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## **From the Process Self to the Ecstatic Self: Pantheism Reconsidered**

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The human process, dark, taciturn, and melancholy, is yet gifted with a subjective immortality that weaves itself within the innumerable orders of a nature that has no place for eschatological or progressive histories. On the contrary, histories, whatever their momentary status within the manifest orders of the world, are but irruptions and traces left behind by creatures blindly but steadily moving toward the archetypal and non-historical. Panentheism, that last narcissistic gasp of liberal Christianity, is but a fragile bubble produced by human longing and self-denial. In the vast and unending sweep of nature, such thought-bubbles radiate but briefly before collapsing back into the unconscious momentum of the infinite.

The self, ever so elusive yet always radiant in archetypal splendor, moves monadically through orders of nature too numerous to count, too ramified to trace, and too reluctant to emerge into some alleged network of internal relations. Breaks and discontinuities punctuate all continua. While any order will relate to some other orders, and to subaltern traits within itself, it will never relate to all orders other than in the fantasyland of human linguistic contrivance. Panentheism promises the world, cleaned up and gloriously self-referential, but nature merely rolls on in its grand indifference and fragmentary plenitude, crushing under foot all humanly constructed and grandiose internal self-referential series.

These are stark thoughts, yet such categorial minimalism at the outset prepares the way for a more genuine, if but darkly sensed, plenitude found within the heart of nature. The move against narcissism and anthropomorphism, and what perspective has ever admitted to being anthropomorphic, requires that we let nature do the talking and not be overly enchanted by the manic voice of its tiny infolded fragment known to us as the human self.

The current fashion in theology and philosophy is to tout nature as if poor old nature

needed somehow to be the object of our eulogistic encomiums. But alas, the pleasurable scenes currently being painted have little to do with the infinite fecundity of what a few in our traditions have called *nature naturing*; namely, nature creating itself out of itself alone. The various pastoral paintings filling the academy say more about their creators than about strange radiance of the self-ejective *naturing* that mocks all models of the human process that currently strut across the stage with their canned lines and ersatz triumphs.

My own polemics notwithstanding, is there anything valuable to offer as an alternative to what I perceive as the anti-naturalistic categorial scheme of panentheism? And if so, does it have anything analogous to the kind of hope available to those who believe in a loving/gathering consequent nature of god? After all, what is left to the foundling self once thought has removed: the supremacy of eschatological history, the importance of history itself, teleological structures, concrescent enjoyment through time, a dipolar deity in and out of space/time, and an objectively immortal human self? The answer is: absolutely everything provided that the “everything” be understood to mean the innumerable orders of the world, the ferocious power of *nature naturing*, and a monadic human self that is objectively *and* subjectively immortal but in very different respects.

I remain persuaded that a, but certainly not the only, philosophical perspective with enough scope and power to let nature truly be nature is that of *ecstatic naturalism*, or what I am equally inclined to call “ecstatic pantheism.” My first use of the term “ecstatic naturalism” in print occurred in my 1992 book, *Nature and Spirit: An Essay in Ecstatic Naturalism* in which I struggle, among other things, with and against the panentheism of Hartshorne, who, incidentally, commented on the strong Platonic flavor of the book—a prescient insight given the migration of my perspective toward neo-Platonism and the congenial thinking of Plotinus. But rather than fall prey to my own form of narcissism, I want to move past this historical marker and unfold what I can in this brief compass about the twin and enveloping potencies of *nature naturing* and *nature natured* as understood by ecstatic naturalism.

But first, a bit of special pleading of my own. In both the theological and the philosophical traditions of the West, the word “pantheism” has almost always been a term of derision, abuse, and, most often, warning. To label a perspective pantheistic is to quarantine it so that it cannot infect other allegedly healthier perspectives that invariably want to keep an oftentimes frightening and sheer nature at bay. Most of us are familiar with the debates swirling around this concept in nineteenth century Germany and some of us give honor to Schleiermacher for his courageous defense of Spinoza in a period in which such a public affirmation had non-congenial consequences.

What then is pantheism and why has it been so unrelentingly purged from our categorial schemes? In one sense, pantheism as a perspective really says very little about nature itself. It

refuses to impose any *one* term onto the indefinite complexity of an endlessly ramifying nature. Thus, for example, a pantheist can never say that nature is, at bottom, constituted by such discriminda as: matter, spirit, monads, substance, actual occasions, percepts, atomic facts, chaos, order, forms, thoughts, or, in fact, anything nominal or verbal whatsoever. The minimalist claim made by a radical pantheism is that nature is the sheer availability of orders and the orders themselves. There is no one trait found in each and every order, nor is there some kind of super order or super ordering that somehow unifies nature. Unities certainly exist, but they are ordinal, that is, they have specific locations and not others. Chaos exists, but only as ordinal, as pertinent to and in certain orders, but never all. Forms exist, but not always in the same respects and not in all orders. Spirits may exist, but again, only in some ordinal locations and not others.

More precisely, the term “nature” actually has no referent and, as such, cannot be defined. It has no referent because there is no “it” to which the word “nature” could refer. For a pantheist and naturalist, there is no non-nature, nothing somehow outside of nature that could make nature something other, i.e., something that could be pointed to that would stand against it as a contrast term. From this it follows that nature cannot be defined. This is so because to define something is to locate it within a specific difference from a more encompassing genus. And what would the genus be “within” which nature could be located as a subaltern?

Hence nature has no “what” and cannot be defined. Does this leave philosophy paralyzed, and pantheism mute? Hardly, but it does compel thought to find a different way of approaching and being approached by the self-ejective, yet self-unfolding momenta of *nature naturing* and *nature natured*. And this rethinking relocates the human process within and against the primal self-fissuring of the one nature that there is.

While there is only one nature, and even the word “one” says too much, there is a mystery-filled momentum within the heart, within the ever-opening cleft, of nature that grasps thought and binds it to a series of pulsations that are not yet semiotic or ordinal. That orders and their traits prevail is obvious — the domain of *nature natured*. That the “sum” of these orders, and they can never truly be summed, exhausts the fecundity of nature is less obvious. However, an ecstatic pantheism lives out of the recognition that the innumerable and uncountable orders of the world are emergent from or ejected by another dimension of nature that obtains in an ontologically unique way. This other dimension, denoted by the terms *nature naturing*, is pre-ordinal, pre-temporal, pre-spatial, pre-semiotic, and pre-spiritual.

Only the clumsiest perspective would equate nature and spirit without some serious qualification and detailed categorial analysis. Put simply, the infinitude of *nature naturing* is different in kind, although in some rough sense commensurate, from the mobile infinitude of spirit. The infinitude of spirit is and must be ordinal, must have ordinal locations and feel the

impress, at least in a muted form, of entropy. Whereas the endless fissuring of *nature naturing* has no ordinal location and is not entropic or subject to ordinally defined forms of entropic dissipation.

If *nature naturing* is isomorphic with nature creating nature out of itself alone then there is no pre-natural originating ground or abyss that would produce nature from a point outside of its own endless self-fissuring. Here, in a way that is akin to process pantheism, ecstatic pantheism finds the dogma of *creatio ex nihilo* to be a product of a kind of theoretical fatigue rather than a robust categorial intuition that opens out some feature within or as nature. Only a psychoanalytically explorable distrust of nature would compel thought to posit an extra-natural agency as the sufficient reason for “it” prevailing at all against some alleged devouring abyss of nonbeing. Of course, this latter claim has become common coin in the so-called postmodern world of neo-Freudian feminism and eco-theology, but its fashionable status doesn’t, in this case, render it suspect.

The fundamental fissuring divined within and as nature does not in any way obviate the intimacy between the pre-ordinal dimensionality of *nature naturing* and the fully ordinal domains of *nature natured*. Each and every order that obtains, in however tenuous a fashion, is an emergent, an eject from the self-othering momenta of the depth dimension, the unconscious dimension of *nature naturing*. By the same token, but obviously from a different directionality, *nature naturing* is what it is in and through its ejecta, the innumerable orders of the world. There is no third term or mediating reality somehow standing between these two infinite and infinitizing dimensionalities of nature.

Note, again, that I speak of the innumerable orders of the world (*nature natured*) rather than anything like *the* creation or *the* order of all orders. No such totality as “the creation” prevails any more than does a super-order that encompasses, and shapes, the innumerable orders of the world. Even the concept of “world” is theoretically too aggressive insofar as it too points to something like a worldhood of all subaltern worlds. It may be the case that our aesthetic longings drive us again and again toward a panordinalism that wants to believe in a web of internal relations, not to mention unlimited external causal and teleological connections, but aesthetic desire cannot drive fundamental metaphysical delineations of the regnant features of whatever is in whatever way it is. We must be more modest and humble in the face of the elusive infinitizing of a nature that seems to take delight in overturning our most cherished categorial frameworks.

To recapitulate before turning our attention to the unique traits of the human process, we can summarize the main aspects of ecstatic naturalism or ecstatic pantheism as follows: 1) there is only one nature, 2) the one nature has two fundamental dimensions—*nature naturing* and *nature natured*, 3) there is no order of nature, nor is nature an order, 4) there are breaks and

diremptions within all continua, i.e., nature is not a continuum of all continua, 5) nature has no external sufficient reason for prevailing — it merely prevails, 6) nature is the availability of orders, 7) history is a subaltern category and has a limited role to play in ecstatic pantheism, 8) the human process is both objectively and subjectively immortal, but in different respects, 9) archetypes obtain and are subject to only a minimal degree of evolutionary pressure within a cosmic epoch — this slight transfiguration may be rendered available to nascent shaping potencies at the onset of a subsequent cosmic epoch, and 10) strictly speaking the term “nature” says far less than is usually assumed — that is, the term functions as a pre-category rather than as a category with a contrast term — for this reason, the term “nature” has greater scope than the term “being” which always entails its contrast term “nonbeing.”

Clearly, the human process exhibits traits that are discontinuous with the other currently known orders of the world. Traits of continuity are equally in evidence and can be delineated with great care. However, in what follows the stress will be on those traits that mark out the human process from other orders. As will soon be clear, ecstatic naturalism has a different conceptual and, one might say, feeling tone or mode of attunement, than does process pantheism.

Metaphors, while often overrated in the current scene, are important indicators of the inner woof and warp of a categorial scheme. I want to briefly adumbrate four such metaphors as they have been used to give some initial shape to the commensurate conceptual delineations of the human self. Each gives certain sharpness to the corollary philosophical anthropology that they serve, and each carries a deep emotional tone that reverberates throughout the governing perspective. The first metaphor comes from Whitehead. He speaks of the self as being a participant in a cosmic and experiential *adventure*. This adventure is open-ended and lives within a penumbra of cosmic hope in the ameliorative powers of creativity. The second metaphor comes from Heidegger and evokes a more recollective momentum for the self; namely, the image of *homecoming* in which the human process, emptying itself in the face of the event of enownment, becomes gathered into the “other beginning” that will re-empower history — here the attunement is highly complex but has its own melancholy. The third metaphor comes from Justus Buchler where he speaks of the self as being born in a state of *natural debt*. The sensibility here comes from what I have called “descriptive naturalism” where the focus is on the littleness of the human process in the face of infinite nature—a sensibility also developed by Santayana. The fourth metaphor is that of ecstatic naturalism that speaks of the self as being a *foundling* cast adrift to ride precariously on and in both of the twin dimensionalities of nature; namely, to be tossed back and forth between the unconscious potencies of *nature naturing* and the innumerable orders of *nature natured*. Here the mood of attunement is actually a volatile dialectic between the melancholy for the lost object and the

ecstatic transfigurations emergent from the unconscious of the self and of nature.

The tonalities of the four metaphors point to different anthropologies and different framing cosmologies. The world is significantly different depending upon which metaphor assumes the central role — *adventure*, *homecoming*, *natural debt*, or being a *foundling*. In our final delineations we will look at the correlation between the sense that the self is a founding within nature and the framework of ecstatic pantheism that seems to entail such a conception.

Perhaps the primary differentiating trait of the human process is that it has a unique relationship to the self-fissuring of an infinite and ordinal nature, and that it enters into this fissuring through modes of attunement, that is, modes of comportment, that are largely products of the ontological difference between *nature naturing* and *nature natured*. The human self is a broken and incomplete eject from the innumerable potencies of the unconscious of nature, an unconscious to which the self has partial access through its own personal and collective unconscious.

While it makes sense to see an abyss of difference between the potencies of *nature naturing* and the emergent and unfolded orders of *nature natured*, it also should be recognized that there is a point of connection between the two dimensions of self-fissuring nature. This point, held between the mysteries of non-grounded origin and the full richness of the post-temporal dimension of the subjectively and objectively immortal, is the domain of the archetypes. The archetypes of nature live through, in, and out of the cleft held open by the ontological difference between *nature naturing* and *nature natured*. But the archetypes, indefinite in scope and “number,” do not stand as an additional third term linking together what otherwise might be forever alienated. Rather, the archetypes of nature are natural and highly compelling ejecta from the depth dimension of nature and wend their way through and among the innumerable orders of *nature natured*.

Of course, it is often difficult to probe into the differences between a genuine archetypal form and cultural forms of inscription that mimic the archetype. But the current intellectual climate has erred so egregiously in the direction of a hermeneutics of suspicion, assuming that discourse about nature’s archetypes is actually a mask for a benighted patriarchal distortion of the human process and its communities, that it has become difficult to attain philosophical sanity regarding the distinction between what nature does and what our cultures do. Polemical discourses, while often well motivated, have had the unintended consequence of forcing us into a constricted and ironically anti-naturalist horizon.

The self, as delineated by ecstatic pantheism, is a foundling that at the same time finds its measure, its sense of a higher gestalt, through the archetypes that hold it into the depth rhythm of the ontological difference. Its ancestry, both that of its immediate subjectivity and that of the nature from which it has come and in which it is fully embedded, remains covered by a veil of

ignorance, a veil that seems to be an evolutionary necessity for the nascent self as it wends its way toward the *not yet* that hovers around it as a strange gift of the otherwise reticent heart of *nature naturing*.

The founding self is in the great between, held into a fitful clearing between the self-masking potencies of *nature naturing* and the endlessly ramified orders of *nature natured*. Shifting our metaphors slightly, we can describe the self as one of the primary *unfoldings* from the unconscious of nature. But unlike most other unfolded orders of the world, the human process adds its highly complex and deeply conflicted forms of *infolding*. The dialectic between unfolding and infolding is parallel to the dialectic that takes place between objectivity and subjectivity. Needless to say, the terms “objectivity” and “subjectivity” are subject to a variety of articulations and ramifications. Precision is called for.

The *unfolded objective* dimension of the human process contains the following traits: physicality, entropic vulnerability, spatial and temporal locatedness, vulnerability to causal powers, linguistic, tribal, and cultural givens, and inertial drift. The *infolded subjective* dimensions of the human process, while less obvious, can be seen in such traits as: the dialectic between melancholy and ecstasy, freedom from bodily spatiality, access to the pre and post-temporal, conscious assimilation of archetypal potencies, a self-gathering of antecedent states into a higher subjective integrity, and the transcendence of so-called death.

Thus the human self is both an unfolded and unfolding ejection from *nature naturing* and an infolded and infolding self-gathering within the innumerable orders of *nature natured*. Its objectivity is both physical and semiotic. It lives through and as its products, signs, and inertial embodied structures. Simultaneously, it folds its own forms of interiority back in on themselves over and over again to echo forth in ever new ways its initial unfolding from the potencies of the unconscious of nature in its naturing. Each new infolding is a counter response to the primal unfolding that calls it forth. As the human process becomes more and more the master of its own endless infoldings, its subjectivity becomes increasingly monadic, increasingly unique in the way that it infolds itself and in the ways in which, more specifically, it infolds archetypal powers.

Subjective immortality, contra Hartshorne, is itself a product of the counter draft of infolding as it takes the elusive gifts of the primal unfoldings of *nature naturing* and weaves them into a lightening monad that more and more leaves behind the conditions of objectivity. So-called objectivity immortality does exist, but the goal of monadic evolution is to shed all objective structures in the journey through numerous forms of embodiment. Of course, process panentheism means something slightly different in its use of the term “objective immortality,” and this difference is important. Yet the key point of contrast between panentheism and pantheism is that the latter insists that at the point of the death of the physical body full



self-conscious subjectivity continues, and even expands, in the post-incarnate state. Even after “death” the self is in some sense a foundling, a pilgrim within the vast panoply of a nature with neither clear luminous origin nor final atemporal goal.

The self of ecstatic naturalism, of a self-conscious pantheism, is a highly complex mixture of unfolding pulsations and infolding and self-gathering subjectivities. It endures a melancholy longing for a lost domain, yet also lives as an ecstatic monadic pilgrim seeking subjective immortality. It lives in a world of only partial continuities and learns to negotiate among great archetypal powers. Ultimately, the self of nature is a foundling living in the great between where the ungrounded origin drives it both away and toward itself and compels it to deepen its great monadic infoldings — the internal goal of the primal unfolding.