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The Individual, the Social, and the Not Yet Being: Ecstatic Naturalism and a Metaphysics of Responsibility

Introduction: A War Against Nature

Recently, while seeking some insight during a dire political moment, I decided to revisit William James's "Moral Equivalent of War."[1] Originally a speech and published during the very last year of James's life, this is a piece which prompted John Dewey to proclaim that we owe James "an immense debt" for its very title.[2]

James's main argument here is for the preservation of the same upbuilding of character and demonstrations of heroism as found in military life, but through their realization in a different context – namely, one beyond that of a training for violence and technologically enhanced brutality. James's well-known answer is a proposal for a kind of domestic civil corp. This is an organization wherein the young are conscripted to join their efforts with the laboring classes, thereby focusing their en-

[1] William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War," access 4.02.2022, https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/moral.html.

[2] Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 515.

ergy on the difficult, tedious, and even dangerous projects which build and maintain the infrastructure of civilization. One tries to avoid quoting James at length, but the lushness of his prose defeats all resistance: "To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, clotheswashing, and windowwashing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes, and to the frames of skyscrapers, would our gilded youths be drafted off, according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas."[3]

It was only after printing out the version of this essay I found online that I noticed a kind of trigger warning included with the useful background information at the top. Here we are prepared for a few expressions of James that, in the words of the editor, "grate upon modern ears." One of these is James's stated mission of his proposed civil corp to engage in a "warfare against nature."[4]

I imagine reading this essay with no exposure to James's mature philosophy, particularly in a culture where our sensibilities have long been influenced by ecological and other progressive concerns – and I wonder if my ears too would have been so grated. The idea of a warfare against nature, however, takes on a radically different meaning against James's metaphysical vision. This is one in which the human being is understood as continuous with both the natural world and the divine, and in which we are an expression of the same unevenly connected events as the rest of the cosmos.[5] Despite James's well-known championing of the individual, this is also a universe that is plural and social to its core – if one can even speak of a core to such a cosmos. The Jamesean self shares its existence quite closely with other selves. James scholar Gerald E. Myers writes:

> It is a common judgment that James's *Anschauung* was excessively individualistic and ignored the role of community; on the contrary, he sought notions of self and reality that permit communality of the profoundest sort – in the depths of the most intimate personal experience. He hoped that the metaphysics of radical empiricism and pluralistic universe would indicate that

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[3] "The Moral Equivalent of War."

[4] Ibidem. Underneath the essay it states, "Special thanks to Don Weiss and the Santa Cruz Service Corps for the text of this piece."

[5] James called this basic and heterogenous substratum of the universe, a reality more fundamental than mind and matter, *pure experience*. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 4.

> a genuine overlap of many individuals' experiences might occur at levels of consciousness we do not yet understand.[6]

Finally, and most to the point, this is an unfinished, open-ended universe in which individual and collective effort is required to make a difference. Even the Jamesean god is finite, one for which we are partners in the betterment of things.[7]

Having first read "The Moral Equivalent of War" with all of this in mind, the notion of a war against nature never quite stung. Except it might have been better if *against* were exchanged for *with* or *alongside*. The idea of a war *with or alongside nature*, one involving our partnership with the rest of humanity, perhaps even with the rest of all sentient life, is far better aligned with James's mature thought. It is what I call throughout this essay a *metaphysics of responsibility*.

I. The Creative Advance

It has been suggested that Whitehead essentially systematizes the ideas of James.[8] The former presses the insights of the latter into a cosmology in which momentary bits of experience are fashioned partly out of their relationship to previous such experiences, and partly by virtue of their own initiative. Whitehead called these droplets of experience *actual occasions*.[9] As each of these interdependent moments of experience hardens up, losing its inner life as it finishes forming, so it sends its influence into the next wave of experiences, and so on. In this way, the entire universe gradually increases in harmony and intensity, a grand cosmic process

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[6] Gerald E. Meyers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 350.

[7] While James argues for a finite theism throughout his writings, his most completed statement on this doctrine, arguably, is found in *A Pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 310–311.

[8] John Cobb writes "Whitehead believes that philosophical movements typically have two key moments. There is the genius who inaugurates the movement, and the systematizer who follows. He seems to depict himself in the latter role in relation to James. He accepts and adopts many of James' key insights, and then goes on to develop them in rich and rigorous detail." David Ray Griffin, John H. Cobb, Jr., Marcus P. Ford, Pete A. Y. Gunter, Peter Ochs, *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 166.

[9] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality, Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin, Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 18.

Whitehead calls the *creative advance*.[10] God is one giant and everlasting actual occasion which houses and influences the rest. Gently prodding the cosmos forward by sending possibilities into the universe, suggestions for the ideal development of each moment of experience, God cannot *force* anything.[11]

Tables, planets, and galaxies are all composed of such events, and in different ways.[12] But to think of the dynamics involved in such occasions as reflected in human existence provides a strong undergirding for a few of the conditions of the moral life. These include our relatedness to, and even dependence upon, others, and a measure of independence, personal initiative, and novelty. All of this is informed by a cosmos still in the making, the shaping of our brief lifespan by the guidance of ideal possibilities (sent by God), and the passing along of such ideals to the next generation. Here too, in this balance between the relevance of the individual, the social, and the interests of the future, we see a metaphysics of responsibility.

From the Transcendentalists though the pragmatists and right up through to the present, there is more than one stream of classical American thought with a pertinence for a metaphysics of responsibility. I would like to turn our attention to a slightly more recent inheritor of these streams, a kind of less domesticated, more bohemian rival to Whiteheadian and process ontology. This is a system which integrates the Jamesean themes I opened with, albeit integrating them with many other areas of philosophy, including Continental thought, Asian philosophies, psychoanalysis, and more – an eclecticism to echo the Emersonian Transcendentalism of which it understands itself as a retrieval. But unlike Emerson's hyper-individualism and complex relationship to the great moral cause of his day – the Sage of Concord once remarked that he was set more upon liberating those "imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man" than the chains of the enslaved – this is a chapter of American philosophy in which the ethical is never relegated to second place.[13]

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[10] Ibidem, 21.

[11] Ibidem, 342–351.

[12] Ibidem, 20.

[13] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman (New York: Signet Classics, 1965), 156. In a postscript titled "A New Transcendentalism," Robert Corrington cites this passage and affirms that "[…] a genuine Transcendentalism will emerge to transform the conditions of *both* self and society." In arriving late to embrace abolition, "largely under the pestering of Thoreau," Emerson "came up to the edges of the concept of the

A central mission of this essay to display a metaphysics of responsibility as it is found in *ecstatic naturalism*, the creation of the philosopher Robert Corrington. As many lines of influence make their way into Corrington's thought, a host of figures, mostly from classical American philosophy, will make an appearance here – even if their significance is lightly reconfigured within ecstatic naturalism.

If there is a larger purpose to what follows, it is not only to present a few of the more compelling themes ecstatic naturalism may contribute to social and moral philosophy. It is to showcase some of the best insights the American intellectual tradition has to offer on the relation of the individual and the communal.

II. The Relevance of the Social

There is a tendency of some religiously inspired metaphysical systems to perceive the universe of phenomena as possessing no genuinely independent existence. According to this perspective, sometimes called *acosmism*, the plane of our day-to-day life is a manifestation of an ultimate reality, one typically understood as unitary or all-inclusive, and beyond time and change. A classic example of such a worldview is *advaita* or "non-dual" Vedanta. According to this most well-known interpretation of a series of Hindu scriptures called the *Upanishads*, the world of the many is but an expression of *brahman*–the sacred and infinite ground of all things. Our deepest and eternal self, the *atman*, is identical with *brahman* in this school of thought.[14]

A frequent criticism of such a worldview is that it fails to do justice to the limitations and difficulties of our ordinary experience. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James argues that the attempt to overcome all dualities with a belief in the One breaks out into a dualism of its own: namely, that between our messier and earth-bound perspective, and the unconditioned and all-knowing view from the Absolute.[15]

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community of interpreters as his social involvement became more active and public." *Deep Pantheism: Towards a New Transcendentalism* (New York: Lexington Books, 2016), 99–100.

[14] For a lucid and detailed account of Advaita Vedanta, see Ramakrishna Puligandla, *Fundamentals of Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 2005), 227–254, 276–290.

[15] James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 38–40.

In a volume-length debate between a process theologian and a more mystically inclined philosopher of religion – David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith, respectively – some highly detailed arguments are exchanged on a variety of topics.[16] One of their strongest points of contention is the status of evil.

As an advocate of the perennial philosophy, Smith holds that at the center of all genuine spiritual traditions is a distinction between this mundane cosmos of our everyday lives and a supernal ultimate reality. When encountered in this empirical realm, evil, states Smith, must be fought "with every energy we can possibly muster."[17] And yet, from the point of view of the absolute, the universe is perfect as it is. Engaging Griffin's argument on how his perennialist and mystical theology makes time and matter into "wastes," Smith goes as far as to proclaim that such a thing is impossible because "waste is an evil, and in perennialism (as we have seen), there is ultimately no such thing."[18]

In his rejoinder, Griffin offers a number of arguments against Smith's denial of evil. One of these is that evil is a *primordial truth* – a position which, even if rejected at the level of belief, can never be denied in practice. Not only do the legal and ethical codes of every civilization rest upon notions of good and evil: the very attempt to teach the nonexistence of evil presupposes that the world is better (less evil) to the extent to which such an idea is accepted. Indeed, Griffin cites Smith's own disdain for our modern and increasingly de-spiritualized era as evidence of this contradiction in action.[19]

Griffin also presents a moral argument. To believe that everything is already perfect just beneath the surface is to sap our endeavors to struggle for the good. If this world is an illusion, what is there to fight for on this lowly material plane? Griffin suggests that while individuals whose characters are already formed before they embrace such a perspective will not likely relax their moral vigor, the situation might be very different for those reared in such a cosmology. Reminding us that beliefs influence our actions and behaviors, Griffin concludes: "I do hold, therefore, that Smith's doctrine, rightly understood, would have pernicious effects."[20]

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[16] David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith, *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

[17] Ibidem, 70.

[18] Ibidem, 75.

[19] Ibidem, 90–92.

[20] Ibidem, 94–95.

Smith's next response on this topic includes a critique of Griffin's banalizing of religion – as displayed by the latter's overriding of paradox (i.e., that evil may coexist with an ultimate reality) – as well as Griffin's presumptuous use of common-sense as a standard to which spiritual insight must conform.[21] Smith doubles down on the grand design argument wherein (apparent) evil has a much-needed place within a perfect cosmos, and questions whether such a belief must hinder the moral life.[22] He writes: "I do not know if Griffin would wish to pit the conduct of process theologians against that of the mystics, many of whom lived prodigiously active lives, or against that of the Buddha."[23]

That contemplatives can be morally active is duly recognized by James. "Saint Ignatius was a mystic," James explains in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "but his mysticism made him assuredly one of the most powerfully practical human engines that ever lived."[24] And yet, that some philosophic worldviews better facilitate and support the moral life than others is a major theme throughout the writings of James. Belief in a transcendental One offers us what he calls a *moral holiday*, a reprieve from worldly struggles. For James's own pluralistic metaphysics, however, moral holidays may only be "provisional breathing-spells, intended to refresh us for the morrow's fight."[25]

I do not doubt that contemplatives and mystics East and West, including those who espouse different degrees of acosmism, can be sincerely moral individuals. But the above reflections still prompt me to ask: What are the conditions for taking the social as seriously as possible – for taking the duty of the individual to the social as *indispensable*? In short, what are the components of a metaphysics of responsibility?

I propose that a metaphysics of responsibility may include: the integrity and irreducibility of the *individual*; our connections to, and need for, the *other*; a genuine *realism* which grounds us in a broader social and nat-

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[21] Ibidem, 155–161.

[22] Ibidem, 162–166.

[23] Ibidem, 165. As an advocate of Traditionalism, a philosophy of religion which includes the perennial philosophy, Smith understood Buddhism as pointing to the same transcendental ground as other religions. Not all accept this interpretation of Buddhism. See, for instance, Richard K. Payne's "Traditionalist Representations of Buddhism," https://pwj.shin-ibs.edu/pacific-world-third-series-number-10-fall-2008, 200-02.

[24] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Barnes & Nobles Classics, 2004), 358.

[25] William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 290.

ural world; the entrance of robust *possibility* into human experience; *problems* which run to the heart of things, and are not trivialized or deemed as illusory; a *melioristic* cosmos, to borrow another term from James, or a universe which responds to individual and collective energies for improvement; and a sense of an *aim* or direction for our efforts.[26] Much of what follows will outline these conditions in greater detail.

It should be noted that throughout this essay, not least of all its very title, I write of *a* as opposed to *the* metaphysics of responsibility. I have no pretense here of presenting a definitive or final catalog of the principles required for the moral life. My goal is merely to offer *one* set of conditions for such a metaphysics – a goad, perhaps, for further discussion – and to demonstrate its exemplification within a contemporary school of American thought. Humility, after all, is yet another condition for a proper moral philosophy.

III. Ecstatic Naturalism

Ecstatic naturalism holds that nature is all that exists. Nature, however, possesses two aspects. This is a distinction which, originating with the Medieval Scholastics, passes through the writing of Spinoza, Emerson, and the metaphysics of Justus Buchler.[27] There is, first, *nature natured*, or the universe extending around us – one of stars and supernovas, trees and planets. And there is, second, *nature naturing*, or the dynamic and generative character of things – that which continuously ripples beneath and through the cosmos, crystallizing into the phenomenal universe of *nature natured*. As *in* and *of* nature, human beings straddle this divide.[28] On the one hand, our bodies and much of our perceptual and psychological experience are inextricably woven with *nature natured*, or the environment. On the other hand, the depths of our psyche, including our unconscious, extends downward into the rumbling and unseen plenum of *nature naturing*.

Ecstatic naturalism is a religious philosophy in the spirit of Emerson and James, and it contains what Corrington calls a *deep pantheism*. If traditional pantheism equates God with the entire cosmos, deep pantheism refrains from spiritualizing all of nature. Rather, the divine arises from

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[26] Ibidem, 137.

[27] Robert Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 40.

[28] Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, xxiv.

the activities of *nature naturing*. This is an account of spiritual meaning as including the potencies erupting from the heart of nature and into the underside of the human psyche – an event which may color certain feature of our environment with a sense of the numinous.[29] The main works of ecstatic naturalism also include a sense of the ineffable gained through an attentiveness to the sheer endlessness of a cosmos vastly exceeding us in all directions. Borrowing from Karl Jaspers, Corrington labels such an experience as the Encompassing.[30]

Since this is an essay on the social and political relevance of ecstatic naturalism, I will leave a fuller discussion of its theological contributions for another time. I would like, instead, to introduce a number of features of Corrington's system that are key for a metaphysics of responsibility.

The first two of these elements derive from the influence of Buchler.

A. While the history of thought in the West and elsewhere is marked by *ontological priority* – the idea that one layer or segment of things is more fundamental, more real, than everything else – an ordinal metaphysics upholds a notion of *ontological parity*.[31] The latter is an approach in which everything we may discern – a thought, the corner of a table, the atmosphere of this discussion, a cell, a galaxy – is accepted as real, in just the *way* that it is real. The angle by which an ordinal metaphysics conceptualizes the cosmos, its fundamental categories, avoids the tendency, so definitive of Western thought, to search after a foundational substance or thing by which to explain all that exists.

I have already pointed out how ecstatic naturalism is a philosophy of religion, and Corrington's writing demonstrates an appreciation for numerous systems of thought, including monistic or pantheistic ones – Transcendentalism, Vedanta, etc. These classic metaphysical traditions, however, are strained through the principle/method of ontological parity in such a way that the material plane, the ordinary or common-sense world, is not relativized or deemed as derivative to some deeper ground.

B. Anything we discern in the cosmos – a dew drop, the currency of Brazil, a mathematical theorem – is labeled by Buchler and Corrington

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[29] Ibidem, 42.

[30] Ibidem, 89–95.

[31] Justus Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, ed. Katheleen Wallace, Armen Marsoobian, Robert S. Corrington (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 30–51. Robert Corrington, *Nature's Sublime: An Essay in Ecstatic Naturalism* (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), 13.

a *natural complex*.[32] True to the strategy of ontological parity, a natural complex is understood as a structure of traits rather than a specific kind of entity or substance. Every complex both inheres within a greater complex and contains innumerable smaller complexes, a nesting of layers without beginning or end. A specific electron exists within a molecule, within the leg of a table, in a room, in a university, in a town… etc. Alternatively, it is a prop in a discussion, in a conference session, in the career of a college professor… etc. And yet, as Buchler argues in his *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*: while every complex is related to another, *none* is related to *all* others.[33] This is an ontology of overlapping elements, but also one in which each element is by no means dissolvable into a network of relations. The corner leg of the table, while a part of other things, and composed of other things, possesses an integrity of its own. A similar doctrine appreciated by Corrington is James's notion of the universe as a *concatenated* unity – an ontology wherein the breaks and disconnections between things are equally as real as their connections.[34] This possesses consequences for appreciating the relationship of the individual to the community, as we will see below.

C. Human beings, in ecstatic naturalism, are thoroughly semiotic beings, and exist in and through a sea of meanings.[35] The unique semiotics of ecstatic naturalism are pertinent for a metaphysics of responsibility along three lines:

First, Corrington goes to great lengths to remind us that meaning is not just – or even primarily – linguistic. The semiotic character of our existence signifies our inherence in a world full of meanings which our minds do not fabricate. Ecstatic naturalism draws upon Emerson to point out how the primal roots of language derive from our relationship to the environment. Corrington cites a small number of Emerson's examples. Words like *spirit*, *right*, and *transgression*, come from our experience of wind, a straight path taken over a terrain, and the literal stepping

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[32] Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, Chapter 1, "The Rudimentary Considerations." Corrington, *Nature's Sublime*, 10.

[33] Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, 24. Corrington, *Nature's Sublime*, 10–11.

[34] James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 107.

[35] Semiotics is addressed throughout the entire corpus of ecstatic naturalism. For a volume-length treatment of this facet of human experience, see Corrington's *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy*. See also Corrington's earlier *The Community of Interpreters: On the Hermeneutics of Nature and the Bible in the American Philosophical Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 47–67.

over a line, respectively. For Emerson, explains Corrington, "language rides on the back of nature and gives it utterance."[36]

Second, the presence of that seminal figure in semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, is never far away from the arguments of ecstatic naturalism, nor is the recalibration of Peircean semiotics within the mature thought of Josiah Royce.[37] Corrington points out how Peirce and Royce demonstrate the inherently social nature of all language and meaning. From these two influences also comes a central distinction for ecstatic naturalism, one crucial for its social and political vision. This is between the *natural* or *inert community* – one that is authoritarian, and in which inherited meaning is zealously guarded from reflection and innovation, and the more democratic and progressive *communities of interpretation* in which inherited meaning is held perpetually open for analysis, assessment, and expansion.[38]

Third, Corrington's semiotics is one in which a speculative aesthetics serves as a link between a philosophy of religion and social thought. This is the special role of the genius or the cultural creative in the scheme of things. Corrington takes up Emerson here in placing the creative genius on a level with the prophet in traditional Abrahamic religion. The genius is gifted with a receptivity toward the pre-semiotic depths of nature naturing and the subsequent capacity to innovate with meanings at a level of scope and originality beyond most of us.[39] A core mission of the community of interpreters, as Corrington sees it, is to protect and encourage such figures, to draw upon their influence and to inculcate as much creative capacity in the general population as possible.

D. In some ways, the cosmology of ecstatic naturalism runs a bit darker than many of the alternative systems in the history of American philosophy past and present. Corrington frequently reminds us of the possible extinction of our species and the irreversible destruction of our environment, finalities without a consequent nature of the divine to preserve us in its memory.[40] The most recently published volume in ecstatic naturalism concentrates on the hazardous and unseemly features of existence, including the forms of nothingness pervading the cosmos. While the fourth of these forms of nothingness is equated

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[36] Corrington, *Community of Interpreters*, 92–93.

[37] Ibidem, 1–29.

[38] Robert Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness: An Essay in Ordinal Phenomenology* (New York: Lexington Books, 2017), ix.

[39] Ibidem, 66.

[40] Ibidem, 36.

with the aforementioned concept of the Encompassing, a reality aptly compared with the sacred void of Mahayana Buddhism, the first three are far more stark.[41] These include what Corrington calls the *holes* in nature, or the loss of meaning we encounter in our experience: disillusionment, mortality, and other forms of personal crises.[42] In addition, there is the *totalizing nothingness*, or the revelation of the general and even ferocious indifference of the cosmos to all sentient life, something captured by horror literature as found in the writings of Edgard Allen Poe and H. P. Lovecraft.[43]

Another form of the nothing is *naturing nothingness*. This is the creative but dangerous heart of nature's dynamism, one aptly symbolized by the destructive tendencies of Hindu deities like Kali or Shiva.[44] When not killing us, these forms of nothingness may crush our sense of security and prevent us from ever feeling at home in the cosmos. At the same time, they may equally serve to clear away many of the hang-ups, attachments, and other psychological impediments to our further development and self-understanding–what Corrington calls the *selving process*.[45]

IV. The Self and the Other

Let us now further unpack the themes of ecstatic naturalism as we revisit each of the conditions for a metaphysics of responsibility.

Our initial set of conditions includes, first, the recognition of the integrity of a volitional and active self, and second, the reality of both the other, and the possibility, indeed the necessity, of genuine and transformational relationships between persons.

In the third chapter of *I and Thou*, the Jewish philosopher of dialogue Martin Buber challenges monisms which conflate the self and the world–those which see either the cosmos as a projection of the mind, or which dissolve the ego into the other. He attributes just such a doctrine of "immersion" to the Buddha. To the Buddha's (alleged) claim that the

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[41] Ibidem, 135–156.
[42] Ibidem, 8–12.
[43] Ibidem, 27–54.
[44] Ibidem, 113–134.
[45] The Selving process is an essential theme of ecstatic naturalism. Explored all throughout Corrington's work, a particularly strong treatment of it is found in the third chapter of Nature and Nothingness, "Nature's Psyche": 55–87.

cosmos is a figment of our consciousness, Buber insists that a proper *I-Thou* relationship "detaches me from the world in order to relate me to it."[46] The upshot is that genuine and living relationships, true dialogue, require a robust self to reach out to another.

Corrington also wrestles with Buddhist thought in *Nature and Nothingness*. Here, he finds some kinship between his concept of encompassing nothingness and the idea of *sunyata* or the void.[47] In its most general form, *sunyata* is the doctrine that since everything is ontologically and casually dependent upon everything else, nothing has a strictly independent existence. Corrington's main interlocutor here is Nāgārjuna, the third century Indian philosopher and the central formulator of this crucial Mahayana Buddhist concept.[48]

In comparison with a sharply drawn depiction of the Buddhist account of *anatta* or no permanent self, Corrington accepts that there is no substantial and unchanging soul-entity abiding throughout the fluctuation of our experiences. Ecstatic naturalism, however, defiantly affirms *something* of the personal and responsible element of our existence. The very term *selving process*, as Corrington labels the human being, speaks of an activity rather than a thing, and yet of a continuity of some sort–one with an integrity of its own. Against Nāgārjuna's statement in the *Middle Way* that "the nectar of the teachings of the buddhas," is one of "not having a single goal, not having many goals…", ecstatic naturalism affirms that to be human is to have a goal. This is, in fact, the only presence of teleology or goal-centeredness in the metaphysics of ecstatic naturalism.[49] Of these goals undertaken by the selving process, Corrington writes: "some of them may last a lifetime and bear fruitful results for future generations."[50]

As most evident in Corrington's semiotics, particularly through his inheritance from Peirce and Royce, others are never merely incidental to

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[46] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, transl. Walter Kaufman (New York: Touchstone, 1970), 141–142.

[47] Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness*, 140–145.

[48] Nāgārjuna's major and influential work is the Middle Way. The Translation used by Corrington is *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, ed. Mark Siderits, Shōryū Katsura (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2013). It should be recognized that the accuracy of Corrington's interpretation of Buddhist thought (or that of Buber, Smith… etc.) is not the focus of our discussion, but only that which pertains to a metaphysics of responsibility.

[49] *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*, 205.

[50] Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness*, 144.

who we are but play a role in the very constitution of our selves.[51] The self is a concrete if fluid reality, irreducible to its relations, and yet the signs and meanings in which and through we have our being are fundamentally communal. The individual is never to be swallowed up in the social, but there is certainly a mutually enriching and expanding involvement between the two. In response to Nāgārjuna's opening statement in the *Middle Way* on the inadequacy of all concepts to capture the nature of reality, including the statement that the universe is neither a "singularity" nor a "plurality," – Corrington, drawing upon James's concept of a concatenated unity, insists upon the existence of "many ones and many pluralities."[52]

In a nutshell, a cosmos of only roughly overlapping entities – one in which disconnections are as real as the connections – permits an ontology which speaks to both the interpenetration of the self and the other as well as their distinctiveness. This reinforces two of the seven metaphysical conditions for responsibility. We can go through the next five conditions a bit more breezily, since the relevance of ecstatic naturalism for each has already been suggested.

A third condition is a *genuine realism*, a rooting in both nature and the social against all solipsisms and subjective idealisms. *Pansemioticism* is Corrington's pejorative term for those postmodern philosophies which fetishize the text, and in which we have no escape from self-referential webs of linguistic meaning.[53] I have previously referred to Corrington's inclusion and reworking of Peircean/Roycean semiotics, a genuine realism which, by way of a further influence of Emerson, grounds us as much in the natural world as the broader human community.[54]

A fourth condition is the entrance of real possibility into our experience, that which delivers us from merely repeating the meanings inherited from nature and society and grants a bulwark against the further sedimentation of the natural/inert community. Process thought envisions a primordial nature of God which sends eternal objects into the world of becoming, suggestions for the ideal development of each and every occasion constituting the universe. For ecstatic naturalism, with its deep pantheism, it is the potencies erupting from nature naturing

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[51] For a close study of Royce's inheritance from and re-working of Peircean semiotics, including its relevance for the question of personal identity, see: Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 1–29.

[52] Nāgārjuna's *Middle Way*, 13; Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness*, 141.

[53] Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory*, 90.

[54] Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 1–29, 85–99.

which provides for emancipation from the past. One such potency is the *Not Yet Being*, or the principle of hope, a concept Corrington borrows and reworks from the German philosopher Ernst Bloch.[55] Breaking into our experience from outside the contrivances and complacency of the ego, the Not Yet Being may shake and even shatter our worldview, expanding our horizon of meaning and pushing us toward novel forms of existence and understanding.

If there were no problems inherent within existence, the fifth condition, there would be no need for struggle, nothing to call for what James calls the morally "strenuous mood."[56] The universe of ecstatic naturalism is a far cry from those grand theological systems which grant evil a merely derivative status, and we have already been introduced to the hazardous forms of the nothing coursing through nature and the cosmos.

But all is not doomed in ecstatic naturalism – for human beings can, in fact must, do their part to engage with the problems besetting the environment, as well as to continually fight for the protection and advancement of the community of interpreters. This speaks to our last two conditions: a melioristic universe which responds to our efforts and a concrete aim for our actions. The very goal of the *selving process*, Corrington writes, is "to increase the amount of free will and creativity in the host self and tribe," thus defying the authoritarianism of the natural community.[57]

Conclusion: A More Sober Vision

Corrington writes of the blissful as well as the terrifying character of the potencies rising from nature into the psyche, the *jouissance* accompanying experiences like the Not Yet Being which bring about the possibility of personal transformation and social progress.[58] On the other hand, without an *eschatology* or a *guarantee* of a satisfactory and meaningful future for humanity in the face of our personal and environmental crises, ecstatic naturalism skirts the pessimistic and the tragic. And yet, this is no worldview of resignation – what James calls a *pessimistic* cosmos – any more than it is one of acquiescence in an already ideal or *optimis-*

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[55] Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, xi.

[56] William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 211.

[57] Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness*, 66.

[58] Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 98.

tic universe.[59] It is what grants ecstatic naturalism its prophetic tone, its calling toward an even sharper re-direction of our energies toward the tasks at hand. This is partly why James's expression of a "war against nature" does not grate my ears so much, even if a war *with* or *alongside* nature would have been better still.

It is useful here to contrast ecstatic naturalism one more time with process thought, what Corrington calls the "dying gasp of liberal Protestant bourgeois religion."[60] Process cosmology certainly recognizes evil – the "perpetual perishing" of nature, a god with only persuasive as opposed to coercive power… etc.[61] But with its consequent nature of the deity preserving the memory of every experience for eternity, recalibrating its inner life so that the good resonates forever and the evil made insignificant in the forward march of the universe toward ever-greater harmony and intensity of experience, we are left with a far more tepid acknowledgement of the breaks and tears in the cosmos than that of ecstatic naturalism.

After outlining his arguments against Smith's denial of any genuine evil in the cosmos, Griffin offers a middle ground. God is not omnipotent or all-powerful in the typical sense of what this means, argues Griffin, but the divine is "*perfect* in power."[62] Griffin explains that the deity possesses as much power as it can have while still beholding a universe of free beings – since the idea of a being with *all* the power is simply incompatible with a world of other self-directing agents, entities whose decisions cannot be simply "cancelled or overridden at will."[63] As nurtured and apprehended by a benevolent deity, this is a cosmos in which all worldly evils will, in time, "lead to such great and universal good that all the participants in the process will agree that the sufferings endured *en route* were worth while." In this way, Griffin and Smith, process theologian and mystical perennialist, may join forces against the "late modern denial that reality is perfect in any sense."[64]

There is nothing even close to such a grand design argument in the works of Corrington, no joining forces with a theodicy in which a great and universal good is guaranteed to greet us at the end. I submit that it is

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[59] James, *Pragmatism*, 137.

[60] Robert Corrington and Leon Niemoczynski, "An Introduction to Ecstatic Naturalism: Interview with Robert S. Corrington," https://users.drew.edu/rcorring/downloads/01RobertCorringtonInterviewKINESIS2009.pdf, access 4.04.2022.

[61] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 340.

[62] Griffin, Smith, *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology*, 89.

[63] Ibidem.

[64] Ibidem, 95.

precisely the harsher contours of ecstatic naturalism, its far more sober vision of the universe, which offers a more acute metaphysics of responsibility. Perhaps a synthesis of the starkness of ecstatic naturalism and the tone of optimism and spiritual triumph found in process thought awaits us in the future.[65]

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Summary

The mission of this essay is to outline the conditions for a *metaphysics of responsibility* – an ontology which encourages the morally and politically active form of life. The ecstatic naturalism of Robert Corrington, a contemporary development in American philosophy, is employed as a means of highlighting these conditions. As the work of Corrington integrates numerous influences from classical American thought, along with several Continental and Asian philosophies, a broad variety of figures and traditions are introduced throughout. The essay concludes with a comparison between ecstatic naturalism and process theology over a topic which surfaces repeatedly throughout the discussion: the question of evil.

Keywords: ecstatic naturalism, process theology, problem of evil, comparative philosophy, American philosophy