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Robert Corrington

A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy.

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Philosophical speculation is rarely as confessional as Robert Corrington's *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy*. In this book speculative cosmology emerges from philosophical reflection that is sensitive to human experience and struggles, engaging the problems of men and women that Dewey suggested was the main task of philosophy. Corrington's exploration ranges widely over philosophical and religious traditions and freely transgresses boundaries and barriers of reified thought such as all manner of theism and the general acceptance of human consciousness as the ultimate origin of meaning in the universe.

The language of this text is typical of Corrington's writing, a dense mixture of Peircean and psychoanalytic terms, joined with allusions to theater and art, but always moving a line of thought like an explorer pushing through tall grass. Corrington's platform of 'ecstatic naturalism' is the driving theme, developing Peirce's and Buchler's semiotic theories into territory neither traveled. A fundamental question I have is whether 'ecstatic naturalism' is broader than Corrington himself which comes down to asking whether this labyrinthine reflection is idiosyncratic or generically human. It is the same question, interestingly, that plagued Peirce about his own work.

Corrington presents his thought in three extensive chapters. Corresponding vaguely to Peirce's categories of First, Second, and Third, each of these chapters exhibits an internal logic and a structural openness to the other sections. Corrington moves from nature to signs to the evolution of meaning. Anyone familiar with Corrington will not be surprised that his Third, evolutionary meaning, recurs strongly to the First, nature. This strategy reflects Corrington's general dissatisfaction with the philosophical primacy granted to human consciousness that is reflected in the Kantianism Peirce could not escape. Human consciousness almost disappears in this work, or rather, appears as a debilitating limit to the full encounter with the under-conscious of nature, Corrington's term for the origin of meaning and the ground of impulse in the universe.

In the first chapter, 'The paradox of "nature" and psychosemiosis', Corrington introduces the primal distinction between nature naturing, a momentum within nature, and nature natured, the categorial array interpreting this momentum. The underconscious of nature cannot be lifted to view, but only be the subject of a metaphysical tale where 'phenomenological and transcendental categories require each other' (39). An instance of this reciprocal requirement of categories is psychoanalysis. Corrington aggressively argues for the transformation of psychoanalytic terms, theory and practice into a species of psychosemiosis, the uncovering of the effect of the underconscious of nature in the semiotic exploration of psychological effects and disturbances. Corrington demonstrates psychosemiosis with an analysis of a cycle of his own dreams. This integration of his experience with philosophical argumentation for ecstatic naturalism is deeply revealing and personally courageous.

The most technical part of this volume is chapter two, 'The sign vehicle and its pathways'. Corrington is a master of description when it comes to signs, Peirce's semiotics, and critical development of issues of semiotic theory. Probably the most important issue he focuses on is the abyss over which meaning is suspended within any sign system. Peirce saw clearly that meaning entails the most ethereal of grounds. Treading this ground implies the intersection of signs and communities, both interpretive and natural. Corrington gravitates toward the aesthetic pathway for negotiating this abyss saying that aesthetic is the 'antechamber of the religious, because it prepares the way for another relationship to the orders of the world' (152). This openness through aesthetic is critical for Corrington's promise to address theology, which he does in chapter three.

Qualifying and correcting the correlation of the sign and its object is the main thrust of chapter three, 'World semiosis and the evolution of meaning'. Corrington addresses the most intractable issue of semiotic theory, the movement and development of signs and meaning. Peirce located his developmental teleology in the communal pursuit of the dynamical object, but Corrington locates it in the underconscious of nature that exhibits a kind of directive interaction without constituting a ground of divine creation as Robert Neville suggests. Corrington is aware of the temptation to find nature

'magical' in this creative enterprise, but this would severely undercut his project. Instead of safely cutting off this interaction at an abstract level, however, Corrington turns directly to texts of scripture and other encounters as species of 'sacred folds'. He states the point this way: 'If we were to combine the best of the Greek with the best of the Hebrew worlds, we could say that the sacred folds of nature are in some sense responsive to our own semiotic and moral probes, and that there are energies that are extra-human that can aid us in the process of moral growth. But these powers are not extra-natural, nor are they in a "position" to give us a moral blueprint. Yet without their powers, we are truly at the mercy of semiotic inertia and blind habit' (224). What becomes most clear in this chapter is Corrington's dependence on Tillich. 'In the spirit of Tillich,' he says, 'who argued that religion represented the depth-dimension of culture, and culture the form of religion, ecstatic naturalism affirms that the sacred folds that disturb, transform, haunt and goad us are the religious heart of the self/world correlation' (244).

This extended statement of ecstatic naturalism is intriguing, especially for readers already in the semiotic fold. One argument that Corrington does not make well is why such a naturalism is necessary for his larger argument. He dodges the issue early in the volume by proposing this study as a bit of speculative naturalism, one that moves beyond the limits of anti-transcendental arguments. But in the course of the book ecstatic naturalism restores almost every categorical position related to traditional transcendental theology. I am reminded of Peirce's claim that some philosophical doubt is not satisfied until it has formally recovered all the components of what it dismissed. Corrington did not demonstrate the genuine character of his doubt of the transcendent, at least not to my satisfaction. Further, Corrington's ultimate categories of nature and its underconscious seem rather domesticated. Though it may be revealed through Jungian archetypes and interpreted through dream work, there is a palpable absence of obligation, fear, or reverence for the 'underconscious of nature', theological phenomena that demand explanation.

Corrington's work here is much like James in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Both try to understand religious experience without reifying 'god'. In the process Corrington and James diminish both the necessity or significance of individual will and any resistant content of the divine. Corrington is architectonic in his thinking in a way that James was not but Peirce was. I think Corrington may be attempting to mediate the disagreement between those two old friends over the reality of God. Whatever the motivation, Corrington's semiotic exploration exceeds where other descriptions do not. This is speculative philosophy that is challenging and refreshing.

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