large, that of an original thinker who is well versed in the Western philosophical tradition. He certainly stands on the shoulders of at least a half-dozen philosophers with whose writings he has been in dialogue. Corrington's originality, however, is most obvious in his exploration of Peirce's category of Firstness and of the notion of the ontological difference as it appears in Heidegger's writings (*Dasein* and *Sein*).[7] His original contribution to philosophical naturalism also consists in the wedding of certain ideas of Peirce (categories and sign-theory), Dewey (definition of metaphysics), and Justus Buchler (ordinal metaphysics). Corrington prefers to think of some of these thinkers as "dialogue partners" and others as precursors of ecstatic naturalism. Even so, it would be difficult to envision his originality without the benefit of the leading ideas and language of his precursors. Indeed, they provide a contour for Corrington's project. A brief

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[6] Robert B. Westbrook, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2 (Spring 1993), 259.

[7] See Chapter 4 of Corrington's *An Introduction to C. S. Peirce.*

review of the historical development of Corrington's system makes this evident.

C. S. Peirce's basic categories (Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness) and his theory of signs are central to Corrington's work, but have undergone certain transformations or "emancipatory reenactments" as Corrington prefers to call them. John Dewey provides the basic definition for Corrington's understanding of metaphysical inquiry (query). According to John E. Smith, Dewey defined metaphysics as the "reflective analysis aimed at disclosing what he called the 'generic traits of existence' or the pervasive features which manifest themselves in every specific subject matter which defines or marks off a distinct field of inquiry."[8] Dewey drew a distinction between philosophy and metaphysics, the former being a reflective enterprise of criticism. The neo-pragmatists have emphasized this aspect of Dewey's distinction and have neglected his metaphysics, especially as it is presented in *Experience and Nature*. Dewey seems to have believed that criticism (philosophy), without an antecedent metaphysical inquiry, would lack the breadth and depth necessary to the disclosure of the"'generic traits of existence." While the neo-pragmatists emphasize philosophy as criticism, Corrington emphasizes what was once called first philosophy, or metaphysics, and downplays Dewey's instrumentalism. This is a telling difference which reveals the tension within American pragmatism between those thinkers engaged in metaphysical inquiry and those who are engaged in linguistic analysis.

Corrington's acceptance of Dewey's functional definition of metaphysics is, in many respects, the acceptance of Justus Buchler's refinement and expansion of Dewey's metaphysical definition and method of inquiry. Buchler's "metaphysics of natural complexes" opens the door for Corrington's query of the depth dimension of nature (nature naturing), a door Buchler opened but did not pass through. The upshot of all this is Corrington's definition of metaphysics. For him, metaphysics is

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[8] Smith, John E., *Purpose & Thought: The Meaning of Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 143.

> [t]he attempt to find the most basic categories through which phenomena (orders of relevance) can become available to the human process. To engage in metaphysics is to probe into the most generic features of a given order and to isolate those features for special treatment.[9]

With this in mind, I now want to say something about the sources, the structure, and the key elements in Corrington's philosophy.

II. Tracing the Weave of Corrington's Tapestry: Methodological Considerations

John Deely, in his forward to Robert Corrington's *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World,* correctly identifies "the context of naturalism within which Corrington situates himself."[10] Deely's positioning of Corrington relative to the naturalism of ecstatic naturalism is, however, somewhat misleading because Deely has not taken into account Corrington's earlier monographs.[11] Deely's mention of certain omissions[12] in Corrington's third volume is an instance of his failure to take into account Corrington's past achievements and the developmental character of his philosophical mode of thought. A part of my task in facilitating a dialogue between Corrington and other naturalists is to enrich Deely's account by taking a more complete measure of Corrington's project of thought as it appears in his monographs. This can be accomplished by examining Corrington's philosophical sources as they appear behind and within the methodologies he develops and employs in each of his books. Of course, method-centric investigation skews the contours of the object under investigation by limiting the field of vision. However, the focus on method offers the best, and least distortive, perspective on Corrington's work.

Although Corrington's monographs can be read as autonomous texts

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[9] Corrington, *Nature and Spirit,* 3.

[10] John Deely, forward to Robert Corrington's *Ecstatic Naturalism,* x.

[11] Of course, Deely is working within the limitations of a preface written for a specific work. However, some of Deely's remarks are bound to mislead those readers who have not read Corrington's earlier works, especially *Nature and Spirit* where he does treat the four divine orders of God.

[12] Deely, forward to Corrington;s *Ecstatic Naturalism,* xi.

that stand on their own, a methodological focus will reveal the correlative quality of his texts and the thoughts conveyed through them. The three monographs are three installments in the ongoing development and application of his philosophical mode of thought. Each volume employs a different method that has been developed for the purpose of exploring and delineating specific kinds of phenomena. Horizonal hermeneutics, the primary method relevant to *The Community of Interpreters*, was developed for the purpose of inquiring into the nature of communities. Ordinal phenomenology, the method that comes to the fore in the second volume, was developed for the purpose of identifying and describing non-human (and human) orders of relevance and for unfolding the notion of the ontological difference (nature naturing/nature natured), the concept of worldhood, and the four divine natures. Finally, in the third volume, Corrington broadens and deepens his query of nature through a more explicit utilization of ecstatic naturalism. Ecstatic naturalism is both a method and a metaphysics. It is a semiotic, theoretical method in the sense that it reveals the world as "a natural totality that achieves its orders ('nature natured') by semiotic means and reveals its puissance ('nature naturing') through semiotic modalities."[13] Ecstatic naturalism is a metaphysics in the sense that Corrington is telling us what the nature of nature is and what lies on the far side of the ontological difference (nature naturing). Each of these methods, and some of the key concepts Corrington reconstructs, will be more fully explicated in the pages that follow.

A. *Horizonal Hermeneutics: The Community of Interpreters*. Even though his initial monograph is set within the context of hermeneutical theory, nature is Corrington's preeminent concern. He wants to disabuse us of the notion that hermeneutical theory is limited to textual analysis while, at the same time, reminding us that not everything that is is a text and that the search for more generic accounts of meaning must go beyond texts to that which ultimately enables their existence. Corrington also argues for the recognition of the American philosophical tradition by arguing against the assumption that "hermeneutical theory is primarily a European achievement and that other traditions have had little to say concerning the problem of interpretation."[14] The American tradition, in the persons and works of

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[13] Ibid, ix.

[14] Corrington, *Community of Interpreters*, xi.

Emerson, Peirce, Dewey, Royce, Buchler, and others, deserves notice as a major contributor to the hermeneutical enterprise.

The development of horizonal hermeneutics reveals Corrington's talent for identifying and creatively extending the ideas of others through acts of "emancipatory reenactment" which reveal the latent meaning in those ideas. In this sense, horizonal hermeneutics has a variety of precursors. For instance, Emerson's writings, though often ignored by philosophers, are a fertile field for Corrington in that the writings are an early instance of an American naturalism that transcends biblical (textual) horizons in an effort to solve the "riddle of the Sphinx." Emerson's conceptualization of nature as the ultimate text is a hermeneutical move that decentralizes the Bible and opens out the broader horizon of naturalistic inquiry. For Corrington, Emerson's conceptualization of nature as a text is inadequate to the nature of nature itself. On Corrington's view, binding nature to textuality denies the "infinite semiotic" process that is nature in its naturing capacity. To conceptualize nature as one text among others is to make of it and its "products" static objects with fixed horizonal boundaries that ultimately deny the ecstatic quality of reality.

Even though Corrington values Emerson's work, especially his understanding of horizons, he is well aware of the points at which Emerson's work requires reconstruction in the service of horizonal hermeneutics and, ultimately, ecstatic naturalism. Corrington's early work is fueled by something like an "Emersonian mood," to use Stanley Cavell's phrase. This is not to say that Corrington's mood is a species of the alleged Emersonian optimism. Instead, it has more to do with the darkness of closed horizons. As a nineteenth century Unitarian minister Emerson experienced first-hand the constraints of an exclusively textual orientation. He expressed his reservations and frustrations at Harvard in 1838 when he delivered *The Divinity School Address*. Today we might say that Emerson was inveighing against the premature closure of religious horizons that "kills meaning"[15] when he said that

> [t]he stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed; the fear of

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[15] Ibid., 46.

> degrading the character of Jesus by representing him as a man—indicate with a sufficient clearness the falsehood of our theology.[16]

Although Corrington honors Emerson's desire to emancipate Christianity and its adherents by calling it and them beyond the text, he correctly identifies the limitations of Emerson's conceptualization of nature as a text. For Corrington, "hermeneutics must free itself from the narrow concern with human linguistic artifacts."[17] Corrington argues for a more adequate account of nature that reaffirms its natural and categorial supremacy. This more adequate account of nature, and the wider hermeneutical scope, are given and shown in Corrington's horizonal hermeneutics.

While Emerson sets the mood for Corrington's "recovery of nature" for philosophy, C. S. Peirce provides the general philosophic framework within which, or out of which, Corrington develops horizonal hermeneutics. Peirce's "three fundamental, non-reducible categories"[18] and his semiotic theory are instrumental to the development of Corrington's hermeneutical method. A review of Peirce's semiotic metaphysics is not within the purview of this essay. However, and even though Peirce's work is crucial to Corrington's mode of thought, it is Josiah Royce's brilliant recasting of Peirce's semiotics that enables Corrington to reveal and then extend the scope of hermeneutical inquiry beyond textuality. So, too, Royce's more exact account of the nature of communities[19] and his grafting of semiotics onto the horizon of the community resonates with Corrington's understanding of the greater scope of the "object" of hermeneutics.[20] What Corrington finds so attractive and useful in Royce is his "articulation of the semiotic process of triadic progression in the unfolding of serial meaning."[21] Whereas horizonal hermeneutics is directed toward "the innumerable signs and interpretations

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[16] Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "Divinity School Address," in *The Portable Emerson,* ed. Carl Bode, in collaboration with Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin, 1981), 86.

[17] Corrington, *Nature and Spirit*, 1.

[18] Corrington, *Community of Interpreters*, 4.

[19] This thought is expressed by John E. Smith in his *Purpose and Thought.*

[20] Corrington, *Community of Interpreters*, 36-37.

[21] Ibid., 36.

that emerge from communication and the creation of shared meanings"[22] within human orders of relevance, Corrington's semiotic metaphysics seeks the best angles of repose from which to "view" the encompassing nature of nature itself. This larger hermeneutical circle establishes the flexible and reflexive "encompassment" within which the many smaller hermeneutical circles dwell. Corrington's hermeneutical query is guided by Justus Buchler's principle of ontological parity, a principle whose maxim states that "whatever is, in whatever way, is real."[23] The principle of ontological parity has the effect of decentralizing or deprivileging human orders of relevance by relegating them to the status of one order among others, including non-human orders of relevance or natural complexes. Corrington seeks to persuade us that reality, that is, whatever is, in whatever way, is complex and that no single complex can be "held to be more real or more fundamental than others."[24]

Horizonal hermeneutics focuses upon human orders of relevance. Methodologically, the object of horizonal hermeneutics is "the innumerable signs and interpretations that emerge from communication and the creation of shared meaning"[25] within and across human orders of relevance. Corrington describes horizonal hermeneutics as the drive

> toward the encompassing perspective in which all signs are located via-a-vis each other and in terms of the human communities that sustain and articulate them.[26]

The encompassing view toward which hermeneutics is driven is constrained by finitude and ideology. According to Corrington, ideology is the social expression of finitude. Furthermore, the desire for an encompassing perspective "lures" the community of interpreters beyond ideological structures toward personal openness and communal democracy.[27] Corrington pushes us toward a redefinition of community in his drive to reveal the more

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[22] Corrington, *Nature and Spirit*, 1.
[23] Ibid., 25-26.
[24] Ibid., 26.
[26] Corrington, *Community of Interpreters*, 47.
[26] Ibid., 47.
[27] Ibid.

generic hermeneutical clearing that better accords with the aspiring, almost omnivorous, nature of hermeneutics itself.

For Corrington, all interpretive transactions are embedded within orders of relevance (natural complexes). Thus,

> hermeneutics is the self-conscious moment within topology. The finding of place (*topos*) is basic to the interpretive process. Each interpretation derives its meaning from the larger order that determines its scope and direction. The traditional discussion of the hermeneutical circle, particularly as found in Schleiermacher and Heidegger, expresses this fundamental insight that all interpretation is embedded in an order that encompasses the complex being interpreted. Whether the center or the circumference of this circle is being articulated, the ordinal nature of the act of interpretation is clear from the outset.[28]

A thorough reading of chapter four of *The Community of Interpreters* reveals the relational quality of Corrington's methodologies. Corrington begins where he must, with human orders of relevance and horizonal hermeneutics, in order to open out his query toward non-human orders of relevance via the methods of ordinal phenomenology and ecstatic naturalism. His quest is always in the direction of the more generic and encompassing semiotic metaphysics of ecstatic naturalism. Horizonal hermeneutics provides the context or clearing for his redefinition "of the notions of order, community, sign, and horizon."[29] Also, by beginning at a point within the larger, permeable hermeneutic circle of nature itself, the movement of Corrington's inquiry is outward toward the more generic enabling category of nature, a categorial precategory that makes discrimination or valuative judgment possible. That hermeneutics is the search for a place within the larger order makes sense given Corrington's metaphysical push toward the discovery of the most generic features (traits) of the world. A community of interpreters must

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[28] Ibid., 48.
[29] Ibid.

locate itself relative to its location within the encompassing that is nature and relative to all other orders that border on or intersect its horizon. In other words, horizons are perspectives or windows onto the world. However, horizonal hermeneutics, as a methodology, is limited to a perspectival view of what I shall call the "near" side of the ontological difference, the "side" that is open to a description of the world as it can be "seen." In order to query the "far" side of the ontological difference one must, according to Corrington, move from horizonal hermeneutics to ordinal phenomenology and, finally, on to ecstatic naturalism. However, this movement does not imply that one method supersedes another, or that Corrington's methods can be hierarchically arranged. The methods are brought into play on the basis of the kind of phenomenon encountered. Ordinal phenomenology comes into play when the inquiry shifts to the analysis and description of orders of relevance.

B. *Ordinal Phenomenology: Nature and Spirit.* The move from horizonal hermeneutics to ordinal phenomenology should not be made without first addressing Corrington's technical language and his redefinition of technical and ordinary concepts. Even though he criticizes the "language mysticism" found in Heidegger and Gadamer, Corrington's prose, while crisp and economical, presents a formidable challenge to persons unfamiliar with either semiotics or phenomenology or both. Corrington does help the reader along by carefully distinguishing between his use (meaning) of concepts and the use others, like Husserl, have made of the same concepts. However, unless the reader understands Corrington's language-game he or she will not grasp, or be grasped by, the subtle power or spirit that moves the language-game along. There is a sense in which learning the language of ordinal phenomenology is necessary to the acquisition of the capacity that enables us "to see," "to think," and "to feel" the concepts naturally rather than artificially. For within the context of ordinal phenomenology the meanings of technical and ordinary concepts have been enriched; and unless readers learn the language of ordinal phenomenology they will be unable to make the necessary changes in their thinking that will allow them to see with and through the lens of ordinal phenomenology. Hence, there is a sense in which a trace of Heideggerian language mysticism appears in Corrington's mode of thought; and learning Corrington's language is integral to an engagement with the text on the plane of phenomenological breadth and existential depth.

Ordinal phenomenology is a move away from the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl. The move here is a move away from "a narrow concern with human subjectivity and the constitutive acts of an alleged transcendental ego...."[30] Corrington seeks to steer us away from the "spectatorial view of the world" which often fails to take seriously its own subjective location (embeddedness) in orders of relevance or various forms of life in which a subject participates. The task of ordinal phenomenology is to probe "into the most basic and pervasive features of the world." According to Corrington,

> Ordinal phenomenology marks a distinct departure from [the] more traditional way of understanding the tensions between phenomenological method and metaphysical aspiration. It redefines both phenomenology and metaphysics in such a way as to show that they require each other. Ordinal phenomenology is ... the analysis and description of orders of relevance. As such, it does not privilege consciousness by assuming that it must be the mysterious origin of all phenomenal features. The concept of "order" is in a sense pre-phenomenological in that it enables phenomenology to proceed toward a description of any order no matter how constituted or how located. Without such a metaphysical concept, phenomenology would be confined to finite subjectivity, that is, to an idiosyncratic order that has only dubious relevance to all others.[31]

As noted earlier, Corrington views metaphysics as "the attempt to find the most basic categories through which phenomena (orders of relevance) can become available to the human process." The metaphysical process, then, is one that moves "from the less to the more generic, so that private or limited traits are located within larger orders of relevance."[32] A brief

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[30] Corrington, *Nature and Spirit*, 1.
[31] Ibid., 2-3.
[32] Ibid., 3.

phenomenological analysis of the contour of Corrington's second book provides us with insight into the metaphysical movement "from the less to the more generic."

If each chapter of *Nature and Spirit* is an order (subaltern) of relevance, then each chapter heading is a trait embedded in the larger orders of relevance to which it belongs. The overall contour of the book consists of the table of contents, the preface, the various chapters, the index, and so on. Using the chapter headings as guideposts, the process of ordinal phenomenology can be said to move the inquiry from the process of human selving through the signs of community to worldhood and then beyond to the query of the divine natures. Thus, ordinal phenomenology is a project in revisionary metaphysics that moves beyond the descriptive modes of more traditional phenomenological and analytic methods to a position from which valuative judgments can be made.

Though Corrington has distanced himself from Husserl and Heidegger, he remains aligned with them in arguing against the Kantian and neo-Kantian "transcendental ego." He is also in dialogue with semioticians such as John Deely, Umberto Eco, and Thomas Sebeok. However, on Corrington's view the tendency of semioticians toward a privileging of textuality results in the neglect of experience and, hence, the neglect of nature. Corrington's phenomenological effort pushes beyond the Kantian and Husserlian transcendental egos in a manner that opens up areas or orders of relevance for exploration without retreating to an epistemological foundationalism.

The influence of Hegel's phenomenology is also evident in Corrington's ordinal methodology. However, whereas Hegel's absolute idealism maps the growth and development of human consciousness, Corrington's ecstatic naturalism maps the growth and development of orders of relevance (signs) which impinge upon the process of human selving. Furthermore, for Hegel the growth and development of human consciousness and the intelligibility of the world parallels the growth and development of the Spirit or Mind. For Corrington, however, the growth and development of orders of relevance are expressions or revelations of the growth and development of natural grace which is enabled by the "work" of the Spirit. And whereas Hegel's idealism trades upon an inevitable teleological continuity, Corrington's ecstatic metaphysics recognizes and confirms

discontinuity. Even though the two systems seek the greatest possible scope, Corrington's system, while encompassing, is not teleological in a universal sense. This difference between Hegel and Corrington is due, in large part, to Corrington's understanding of the ontological difference which is the great divide within nature.

C. *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World.* Ecstatic naturalism is both a new movement in thought and a method. Methodologically, ecstatic naturalism draws upon horizonal hermeneutics and ordinal phenomenology in its desire to probe and lay bare the most generic features of the world and to shed light on the natural enabling conditions which emerge from within the heart of nature itself. Furthermore, ecstatic naturalism has been made possible and finds its point of departure in the convergence of the revival of pragmatism, the transformation of naturalism, and the "even more radical transformation of psychoanalysis in the context of postmodern discourse."[33] Through various acts of "emancipatory reenactment," acts in which concepts are transformed or reconfigured, Corrington brings out certain neglected or unrecognized aspects of these three streams of thought and uses them to forge his new philosophical naturalism.

My intention is not to trace the path of Corrington's development of ecstatic naturalism. Instead, I shall merely lift up and out the concept or idea that lies at the heart of Corrington's naturalism: the ontological difference. I believe this concept is central both to Corrington's system and to our understanding of his mode of thought.

The significance of the ontological difference becomes more pronounced in Corrington's literature as he moves his inquiry from the less to the more generic traits of the world. The focus on methodology reveals the movement and direction of Corrington's query and the phenomenological and metaphysical scope of his project. Whereas horizonal hermeneutics and ordinal phenomenology are appropriate to query on the "near" side of the ontological difference and to the relation between signs and orders of relevance (natural complexes), ecstatic naturalism, as a metaphysical method, seeks to explore the "far" side of the ontological difference in order to reveal ultimately the relationship between the two sides of the fundamental divide at the heart of nature. The reader must always bear in mind Corrington's naturalistic

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[33] **Corrington,** *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 4.

presupposition, that is, that nothing whatsoever exists outside nature. There is no realm of the super or extranatural on Corrington's account. Even God, or most especially God, is an order within nature, albeit an ontologically unique complex that is "both a complex within nature and the ground for the sheer prevalence of all complexes. The [four] divine natures participate in both sides of the ontological difference, and keep nature natured and nature naturing attuned to each other."[34] Here, too, the reader must recognize Corrington's concern with the "between," the realm or dimension between the two sides of the ontological difference and how those sides are triadically rather than diadically related via the work of the Spirit. For Corrington, it is the Spirit that opens out and enables the possibility of attunement for all orders of relevance. Ecstatic naturalism is a semiotic metaphysics because the world is an evolutionary sign process (world semiosis) and metaphysics offers the only mode of thought and feeling through which human orders gain access to the transformative structures which enable us to attune ourselves to the natural rhythms and natural grace that are operative within the world.

While the ontological difference is said to have stronger and weaker relevance to all natural complexes, non-human as well as human orders of relevance, I shall limit consideration of the impact of the ontological difference to human orders of relevance. The two sides of the ontological difference are, as stated earlier, nature natured and nature naturing or *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. Corrington's query of the ontological difference moves from the "near" side to the "far" side. The "near" side may be described as the realm in which "objects" appear or are otherwise perceivable. The "far" side of the ontological difference may be described as the realm in which and from which all "objects" are birthed or "ejected." The "far" side is the realm or dimension of potencies and powers, a realm Corrington often refers to as the seedbed for the signs of the world, signs that may or may not become "objects" of human perception. The "near" side, or nature natured, is the realm of actual and infinite semiosis and this realm or dimension can be "mapped." Nature naturing, or the "far" side, is the realm of powers and potencies that give birth to the very possibility of world semiosis. This dimension of nature is also referred to as the unconscious within nature, a designation that reveals Corrington's dialogue with Jung (archetypes) and Kristeva.

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[34] **Corrington**, *Nature and Spirit*, 162.

A crude, but perhaps useful, analogy can be drawn by using the metaphors "surface" and "depth." On this analogy nature natured is the surface dimension and nature naturing is the depth dimension of nature. As Corrington expands the scope of his query "outward" from human horizons to non-human orders of relevance and, finally, to the encompassing that nature is, it seems clear that his goal is the explanation of the "depth" dimension of nature along with that of the dimension of the between. This is the case only because Corrington has set for himself the task of showing, by saying, the relationship that exists among the three fundamental ontological categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. While thirdness as the relation between firstness and secondness is the most significant category for Corrington's metaphysical aspirations, firstness understood as the bare qualities of Being-itself is what Corrington seeks to describe and explain via ecstatic naturalism. It is the how of the world, or the answer to the question why something and not nothing that Corrington's naturalism brings into the purview of philosophical inquiry. Corrington does this by employing Peirce's methods of abduction and interpretive musement. Peirce's semiotic theory opened the path for Corrington's exploration of the presemiotic and prelinquistic orders of sign functions. Corrington is also indebted to Heidegger's ontological analysis, especially as they relate to the ontological difference. However, Corrington's indebtedness to these two seminal thinkers stops at the point of his semiotic metaphysical exploration of the depth dimension of nature which is surely the most creative aspect of his work. This exploration of nature's depth dimension invites the most careful scrutiny by Corrington's philosophical and theological peers.

Ecstatic naturalism is both a descriptive and a revisionary metaphysics. It is descriptive in its application to nature natured and revisionary in its application to nature naturing. Corrington has gone beyond his predecessors and precursors in his query of the "origin," the "efficient cause," or the "depth" dimension that is the "ground" of natural complexes. The concept of the ontological difference is what enables Corrington to pursue an inquiry into nature naturing. However, this inquiry is not epistemological because we cannot be said to know the origin of world semiosis in the same way we know "objects" or the phenomena that are natural complexes. This epistemological limitation forces Corrington to work at the boundary of language and to use metaphorical language based upon the senses of "touch"

(feeling) and "hearing" (listening). Feeling is the primary sense for Corrington because the life task for a human self is to bring the self or to allow the self to be brought into attunement with the rhythms of nature, with the mystery of nature itself via the Spirit. It is the Spirit, then, that opens out the clearing between nature naturing and nature natured and the structures of betweenness that serve as clearings between human and non-human orders of relevance. However, this work of the Spirit, though located in the between, cannot be understood in spatial terms that suggest containment. On Corrington's model transcendence occurs within the horizon in which a human self is simply embedded. The event or experience of attunement is a transcendence and not a translocation or a transposition. Attunement with nature itself is like the experience of turning around and seeing oneself and the world as if for the first time.

For Corrington nature is simply, and most profoundly, the enabling condition for whatever is in whatever way. According to Corrington, "Nature is the seed bed of continua but is not itself a super order of continuity or preestablished harmony."[35] His analysis of the ontological difference reveals the ultimate enabling condition which emerges from the great divide that lies at the heart of nature. Temporally, these "betweenness" structures are located between the past and the future, the "not yet," of all signs (selves, orders of relevance) and provide the clearings which also reveal the discontinuity in nature that serves to goad or to lure signs toward fulfillment in the "not yet," the place and the time in which the "lost object" awaits its own. Semiotically, signs generated from within nature naturing are said to be ejected (like Heidegger's concept of thrownness) into the realm of nature natured. All signs carry with them a trace of their origin and a natural desire to return from whence they came. Corrington has reconfigured some of Kristeva's postmodern psychoanalytic theory and grafted it onto his semiotic theory in a way that allows him to probe and open out the psychological dimension of his semiotic metaphysics. However, the investigation of this area of Corrington's project is best left to others more qualified.

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[35] **Corrington**, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 7.

III. Ecstatic Naturalism and Philosophical Reminders

There is, of course, much more that could and should be said about Robert Corrington's philosophical system. His contribution to philosophical theology pushes toward a kind of philosophical faith that seeks to respond to the "natural grace" operative in the world through a "natural piety" that transcends panrationalism. Theologians, and those philosophers who have an interest in religion, should not dismiss Corrington's work merely on the grounds that it moves outside traditional languages of faith. For there is a curious sense in which his redefinition of the concept of the ontological difference suggests the Genesis narrative and the primordial experience of expulsion ("ejection") from Eden by a Divine Parent (Material Maternal). But Corrington is not re-telling an old story; instead, he is describing what for him is an actual state of affairs which results from the ontological difference that lies at the heart of nature and within the human heart as well. Corrington is also prescribing a remedy for the human predicament in his insistence upon a return to naturalism and the recognition of the ecstatic dimension of nature and the ubiquitous presence of the Spirit in nature.

Corrington's prescription for the human predicament seeks to shift us away from the idea that our language, our words and concepts, are embedded in various forms of life to the idea that our languages must be embedded in orders of relevance that are themselves subject to or participants in a semiotic process enabled by nature. The central issue, however, is not the possibility of making a philosophical shift from language analysis to naturalism. Whether the reader agrees or disagrees with him, Corrington has shown that such a philosophical shift can be made. The key issue is finally whether the move to ecstatic naturalism is instructive or merely a systematic project in thought that drives too great a wedge between the theoretical and the practical, the abstract and the concrete. No doubt metaphysicians will welcome Corrington's new ecstatic naturalism with open arms.[36] But neo-pragmatists will want to know what the upshot of ecstatic naturalism is: what are the "consequences of pragmaticism"? For Corrington is trying to rebuild an old bridge that collapsed under the weight of logical positivism and analytic

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[36] See Donald L. Gelpi's review of Corrington's *Nature and Spirit* in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (June, 1993): 369-70.

philosophy, the bridge that once spanned the great divide between nature naturing and nature natured, the pregiven and the given, by driving its ontological moorings into nature.[37] While Corrington has developed a new way of speaking, hence thinking, that resurrects the superstructure of the bridge and reminds us both philosophically and theologically of old ways once traveled, of old languages once spoken, one wonders if the bridge can be safely traversed so that we can not only find but make our way home.

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[37] I want to thank the Rev. Dr. William Elkins for his help with this description of the foundational aspects of Corrington's thought and for the many hours of conversation which have helped shape my understanding of Corrington's mode of thought.

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