

Comments on *Nature's Religion* and Robert Corrington's "Aesthetic Naturalism"

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You can imagine my pleasure at having this opportunity to continue a dialogue with Robert Corrington that already has had a long run. To be a systematic thinker, as he and I both are, easily lapses into frustrating solipsistic work, because a system as such can be engaged thoroughly only by another system that can register system-wide issues. He and I delight in engaging each other. Those of you who read his *Nature's Religion* have seen my Foreword that expresses my expository analysis of some of the salient points of Robert's philosophical theology, and I shall not repeat that here.¹ Let me add to it, however, my appreciation for his subsequent book, *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy*.² That book provides an integrative philosophy of semiotics that connects it with his ecstatic naturalism in ways that relate to surrounding positions.

A theme of our dialogue is that each thinks the other is too anthropomorphic to be a naturalist.³ The four points I want to make in these remarks will both extend and deflect that theme. The points have to do with the metaphysics or cosmology of the unconscious, the category of "naturalism," the problem of the one and the many, and the function of religious symbolism.

Concerning the unconscious, one of Robert's most imaginative contributions has been to construe the conceptual motifs and language of dynamic psychoanalysis, particularly in its French philosophical form, as cosmological categories for ecstatic naturalism. This is

¹ Robert S. Corrington, *Nature's Religion*, with a Foreword by Robert C. Neville (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

² Robert S. Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³ I made that charge in the Foreword, and he answered in a paper called "Neville's 'Naturalism' and the Location of God," originally delivered at a HIARPT Conference some years ago, published in *AJTP*, 18/3 (September 1997) and then again with rejoinders by me in the book Nancy Frankenberry and Harley Chapman edited called *Interpreting Neville* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 127-47, 306-09. See also my "Review of Robert S. Corrington's *Nature and Spirit: An Essay in Ecstatic Naturalism*," in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 34/136 (December 1994), 505.

something like the strategy of Charles Peirce, on whom Corrington is expert, to develop the categories of semiotics as categories of natural existence and causation.⁴ In Peirce's case the semiotic categories were first given a neutral philosophical definition in terms of his phenomenology of firstness, secondness, and thirdness, and then applied literally both to change and causation within nature and to the semiotic theory of the interpretation of signs. In Corrington's case, I suggest that there is an equivocation that needs to be rethought. On the one hand, he and everyone else who holds to an evolutionary view of the origin of humanity agrees that most of nature is not conscious or is "unconscious" until the arising of the higher mammals. Consciousness comes about when signs are used representatively according to the structures of semiotic codes rather than merely causally in non-semiotic patterns. Preconscious causality is taken up within semiotic causality, so that unconscious nature is felt within semiotic consciousness. On the other hand, Corrington wants to say that the structure of the transition from unconscious nature to conscious human life is the same as or like the relation between the unconscious of primary process and consciousness in a psychodynamic sense. He gives intriguing phenomenological analyses of this, and yet the suspicion arises that these analyses are as much projections onto soulless nature as they are straight empirical phenomenological descriptions. Are the psychodynamic categories not merely metaphors for humanizing the stars that blindly run? Why does that analogy hold? Why could there not be other causal processes for the arising of consciousness within nature, quite unlike the psychodynamic relations between the unconscious and consciousness?

The importance of clarifying this point is that the relation of Corrington's account to natural sciences such as psychobiology turns on it. It might be tempting to say that natural sciences are limited to relations within *natura naturata* whereas the kind of origin of consciousness to which psychodynamic categories apply lies within *natura naturans*.⁵ That temptation needs to be set aside, however, in

⁴ See Robert S. Corrington, *An Introduction to C. S. Peirce: Philosopher, Semiotician, and Ecstatic Naturalist* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993). For my own systematic interpretation of Peirce, see my *The Highroad around Modernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), chapter 1.

⁵ The distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* is central to Corrington's work, and appears in nearly all his major writings. See the Foreword to

order to be faithful to the causal character of the psychodynamic account. One of the great virtues of Corrington's cosmology is that *natura naturata* for him is far deeper and more nuanced than Spinoza's conception. Can the psychodynamic modes of analysis to which he appeals be integrated univocally with other scientific causal analyses of the relation of the prehuman non-conscious to the conscious? I suspect that the whole psychodynamic complex of conscious and unconscious intentionalities is itself the product of other evolutionary forces than those exposed in his conception of semiosis: the human unconscious is every bit as semiotically structured as the conscious. Freud described unconscious primary process in semiotic terms which were merely different in their systematic form from the semiosis of the ego and superego. What is gained, beyond the rearticulation of old myths, by the application of psychodynamic semiosis to human evolution?

So much for over-anthropomorphism in ecstatic naturalism. Now I want to cast doubt on the very enterprise of arguing "for naturalism." "Naturalism" is a descriptive category used by people with an Aristotelian bent for classifying philosophies. Original thinkers such as Corrington are going to be classified after the fact by those who think classification aids rather than short-circuits understanding. But the work of classification belongs to others. Would it not be better for the original thinker simply to lay out the theory in systematic fashion, and relate it dialectically to various alternatives, and then leave it to others to apply labels? It seems to me that too much of Corrington's argumentation for his position consists in laying claim to something worthy in naturalism, followed by exquisite maneuvers to distinguish his kind of naturalism from all the others.⁶ It would be simpler merely to argue with the close neighbors.

"Naturalism" as a category requires a lot of work before it is intellectually useful. In the late-modern period, naturalism has taken its definition from a denial of supernaturalism, often with a partly hidden polemic against religion, as in the philosophy of Justus Buchler whom Corrington and I admire. Supernaturalism in popular religion is very

his *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) by John Deely entitled "*Natura Naturans* and *Natura Naturata*."

⁶ See John Deely's chart of naturalisms in his Foreword cited above. There are three main branches of naturalism: Descriptive (Dewey, Santayana, and Buchler), Ecstatic (Peirce, Tillich, Bloch, Jung, Kristeva, and Corrington), and Honorific, which itself has two branches: focus on spirit (Schelling, Emerson, Heidegger) and focus on creativity (Whitehead, Telihard, Hartshorne, and Neville).

different from supernaturalism in sophisticated theology, and the naturalisms that deny them are also different. Sometimes, as among scientific folk, naturalism means whatever science might know. Other times, naturalism means all things that might be in some kind of causal connection; Whitehead's God is part of nature in this second sense, and Corrington acknowledges process philosophy as a kind of naturalism. Yet Whitehead's God is a separate being from the world, rather close to the supernatural intervening God of popular supernaturalism and defended as such by many process theologians. The ancient Near Eastern popular (and scientific) cosmology of a stack of heavens above the Earth which itself rests on a stack of hells conceived all these levels to be within tight causal connection, and hence of a common, though internally differentiated, nature. Aristotle's sophisticated version of this, in which natural motion is circular above the orbit of the moon and rectilinear below, is often called a "naturalism." Yet that ancient cosmology counts all the demons, angels, and gods, including Aristotle's divine stars, which modern anti-supernaturalists hate, to be within nature. I don't see that anything much is gained by trying to hold to a more perfect naturalism, as Corrington does, because that only adds to the burden of making out the case for his own philosophy an extra burden of tweaking the descriptive category of "naturalism" to fit. More perniciously, building a naturalism bandwagon illicitly garners support from anti-supernaturalists without necessarily making them check out the arguments. I recommend that, as a general descriptive category, we say that Corrington is a nature romantic, and then examine just what kind of nature romantic he is if something is to be gained by more classification.

My third point of commentary is to say that Corrington has yet to deal with the classical problem of the one and the many with respect to his philosophy or philosophical theology. That problem occurs in a number of places for him. For instance, he strongly affirms temporal causal process and poetically describes its flow. Many relational characters articulate relations between past and future events, yet those relational characters do not show how the events can be ontologically independent enough not to collapse into one another. The events occupy different parts of an ontological context of mutual relevance.⁷

⁷ For this way of laying out the problem of the one and the many, see my *God the Creator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Reprint with a new introduction (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), part 1.

Nothing in Robert's philosophy, so far as I know, has the eternal reality to define temporal distinctness-in-connection. Likewise with space: places are geometrically related to one another, but somehow maintain their independence as different parts of space. Nothing in Robert's philosophy, so far as I know, has the immense (unmeasurable relative to measure) reality to define spatial distinctness-in-connection. Likewise with the neat distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*: however they are related, what keeps them from collapsing into one another? This is particularly important in the context of a discussion of naturalism, because most naturalists with a scientific bent, such as Buchler, would say that *natura naturata* is all there is because only that is measurable.⁸

The problem of the one and the many is extremely difficult, defining, as it does, the very meaning of intelligibility. Its difficulty led Parmenides to deny all multiplicity and change. Heraclitus was forced to deny all stability or continuity except perhaps in form. Aristotle had a terrible time. On the one hand he wanted to say that the real realities are substances whose analysis is best made in abstractions of form, matter, telos, and efficient causation. The "four causes" are not realities in themselves, but abstractions for explaining the concrete. In this frame of mind he criticized Plato for saying that forms are real in themselves irrespective of their ingression into concrete process. On the other hand he believed that the concretely real cannot be explained by the less real or abstract and so in another frame of mind hypostasized the four causes. He could speak of prime matter, for instance, and his conception of God was of pure actualized form without potency, telos, or external efficient cause. The Western philosophic tradition has taken up hylomorphism in a serious way. The problem of the one and the many for hylomorphism is to account for how there can be independent form and matter that still are related. The Neo-Confucian tradition has a very close analogy to this problem in its debates over Principle and Material Force.

Plato addressed the problem of the one and the many by saying, in the Analogy of the Sun in the *Republic*, that the Form of the Good simply creates intelligibles relative to knowers and objects relative to actors, and these two spheres relate to each other through the actions of

⁸ See Charley Hardwick's discussion of this point in "Worldhood, Betweenness, Melancholy, and Ecstasy: An Engagement with Robert Corrington's Ecstatic Naturalism," in this issue of AJPT.

knowing. For Plato, creation is the ontological context of mutual relevance whereby things can be different from one another and yet related. I follow Plato in this approach to the problem of the one and the many, although with a different conception of the cosmos created and a far more elaborate theory of ontological creation. I hold that the ontological creative act is eternal with respect to the temporal processes created and immense with respect to spatial differentiation, however science eventually articulates the connectivity of space, time, and causation. Moreover, the creative act must be singular because it embraces all independences and connections, though it is not "at once," a temporal category. Because the act is singular, I am willing to call it God and to lay claim to much of the classical Western tradition of *ex nihilo* theology. God in my conception is not another being alongside the cosmos, and so my theory is some kind of "naturalism," as Corrington has noted. Yet God is not a changing, temporal thing and thus is not part of nature as Corrington seems to require of all realities in order to be recognized. My theory, to be sure, is only an hypothesis and I would be glad to have Corrington improve on it. Yet I do not see in his philosophy even a serious attempt to address the problem of the one and the many. Moreover, much of the talk of naturalism seems to rule out the kinds of reality that might ground natural relations or complexes.

Wesley Wildman holds that it is optional for a philosophy to address the problem of the one and the many, and that it is deeply a matter of taste whether to do so.⁹ He himself holds, for instance, that it is more important for a philosophical theology to account for a sense in which God is intrinsically good, or symmetrical, than to be able to solve the problem of the one and the many, admitting that most models of divine goodness or symmetry foul up on that problem. On this account, Corrington can simply finesse the problem of the one and the many to concentrate on his new theory of nature. Given the finiteness of life, this is surely is a strategic or artistic option. But there are prices.

⁹ Just before the conference in which this and other papers in this issue of AJPT were to be discussed, I broke my leg and thus could not attend. Wesley Wildman, my colleague from Boston University, read this paper (in an earlier draft) and led its discussion. His opinions on the one and the many cited here are expressed in his "Neville's Systematic Theology of Symbolic Engagement," in *Theology in Global Context: Essays in Honor of Robert Cummings Neville*, edited by Amos Yong and Peter G., Heltzel (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 3-27.

The first price regards intelligibility. No matter how good one's cosmology or metaphysics, if one cannot show how its hypothesized elements both are different and together, independent and related, then one cannot intelligently and comprehensively conceive those elements. Moreover, if reasons exist to think that those elements stand in the way of a solution to the problem of the one and the many, or if their pretended solution has been refuted, then to assert them as a philosophy is to recommend an hypothesis that says that what is supposed to be explained cannot be explained. As Peirce pointed out so trenchantly, an hypothesis that asserts that its topic cannot be explained should never be affirmed. The only business of an hypothesis is to advance explanation or understanding. It is intellectually immoral, Peirce said, to hypothesize something that affirms unintelligibility, although it is quite alright to admit that something cannot yet be explained and that current explanations are still fallible. Therefore any cosmology or metaphysics that admits itself in principle to be unable to solve the problem of the one and the many should never be asserted: it would be a formally contradictory hypothesis. Note that I am not saying that Corrington cannot solve the problem of the one and the many, only that he has not done so yet and will have to extend his philosophy to do so.

The second price paid by attempting to finesse that problem is that one misses the opportunity to engage the great religious traditions of the world—Asian as well as Western—in their depths. Many of the core motifs of the world's religions, past their popular expressions, take their resonances from classic approaches to the problem of the one and the many. Besides Neo-Platonism and Thomism in Christianity, one thinks of Kabbalistic speculations, the Mutazilite-Asherite controversies in Islam, Vedanta in its three main competing forms, as well as Mahayana Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. One's engagement of these traditions is inevitably somewhat superficial if one does not burrow into their dialectics of the one and many.

Now Corrington's creative development of ecstatic naturalism is an epic attempt to find religious profundity in nature. Yet it also is a retreat from the attempt to find religious profundity in semiotically structured religion. In his early work Corrington was a Methodist apologist, looking to Heidegger and Tillich for resources to breathe new life into that religion of holiness (I do not mean that as a put-down: I remain such a Methodist apologist to this day and our colleague in the HIARPT conferences Marjorie Suchocki has deliberately chosen to

become one). Corrington's books have been a steady retreat from that project. I worry that his frustration in finding religious profundity in semiotically organized religion stems from what is yet an alienation from the problem of the one and the many. Wildman reminds us that the vast majority of Christians and also the adherents of other religions doesn't care a bit for the problem of the one and the many, but he also reminds us that this vast majority is intellectually, if not emotionally, superficial.¹⁰

My final point, about religious symbolism, follows directly. The big-deal symbols in the world's religions have evolved and entrenched themselves in religious cultures because something in them addresses the ultimate issues in human life.¹¹ They are the means by which people in those cultures have engaged ultimacy in its many dimensions. Although many alternative symbol systems for such engagement exist, the engagement itself would be impossible, or only superficial, if there were no such symbols. Without the symbols, we would simply miss the religious realities. Our late-modern situation is that the basic symbols in all the world's religions cannot be taken at face value where they *describe* the world while enabling their *engagement* with ultimacy. Krishna is *not* "brighter than a thousand suns." The symbols also often offend our moral sensibilities, especially those having to do with sacrifice and vengeful gods. Enlightenment people have distanced themselves from these symbols, attempting to demythologize them to find some remainder of contemporary truth in them.

One way of reading Corrington's work is as a deliberate setting-aside of the basic symbols deep in the semiotics of religions and an attempt instead to develop religiously deep symbols from and for nature. This is an ancient strategy. After all, it was the Psalmists, not Goethe, who invented nature romanticism. Yet by itself it is thin gruel if not coupled with the symbols that engage the ultimate in human culture and personality. So I ask why Corrington should not undertake a project of remythologization of the big-deal symbols of Christianity

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ This was defended as a theoretical claim in my *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) and illustrated regarding two traditions in *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (Albany State University of New York Press, 2000) and *Symbols of Jesus: A Christology of Symbolic Engagement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

(or other religions). He has in hand an elaborate semiotic theory with more than enough categories for understanding how to interpret symbols arising from an alien cultural background. He has in hand the very rich sources of psychodynamic theory that were used well by Bultmann and Tillich to start this process. He is no slouch at interpreting contemporary culture in the sciences and arts. He has proved his capacity to master large bodies of disciplinary literature so as to have vast analytical tools at his disposal. And he is a creative, imaginative writer. Why then should he not work to tell us what the atonement really means for addressing ultimacy? Is there no ontological reach in that symbol? If there is, can it be expressed by means of that symbol to contemporary people? Are there alternative symbols to do that job? Can alternative symbols be found in nature's religion alone? I suspect the answer to the last question is no, just because nature's religion belittles the semiotics of culture's religions. I strongly urge, for the sake of profundity, that Robert move to enhance nature's religion with a coterminous exposition of culture's religion. To do that, as I said, he would have to engage the problem of the one and the many. To engage the problem of the one and the many, he would have to disengage from the project of polemical naturalism that does not like to ask the ontological question. To disengage from the project of polemical naturalism, he would find it very helpful to restrict the semiotics of psychodynamics to the human sphere and throw in with the sciences and arts for understanding the genesis of the human. If all this sounds as if I'm saying that he should agree with my philosophy, it's what I've been telling him all along. I wait with delight for his next counter-argument.

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