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## **“An Introduction to Ecstatic Naturalism: Interview with Robert S. Corrington”**

Robert S. Corrington is Professor of Philosophical Theology in the Graduate Division of Religion of Drew University, Madison, NJ 07940. He has published around eighty articles and nine books. Two of his books deal with figures: *An Introduction to C.S. Peirce: Philosopher, Semiotician, and Ecstatic Naturalist*, and *Wilhelm Reich: Psychoanalyst and Radical Naturalist*. Six books represent an augmenting series that unfolds the perspective of ecstatic naturalism, while the most recent book, *Riding the Windhorse: Manic-Depressive Disorder and the Quest for Wholeness*, combines an autobiography with a philosophical, semiotic, and psychoanalytic study of this disorder. Dr. Corrington's current queries struggle to open up some of the more elusive dimensions of the natural (naturing/natured) and in turn, human (conscious/unconscious), ontological difference insofar as aesthetic, but non-honorific, traits may be taken as modes of prevalence impacting on the “how” of nature. He will try to show how the perennial struggle between art and religion can be reconfigured to show the contrast between the generic power of art and the continuing tribal violence of religion.

*LJN: Ecstatic naturalism has been making a name for itself within the contemporary American philosophical setting. What would you say is the major focus of the perspective of ecstatic naturalism, and how might you state its philosophical program for a newcomer to your work? Understanding that any terse introduction to the vocabulary of a philosophical system may commit violence to the carefully built nature of that system (perhaps it is better for one to demonstratively construct a system rather than simply “state” the premises of their system), would you—for the sake of economy in our short available space here—be able to provide the reader with a brief overview of ecstatic naturalism and its vocabulary? Terms such as potency, nature, and God or the divine appear to possess tremendous importance for you. What do these terms mean within the perspective of ecstatic naturalism?*

RSC: Leon, I like your idea that a system should be “demonstratively constructed,” rather than baldly stated. While no one analogy or metaphor can exhaust the “how” of philosophy, each carefully chosen one can light up an important trait or prospect of this activity. It is interesting that Peirce strongly resonated with the analogy between house building and philosophy, each a manifestation of the architectural makeup of the universe, while Schopenhauer puts gravity-soaked architecture on the bottom of his hierarchy of the arts, for all it can produce is a dull-witted struggle between that gravity and humanly contrived rigidity. For the moment we can tip the nod to Peirce. Hence, no major category can be defined in isolation from other powerful categories. It is only in a tension-filled architecture that one’s basic categories can begin to show the work they do, and, where pertinent, their aesthetic and moral aspects. Taking this idea of living architecture to the extreme entails that one only read primary texts, backward and forward, where the systems display such tensional power that lesser writings pale in comparison. Yet with the occasional secondary text being a kind of sublation emptying itself into the primary text that called it into being. Pedagogically, we need not be quite so austere, and there are a number of ways in which we can help the pilgrim make the first footfall in a bewildering terrain

Yet, unlike Peirce and more like Dewey, I am inclined to avoid a technical vocabulary that is held to be required by philosophical construction. The various terms appearing in my perspective are taken from ordinary language but transitioned out of their ‘normal’ provenance into a more generic horizon where they can take on an enhanced meaning.

This is a delicate process in that it requires sensitivity to a term's ordinary contour (an analysis where Wittgenstein exhibited his great gifts), while simultaneously stretching the term to carry an unusual categorial load. Perhaps the term that carries the most conceptual/experiential burden within *ecstatic naturalism* is "potency." I was impressed with the way Schelling used this term even if his metaphysics has a frustrating vague quality. For an *ecstatic naturalist*, the term "potencies" refers to an uncountable 'number' of ecstatic eruptions from the self-covering natural dimension of *nature naturing*. I am keen on the idea of eruption rather than the gentler notion of emanation. Here, and perhaps only here, German Romanticism trumps Neo-Platonism. There is an explosive violence in the heart of nature that Schelling sensed but that Schopenhauer saw more directly and fully. I consider this sensibility in Schopenhauer, who had heard of Darwin in 1860, to be a straightforward anticipation of Darwinism. 'Within' nature, the unending domains of *nature natured*, are orders of relevance that themselves cannot be counted. All orders are complex, yet each order has only the relations it has, never a relevant connection to all other orders, whether in the immediate past (Hartshorne) or the present. I have always considered the process notion of negative prehension to be a cheat; namely, a back door way of sneaking a doctrine of universal internal relations into the realm of the intra-worldly. Many people find it incredulous that there are limits to the multiple thereness of an order of relevance, but this clinging to a conception of universal relationality can fuel a magical view of one's own causal potency – not only is everything relevant to me, but, more importantly, I am also relevant to everything that is. That's a lot of power in the hands of a finite being!

The question of god, of the divine, is always profoundly difficult to render intelligibly while simultaneously avoiding simple-minded honorifics that name too soon without thoughtful categorial preparation. I strongly disagree with the Reformed theologian Karl Barth who would have us emasculate philosophical construction through starting and ending with god's alleged self-disclosure in the singularity, filled with paradox, that comes *von Oben* (from above) to shatter any and all human attempts to climb up to god (the sinful nature of Luther's theology of glory that he contrasts with the humble theology of the cross). For me, the better approach is to work out one's categorial scheme and then to struggle with the god problematic. Doing this, always incomplete, process first can help to weed out those pesky honorifics that seem to cluster around the god

problematic as if they naturally belong there. In the end, god gets pumped up in metaphysical size but always at the expense of nature which suffers a commensurate shrinking. I reject the idea that there could be a divine being that could be directly relevant to all of the innumerable orders of nature and be so in respects that would make a real and telling difference in the lives of a handful of fragmented beings funded with mind. While I have some appreciation of the trajectory that runs from Feuerbach to Freud, there are also more conceptually demanding reasons why an unrelenting series of probes into nature cannot be arbitrarily cut off by a philosophical theology that is besotted with the omnis and other eulogistic traits. Sheer description is much harder work because it has to be vigilant about the deep human tendency to quickly find the “better” and “more real.”

God is more properly described by *ecstatic naturalism* as a fragmented clustering of sacred folds, each one of which having its own interval to dampen down its raw power. A sacred fold is any complex in nature that both folds in on itself semiotically, thereby dramatically increasing its significative power, and that reaches down into the depths where ultimate import moves ecstatically to permeate and vibrate the way of the fold. This means that the ordinally located fold has a special status insofar as it is fully within the orders of nature natured, while deriving its puissance from nature naturing. Technically, any thing whatsoever can be the locus for a sacred fold but in practice sacred folds seem to always appear within certain orders of relevance and not others. I have always been partial to the massive oak trees that are found throughout my native New Jersey. An oak tree manifests a power of being that is almost overwhelming and that shows the sheer force of nature – one is reminded here of Heidegger’s commentaries on Aristotle and the strong emphasis he places on Aristotle’s notion of *physis*. But there is no such thing as ‘the’ order behind all sacred folds – they all rest on their own bottom. They are prior to the distinction between good and evil and any encounter with one requires full awareness of its potency for good or ill. Further, they can serve to link the human unconscious, especially in its archetypal dimension, with the underconscious of nature. One can quickly see that standard divine predicates don’t apply to sacred folds and that teleology, perhaps the most tempting delusion to which humans fall prey, is ruled out along with any sense that god is, ultimately, concerned with our own welfare, at least in the usually affirmed senses.

Yet there is another dimension to the divine that is, simply put, virtually impossible to analyze or rope into the categorial schema of *ecstatic naturalism*. Of all the richly contrived approaches to this second divine dimension (where the word “god” simply drops away) I find the most compelling to be that of the Indian *Upanishads*. Like Schopenhauer I find this Hindu classic to be the most profound and the least tribal of the great religious texts. And my reading of it is non-dualist, the position of *Advaita Vedanta*. The hidden depth dimension of the divine, *Nirguna Brahman*, that is, the divine without traits of any kind (clearly, the Plotinian One), is contrasted with *Saguna Brahman*, that is, the divine with traits. For me, then, the question that has become central is the correlation between *nature naturing* and *Nirguna Brahman*. I am not quite ready to talk about this correlation at present.

**LJN:** *Your work seems to begin in medias res rather than following the more standard procedure of providing a formal prolegomenon that would orient the reader prior to a more sustained engagement. Was this deliberate? Secondly, many metaphysical systems operate as if they are closed and hence require no further elaboration or self-correction. If ecstatic naturalism is a metaphysics, how does it deal with issues like closure, necessity, or even a priori arguments?*

RSC: One can certainly admire works like Hegel’s Preface to his Phenomenology of Spirit. It is a wonderfully dense-pack exhibition of how he will deploy his categories across the time process. Ratcheting up a level the Phenomenology of Spirit itself is also a Prolegomenon for the later system, bringing the phenomenological We, and its individuated co-carrier, up to the Absolute (post-perspectival) standpoint. But such an ‘outside’ introduction only works well when the resultant categorial portrayal has strong idealistic and even panpsychist components. However, if nature is indefinite in scope with nothing like a contour, and further has indefinite and often shifting edges, then it is impossible to write a little tone-poem that can joyously house all, or most, of ‘its’ most pervasive traits. Hence, there can be no privileged entrance point ‘into’ what ecstatic naturalism is ‘about.’

Thankfully, a number of philosophers have come to the realization that we can’t but begin where there can be no meta-beginning. For the later Wittgenstein there is an implicit naturalism that no longer seeks language an sich, but accepts that one is in the midst of many

pragmatically anchored regional movements of language that simply can't be described in a unitary way from a bird's-eye view. Had he been less conservative politically he might have abandoned his stress on cultural sign posts and entered into a truer evolutionary model contrasting habit with plasticity both within language games and their 'sponsoring' forms of life. Still, he advanced phenomenology and an implicit pragmatic naturalism.

Clearly, Dewey and Santayana are the most successful philosophers of the mid-world (John William Miller), the only world that finite creatures can see and live in. In recent years I have been more drawn to Santayana whose works require what might be called a quieter and slower hermeneutics. Like Emerson, Santayana can pack astonishing things into sentence after sentence, and there is an unrelenting way in which he frustrates the human desire and need for closure. As you read along, middle-level vistas emerge, sometimes languidly, sometimes with a sovereign implacability, and the scope of one's own mid-world is augmented, yet the innumerable ties we have to our world, as a "tethered creature," also come home to us. Maybe Santayana is the best hubris buster in the tradition. In any case I am more inclined now days to see him as the paradigmatic naturalist, which I suppose makes Dewey his more pugilistic brother who does kick up his traces, and so wonderfully, while also being more restless concerning which natural boundaries ought to be allowed to stand and which compelled to fall under the subtle hammering of instrumental reason.

Both thinkers could be tough as nails, yet both could be stopped dead in their tracks by humanly created beauty. And while Santayana is more of a classical Stoic than is the evangelical Dewey, both knew in their bones that they would never get a glimpse of the totality, the order, or the meaning of indefinite nature. For Santayana we have this tried and true correlation of common sensism, and the categories, like matter and spirit, which are emergent from self-aware common sense. Peirce wanted his categories to do much heavier lifting – supporting a more totalizing cosmology undergirded by a logic and a phenomenology that weren't really empirical after all. I just don't feel comfortable trying to do metaphysics in Peirce's manner – he knows far too much about the whence and the whither and that makes me somewhat nervous.

As to your second question, I think it is a mistake to limit the movement of one's metaphysics to one specific method or strategy. On this Peirce was right as he contrasted four methods for fixing belief. I'm less worried about the a priori method making a big come back than he might have been – perhaps because as a unregenerate Kantian, he had some hidden tendencies in that direction. For me, one of the lasting strengths of 'real' pragmatism is that it graciously allows for a variety of argumentative, descriptive, and poetic contrivances to be in play but only insofar as their cumulative momentum delivers to thought usable and 'true' traits that have been baptized in the evolutionary modalities of nature (where pertinent), and tested by the reach of imagination (one of Whitehead's desiderata), which insists that each category can actually show that it can be stretched to cover its stipulated domain.

Specifically, I see an ongoing tension between the transcendental method/argument and phenomenological description. Naturalists have long been friendly to phenomenology insofar as it prescind from just those extra-experiential positings that naturalists find not only unwarranted, but deeply troubling for social and political life. Yet it just seems to be the case that we cannot live in a purely phenomenological world. More often than we dare admit we will find ourselves at a dark junction that simply cannot be rendered into a phenomenological datum – no hint of Husserl's Evident, no self-giving of the phenomenon, and no easy coming forward of an essence in its essentializing. Nor can we just sit there and fold our arms in frustration. We feel the need to move on. It is at this moment that the thinker/experiencer is compelled to toss a transcendental ball over to the other side and into the outer darkness. As we know, this posit is created, often through abduction, as the ground or sufficient reason for what it somehow caused to be, and to be in a certain necessary way, on our side of the wall. I would argue that each transcendental argument must be looked at in its own terms. Simply, some are better than other and the test of that is pragmatic. Of course, you will never get consensus as to which are better, but one can at least acknowledge that they are necessary. I have always been persuaded that C.G. Jung did it the right way. He acquired a staggering amount of empirical data from around the world, in art, religion, myth, neurosis, and, above all via the psychopathology found in schizophrenia and manic-depression. You could say that he was, among psychoanalysts, a consummate phenomenologist. But he lacked a causal explanation for these universal and endlessly recurrent images. So, being the good

Kantian that he was, he posited the existence of archetypes as the root causes behind the archetypal images find in an endless variety of contexts. And he repeatedly said that no one will ever see an archetype in itself, at least on this side of the grave, but that the images are available to even arm chair phenomenologists.

On occasion, then, I have argued that while we must be kind to our transcendental arguments we should also struggle, where time and energy allow, to make such arguments deliver their goods in a more experiential way. This may not be possible, but on the other hand I can't see that attempt as without other kinds of fruits.

*LJN: You mentioned Schelling and the concept of "potency." This idea of potency was extremely important for Peirce, too, in the sense that you are referring to. In fact, you mention Peirce in addition to Schelling quite a bit in your work with regard to how potencies function within nature. Do you see Peirce and Schelling fitting together in any significant way with respect to the concept of potency? It seems to me that Peirce did point toward nature in its depth dimensions through his modal analysis of possibility, and through his ontological analysis of potencies and infinitesimals, although potencies and possibility amount to slightly different things for him. Yet, ultimately, Peirce shied away from exploring nature in its most profound sense of nature naturing—its depths—when it came to looking at potency and possibility head-on. What do you make of that?*

RSC: Yes, I agree with your last suspicion about Peirce's perhaps fear of those unruly depths of nature that would fail to get anywhere near redemptive thirdness. For me, potencies and possibilities are completely different animals. Potencies, in my reading of Schelling, are self-othering powers that do not seem to have what we mean by ordinal locations. They eject, through Peirce's infinitesimals, the emergent worlds of space, time, and causality (to use Schopenhauer's triad). As you know, an infinitesimal is a 'quantity' that is infinitely small yet greater than zero. Obviously their ontological status is exceedingly strange. Possibilities, on the other hand, are on 'this' side of nature and are always bound with pertinent actualities. They have ordinal locations. Now a modal analysis, while powerful (if you believe in such things) can also be a means of importing too much intelligibility into the ground, and hence, can fuel yet another

abjection of the unconscious of nature. I think this is another way in which Hartshorne placed too much faith in a particular argumentative strategy, and while it delivered the goods, the question remains as to the actual value of these goods. For me it's all too neat, too aggressively heliotropic.

For Peirce, there is an interesting movement from potentialities (which we could call especially energized and vector-driven possibilities that are partly pre-ordinal) to potencies to a developmental teleology that, here, is tied to developmental Platonism – issues I know that you have analyzed in your dissertation. I have made the correlation between potencies and archetypes in a way that doesn't directly contradict Peirce. Yet my sense is that because archetypes may feel their own kind of selection pressures, they cannot be progressive in Peirce's sense. My position rejects Jung's eternalism vis-à-vis archetypes and Peirce's eschatological triumphalism in which the Forms reach stasis in the infinite long run. The question is: where do archetypes come from and how do they admit or exclude traits once here?

Schelling, unlike Peirce, who in essence cleans up Schelling, dives into much deeper waters. For Schelling, god also contains its own ground/abyss from which even it cannot escape. On occasion Schelling calls this dark ground nature, especially around 1809. Nature, as unruly, as ever spring-forth, is an unconscious cauldron of potencies, driven to propel the divine to emerge from nature's unfathomable depths. And, this god, even though fully dialectic and self-constituting, cannot escape the gravity of nature. For the young Tillich, these concepts/intuitions had the force of a revelation. For me then, Schelling comes closer to an adequate understanding of the potencies than does Peirce. But neither had the capacious understanding of nature that I seek to provide in ecstatic naturalism.

*LJN: Justus Buchler has also had a tremendous importance for you. For our readers, who was Buchler and why is he important for you? How does his theory of nature influence yours?*

RSC: I first met Justus Buchler in 1975 during a conference at Fairfield University that was ostensibly devoted to his work. I was a bit astonished at how difficult it was for some of his interlocutors to grasp the rich scope and precision of his perspective. Yet I was equally attentive to the various ways in which Buchler responded to his critics. Here was a mind and

spirit magisterial in power, indifferent to any and all philosophical fashions, without professional guile, and breathtakingly open to the idea of unending query, one of the very few honorific concepts in his work. Some years later, when he and Evelyn invited me to their home in Garden City, NY, I learned more about the wonderful 19<sup>th</sup> century term “capaciousness.” In our discussions there was no hint of any desire on his part to convert me to any philosophical perspective or concept. His approach was to take my own ideas, whether he was personally interested in them or not, and help me find some clues to enhance their scope and fecundity. This was unique in my experience.

In the mid 1980s, when I spent many hours with Charles Hartshorne, I saw the stark difference. Hartshorne was not, with me at least, a great interlocutor. His map of sixteen possible philosophical and modal ideas of god/world was a closed system. Indeed, unlike Buchler, he did want converts, and sadly, many responded, and still do to such a betrayal of the spirit of query. But then again, I consider process thought to be profoundly flawed in its very foundations and these various flaws, such as the softening of all evolutionary edges and the recurrence of magically appearing wellsprings of teleology, are precisely what comfort-seekers want. In all of my encounters with Buchler’s texts and his person I never detected any attempt to cover over, clean up, or mask the bite of the innumerable orders of nature – perhaps his homage to Peirce’s concept of secondness. As a side note, Buchler once described to me his one meeting with Hartshorne, which took place right after Buchler had published a review of one of Hartshorne’s books. He indicated that Hartshorne did most of the talking and that when he left “silence filled the land.” Indeed. Hartshorne never accepted Buchler’s leading idea that there are no simples in nature, citing his own “principle of contrast” that demanded simples to contrast with complexes – a rather dubious argument from my perspective. Hartshorne corresponded with me on this and other issues entailed or stated by the ordinal perspective.

Buchler’s capacious mind was wonderfully manifest in his refusal to take any one paradigm and drive it deep into the heart of unending nature. At the time I was interested in how Josiah Royce had reworked aspects of Peirce’s semiotics into a philosophy of religion. Consequently, I saw signs everywhere. As some may know, Buchler did his doctoral dissertation under Ernest Nagel at Columbia on Peirce and empiricism. By the time I knew him he had reshaped Peirce and used some of his ideas in

a subaltern way, weeding out the regnant idealism and its attendant panpsychism. At the time I didn't know that I was going to write a book on Peirce, but when I came to do so in 1993 I was already alerted to the honorific and idealistic limitations of Peirce's otherwise impressive categorial array. While the danger of pansemioticism can be tempting for me, Buchler showed me that nature was indefinitely more than any and all signs, no matter how fecund and even richly Byzantine one's semiotics.

There is one place where Buchler reminds me of William James, even though James did not seem to be one of his primary sources. James, who had a genius for getting metaphysical mileage out of colloquial expressions, refused to designate any specific 'what' for nature. He preferred to use the word "stuff." How wonderful. For Buchler, this "stuff" is the natural complex. There is no one trait found in each and every complex – remembering that for Buchler the idea of counting all complexes is absurd. There is no sum. Hence, such subaltern, yet Napoleonic, perspectives as materialism, panpsychism, mechanism, pantextualism (the bumptious cousin of pansemioticism), or organicism, are only pertinent in certain respects and in certain orders, never all. Here is where Buchler's capaciousness shows itself. While most philosophers will ride the hobby horse of their truncated metaphysics all over nature, Buchler's ordinal perspective has its own version of the dangers of misplaced concreteness. Using very different language, perspectives of lesser scope are tribal, not generic. This is, for me, one of the reasons that Buchler's perspective is not more widely known – it unrelentingly challenges all of those tribalisms that even we sophisticates are prone to.

I had a chance to briefly sit in on his seminar on Whitehead's *Process and Reality* during his years at Stony Brook. It was clear that he had the highest regard for Whitehead's work and for his 1929 masterpiece in particular. Yet, once again, in the context of that appreciation he was as ever concerned to find the places where Whitehead intruded honorifics that blunted the scope of his perspective. As is well known in process circles, he took Whitehead to task for a violation of the principle of ontological parity by elevating some concepts, as more real, over others. I remain convinced that, in contrast to Buchler's ordinal naturalism, Whitehead's metaphysics is surprisingly regional in scope.

I want to say something about writing style. Perhaps I should warn you that I actually like the way John Dewey writes! But Buchler is in

another place entirely. There is a clarity and power to his sentences that I do not find elsewhere, even in the early Wittgenstein where he serves up surprisingly thin gruel. Buchler's use of metaphor is very carefully configured so that just the right metaphor does just the right jobs at just the right place. But note, he never throws in a metaphor in a lazy way to elide over some conceptual aporia or some flabbiness of expression. The two writers who have most shaped my sense of philosophic style are Emerson and Buchler, the former one of the world masters of metaphor, the latter one of the world masters of sheer categorial breadth, sparingly enriched by metaphor.

Finally, let me just list some of the query enhancing things that I received from Buchler: 1) a vastly larger sense of nature than even Dewey or Santayana, 2) an impatience with militant subaltern perspectives that are sadly blind to their crude will-to-power, 3) a sense of the human process that uses a far more profound sense of the natures of identity than any found in postmodernism or post colonialism, 4) the revolutionary power (and utter necessity) of the principle of ontological parity, which says that whatever is in whatever way it is can be neither more nor less real than anything else that is, 5) a kind of phenomenological generosity that works hard to let each designated complex get the last vote insofar as our finitude and the demands of method allow, 6) an open spirit that honors critical commonsensism but also knows where the dangers lie that force such common sense to reconstruct itself, and 7) an openness to viable categorial and experiential insights no matter where found even if buried under less useful conceptual debris. But above all else, he showed me the craft of thinking in its purist form and I suspect that my appreciative wonder was not unlike that experienced by Heidegger's students in those heady days after the publication of *Sein und Zeit*.

*LJN: Interesting, Buchler is certainly one of the most important American figures of the twentieth century. "The Metaphysics of Natural Complexes" (1966) is by far a transforming experience to read and one of my favorites when it comes to recent American philosophy. And I can understand how you appreciate his style, and Dewey's writing style, as you have just mentioned. I am gradually warming to Dewey's writing style myself. I suppose it depends on one's taste for philosophy—especially as I am first and foremost a Continentalist and most acclimated to a certain style of writing found with the likes of Heidegger, Derrida, Badiou, and so on. But this does explain one reason why I turned to American philosophy: to re-*

*visit some of the issues that I was visiting with the Continentalists, but stated in a different, and at times, more economic language. In any case, a moment ago you had mentioned how you think process thought is profoundly flawed, especially as it softens evolutionary edges and posits a teleology. Could you elaborate on this?*

RSC: Take the foundational concept of the actual occasion. It has an astonishing amount of work to do. It must scan the entire universe, just past, and somehow vote yes or no to all of nature's constituents. In addition, it must polish up its subjective form and subjective aim to somehow, when the cosmic winds are right, align with a somewhat fuzzy divine or initial aim and say yes to it if and only if it is ready to so. Then it must shake and bake this multiple infinitude and cook it into a solid (mentalized) mass that patiently sits there waiting for a mini apotheosis that will transfigure its 'content' into a kind of "here I am" for the next kid on the block, not to mention a (somewhat) caring vacuum cleaner god. To me, this smacks of science fiction.

The kind of metaphysics done by Whitehead is strikingly old fashioned. In its admittedly pre-Kantian strategy it ends up positing all kinds of things for which there is not a shred of evidence or conceptual compulsion. There is a tendency to scavenge around the edges of science to look for 'evidence' of the scheme, or, more creatively, to reshape ongoing scientific ideas for the 'benefit' of working scientists who are held to need this kind of addition to their meager conceptual frameworks. The idea of finding a foundational 'something' for all of nature, a something that is so protean that it can find a home, rather, be the home (nexus) anywhere for anything, is bold and intoxicating. But one can only do that if the image of the organized whole of the nature comes right out of the can. I know this sounds harsh but this is a perspective that has grand ambitions. When I was at a process conference in Korea it was averred that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the Whitehead century. That statement sent chills down my spine. That's not what the life of query is about.

I am aware that some fine minds in the process camp have worked hard on the problem of evil and the status of the tragic, but I remain unconvinced. The evolutionary edges are muted. Secondness, as Darwinian as you can get, is hardly a major player. Can a panpsychist even let secondness be what it is without tipping it over into thirdness (mind) as quickly as possible? I doubt it. Teleology is bogus, both for

'nature' as a 'whole' and for anything in it except a handful of so-called 'higher' organisms who generate purposes that, alas, must feel selection pressures. The process conception of complexity continually makes a lazy slide from the descriptive to the honorific. And compared to the ordinal perspective, the concept of complexity, always a cheer leader for mentality is rather simplistic. Just maybe, complexity goes all the way down and can't admit of degrees or exhibit some upward climb. In the end, and you don't have to be a Kantian to say this, the process scheme says far, far too much about nature while actually shrinking it into a narcotizing caricature that certainly has a good sales record.

*LJN: The kernel of your work centers around the theme of nature. What is nature for you, and how is the divine involved with it? What is the divine, for you?*

RSC: Interestingly, I have very little to say about the 'one' nature that there is although it will take some time to show why! All categorial analyses, descriptions, evocations, and articulations pertain to 'intra' worldly orders of relevance. Nature is not predicable nor can 'it' be defined. Like Aquinas and Heidegger I am persuaded that nature (not their ultimate term) lies beyond the transcendentals, not to mention the schema of genus/species. If nature is also beyond the genera it cannot be defined because any definition requires naming a given genus with a specific difference. No stretching of these categories could come any where 'near' to nature. I like Buchler's idea that nature is not a *what* but the sheer availability of orders, but can never function as *an* order or arrangement. The realization that nature has no nature moves the ordinal perspective way beyond the desire-filled idealism of process thought, which can be characterized as the dying gasp of liberal Protestant bourgeois religion, what Tillich would call the precarious realm of harmonic autonomy that would be powerless against a new heteronomy. I have noticed over the years that Tillichian's and process thinkers inhabit different worlds. Clearly, Tillich's philosophical theology digs deeper.

Noting again some problems with Hartshorne's principle of contrasts, let me say that the pairing of being with nonbeing is a contrast that is insufficiently generic, and in fact has little to offer to my *ecstatic naturalism*. The self-effacing term "nature" has no contrast term as non-nature is held to be a contradiction. The principle of contrast actually stands in the way of a capacious evocation of 'nature.' On the ultimate

level there is no contrast term. Hence, the word “nature” is absolutely unique among the recurring and regnant terms of the various traditions within which we shape our own horizons of meaning. Let me note that Plotinus, one of the most powerful *and* subtle minds in world thinking, comes wonderfully close to the views of *ecstatic naturalism*. His arch ‘concept’ of *the One* is astonishingly fecund both for a non-monotheistic cosmogeny and as an explanation of the unquenchable thirst of the human process for dissolution into pure light. I see his mystical experiences as being among the highest of our species, specifically insofar as they are not filled with tribal content.

Lastly, within nature there is a fundamental divide between *nature naturing* and *nature natured*. Sadly, Spinoza did little with this pairing, merely adumbrating it within the deducting sweep of his categorial scheme. This is a recurrent failure in the traditions. For *ecstatic naturalism* this distinction is the most fundamental that can be encountered and thought. I would define *nature naturing* as the pre-phenomenon of “nature perennially creating itself out of itself alone.” Jaspers’ concept of the “Encompassing” or “Enveloping” (*das Umgreifende*) and mine of the “underconscious of nature” might be of value for some in helping to look more clearly into the abyss side of nature.

*Nature natured* is easier to render; namely, as the innumerable orders of relevance that ‘constitute’ so-called creation. Hence, while there is no non-nature there is the one fundamental fissure *within* nature. Obviously, to use the word “creation” in a formal sense, is to fall prey to both an external once-and-for-all slayer of nonbeing, and a shrinking of nature to a kind of ‘it’ that is over-arched and over-whelmed by a will-driven and conscious super complex.

**LJN:** *And do you see this fissure within nature resembling the ontological difference?*

RSC: Yes. Like many, I have been fascinated by the highly elastic and even quixotic gyrations of Heidegger’s ontological difference, and his move to enowning/appropriating event. Yet Dewey and Buchler convinced me that the being/nonbeing contrast is less generic than the nature naturing/nature natured contrast, not to mention the pre-contrast term nature which has an indefinite scope ‘greater’ than both being and nonbeing together – if this formulation makes sense. In rich parallel to this

is the psychoanalytic dyad of unconscious and consciousness, which is the human version of the ontological difference. My view is that it, under the right conditions, the human psyche enters into the rhythms of nature's ontological difference between its naturing and natured dimensions. I have reconfigured dream analysis to show its prime importance as an erotic link between the dream ego and nature naturing. Freud's two dream books are too narrow, forcing a linguistic analysis onto archetypal material that must be approached symbolically, semiotically, and through Jung's notion of amplification, what I would call the ramification of dream potencies.

I once had a funny dream. The dream scene took place high in the German Alps. On my right was a table laden with rich cheeses (one of my addictions). To my left was Heidegger. I mentioned to him my interest in Jung. He looked at me with his intense glare and said: "Swiss Cheese." This is the kind of archetypal simplicity and directness that analysts love to retell in their case studies. So there you have it – don't bring that ontic psychoanalytic business to my ontological difference. Well, a good Swiss, Norwegian or Austrian Swiss cheese is a fine affair in my universe. And as a friend of pragmatism, I get wary when someone wants to write the ontic/ontological distinction in stone. For, after all, 'we' Heideggerians want the deep stuff that we can drop down on top of the ontic sciences which were clearly designed with lesser mortals in mind. Once again we see a form of hubris where certain philosophers and their schools believe that they can help scientists get it right, for after all, ontic categories aren't even real categories, just feeble inductively thrown together shanty towns. If this portrayal seems a bit too polemical, and I admit it may be, reread the *Introduction to Sein und Zeit*, Section 3.

**LJN:** *What does it mean to say that there isn't anything outside or "beyond" nature?*

RSC: The minimal answer is that such an 'outside' order would be utterly unknowable as it would have no possible trait that could enter into a knowledge relationship. And, on a deeper level, it would be an orphan in an unusual sense, with neither genetic lineage or any kind of location. Naturalists, very much like feminist theologians, simply can't envision some kind of extra-natural leverage point from and through which to create the 'totality' of nature. While feminist theologians focus on patriarchal power structures and the correlation of the chain of being with

the chain of command (Reuther), naturalists will focus on the fact that human portrayals of nature are astonishingly small and riddled through with easy and comfortable container images. In this perennial strategy nature is tamed, ordered, and abbreviated. A deity can be invited to ride herd over it all, but that deity too is tamed, measured, and bent to the comportment of the human will. Not always, but often enough, this dual shrinkage of nature and the divine sustains our narcissism with its infantile demand to hold world and god in one conceptual hand, while the other hand wanders secretively among the fissures and breaks that almost never are carried upward into the light of day, or function within the public categorial scheme.

*LJN: It seems there exists a wide range of philosophical thought influencing your projects: Emerson's transcendentalism, Peircean semiotics, Dewey's naturalism, John William Miller's concept of the midworld; but figures such as Kant and his theory of the sublime, Hegel's organic concept of developing spirit, Schopenhauer's will, and Schelling's divine potencies, also make their appearances. What are some of the main lines to be drawn between these figures, as you see them? In the past you have mentioned that ecstatic naturalism establishes a dialogue between Continental phenomenology on the one hand, and American pragmatism on the other. How do you see your work as contributing to this dialogue?*

RSC: For the first part of your question let me say that the issue of influence is a difficult one, especially since retrospective probes can't always distinguish between a tracing of causes, so beloved by intellectual historians, and the more complex process of listening for those often unconscious articulations and ramifications of antecedent perspectives that are often very much in the not-yet. And there is the in-built tendency to affirm our own uniqueness and creative power by downplaying the influences, static or ongoing, of our predecessors. On occasion, I have used the phrase *emancipatory reenactment* to denote the interlocution between source and product, both partially suspended in the not-yet that goads (and invites) linguistic contrivance into a vital clearing.

That being said, I do not find it difficult to signal moments when something turned inside of me as I encountered a perspective of unusual power. The very first technical philosophical essay I read, when I was nineteen, was Heidegger's small masterpiece, "The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics." His use of Descartes' image of the tree, with the

roots being metaphysics, the trunk, physics, and the branches the other sciences, haunted me for some time. And when he asked about the soil in which the roots lie buried while also receiving nourishment, I began to feel the shock and uncanniness of the ontological difference. That initial destabilization has remained with me prejudicing me against those thinkers for whom such a shock is utterly alien. Many years later, I instantly resonated with the thought of Paul Tillich, and were I a theologian, he would be my touchstone for my idea of what is demanded of such thinking. While Tillich was not an original philosopher, his reconstruction of liberal Protestantism stands as the high water mark of that sane trajectory.

Karl Jaspers has long been an important dialogue partner for me. Like many fine spirits he lived just on the outside of, in his case, Protestant Christianity, seeking a saner and more generic perspective that would not necessarily replace religion, but provide a real alternative. In some respects he was a purer philosopher than his problematic friend Heidegger. Lacking Heidegger's vaulting and Faustian ambition, Jaspers was able to trace out the lineaments of the world and transcendence with more care and composure. While his early work in psychopathology was unkind to psychoanalysis one could see the movement of his mind toward a genuine philosophical anthropology, first through what one could call philosophical case studies (Kierkegaard, Strindberg, Nietzsche), and then into a full-blown study of human existence. Jaspers was neither a great sensualist nor someone who celebrated the flesh, but in terms of spirit and Existenz (our depth dimension) he has few superiors. His Kantianism is too central for my tastes but he does some wonderful non-Kantian things when talking about the Encompassing, which is not just an analogue of Kant's notion of the dynamic sublime.

For decades I have simply assumed that a serious philosopher must be deeply acquainted with psychoanalysis. In my late teens and through my twenties I read as much C.G. Jung as I could, impressed with the vast range of his experiences and the courage he had to dramatically reconfigure Freud's pre-war perspective. His brutal and heavy handed analysis of the anima, the contra-sexual psychic component in the biological male is just plain ugly. However, it is a concept still worthy of use if profoundly reconstructed. But I think it happens to many of us who appreciate Jung that by mid-life we begin to feel the pull of Freud, who did probe into things that Jung shied away from or even abjected. And Jung

abused the counter-transference in ways that Freud could never have even considered. I have come to believe that in our species sex and sexuality have a tragic quality. In some sense, everyone gets sex wrong. And in another order most people live lives of quiet sexual misery or loneliness, not to mention that sex kills millions. Hence the urgency of Freud's delineations.

Wilhelm Reich was a sexual utopist and had more courage than Freud to examine the sheer physicality of the orgasm. Yet his optimism about the ability of therapy to remove our characterological armoring didn't blind him to the direct social implications of sexual repression. His analysis of the Nazi movement and castration anxiety is brilliant and, for me, must reading for those seeking a working explanation of the deepest roots of social pathology. His later cosmology of cosmic orgone energy is a bit fanciful but has a certain kind of rugged beauty, and given the centrality of sex and reproduction in organic evolution, there may be more cosmic dimensions at play than we suspect.

I am not as sure about my relation to Peirce. In my 1993 Peirce book I, hopefully, presented a balanced account of his metaphysics, his nascent and incomplete philosophical theology, his categories, his early epistemology, and his semiotics. I also argued for a much stronger account of the unconscious than is in Peirce's texts, but that is latently there. This last move brought a certain enmity toward me and I was a little vexed at a strain of scholasticism that appears now and then in the Peirce world. Some of the criticisms were less than civil. I certainly do not believe in Peirce's cosmology, nor in his refusal to feel the full impact of Darwin. His darker brooding Schellingian pieces are more valuable to me as they open up a crack underneath the triumphalism of his Napoleonic thirdness. Yet even there he intrudes that gratuitous doctrine of panpsychism to smooth out the rough places. On the other hand, as a fellow manic-depressive I deeply admire his seemingly unstoppable creative drive, which produced some of the most brilliant work in the history of philosophy. He worked under conditions that would destroy most people.

As to the second part of your question, a number of pragmatists and a few phenomenologists gathered for a conference entitled, I think, *Pragmatism Considers Phenomenology*, at Penn State University in 1984. It was one of the most collegial conferences in memory and the work done

both refined starting positions, and constructed well thought bridges between these two, still vigorous, frameworks/approaches. William James was a major player and several of us felt that his most congenial dialogue partner was Merleau-Ponty. In light of that I subsequently taught a doctoral seminar on James' *Principles* and Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. Hartshorne presented some of his early-on reflections of Peirce's three categories and their correlation with Continental phenomenology. Royce was in evidence as well as C.I. Lewis, a figure whose work bears more serious study and appreciation.

But that was just a beginning, although some philosophers had starting exploring this correlation before the 1984 conference. Issues, some vexing, some stubborn, but many evocative, remain for query. The centrality of consciousness may work for Peirce, James, and Royce but not for Dewey and Buchler. Intentionality translates nicely into James' descriptions of attention and focus – the perching part of his flights and perchings. Reduction is much more problematic. As I argued at the time, the idea of bracketing out the so-called natural standpoint in order to open phenomenological intuitions of things like imagined objects, is but a pale cousin of Buchler's far more radical notion of ontological parity, which truly invites any kind of complex whatsoever to, if pertinent and desirable, become available to the bracketing phenomenologist. Husserl's perspective does have that uneasy affiliation with Descartes and Kant, neither of whom represent positive resources for naturalists. Further, Husserl's notion of shadowing; namely, the showing-forth of multiple takes on the phenomenon in question, is again, in its own way, a weak version of the ordinal framework that has a vastly larger canvas upon which to display traits within innumerable orders. And, for a pragmatist, especially someone like C.I. Lewis, the showing of essences or mobile essentialization, rides piggyback on a Platonism that has some strong anti-phenomenological commitments. It is interesting, and an object lesson, that the shift to the much humbler language of traits and orders actually delivers more to circumspect seeing, as well as grasping and shaping, than the rather sanitized language of hovering essences – and here we can hear Santayana chime in, whose own approach was, in his own eyes, rather phenomenological, but more in a Husserlian sense.

There are so many gifted philosophers doing highly detailed work in the rich land between phenomenology and pragmatism that I don't feel any reason to be in explicit dialogue on this issue. There are some

interesting stirrings in the post-postmodern horizon where naturalism, but not in its reductive materialist form, can provide Continentalists relief from all of the rather hard work of linguistic fissioning and hypo-manic differance, where the brass ring glows ever brighter as its consummatory presence awaiting us in a miniature infinite-long-run, becomes more mocking and, if one likes, ironic. For a 'real' naturalist linguistic artifacts are very late evolutionary adaptations emergent from a vast ocean of natural forms of semiosis. The brass ring, assuming it has genuine social and/or individual value, can actually be grasped and rendered available without all of the linguistic angst. On a personal note, my former student Iljoon Park, wrote an essay comparing ecstatic naturalism with at least a facet of the work of Derrida. He appended it to his masterful translation of my *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy* into Korean. My prognosis is that some of the more naturalistic and pragmatic insights of post 1968 French thought will shake themselves free from their rather unhealthy environment and aid American naturalism in an exploration of its own blind spots and abjections. This process could advance philosophy in striking ways.

*LJN: Certainly. After studying some of the original Peirce letters housed in the Southern Illinois University Carbondale archives, it seems to me that Peirce was leading a very "existential" life. His work is supposed by many to be hardnosed, super-rationalist, and objectively "scientific" in its character. However, his life and letters reveals, at least from what I saw, the concerns of a man whose work dealt with existential and "postmodern" issues: the deferral of historical truth, religion without a "classical" God, tragedy and nihilism, loss and despair, and the nature of academic isolation. The rough and dirty "existential" aspects seemed to involve mostly his commutes between Milford and New York, his opiate abuse, his suffering from brain fever, caring for his sick wife, his alcoholism, and his pensive wanderings into the woods. Those issues relate to a man's philosophy which is not sterile and scientific, but is rather a vibrant and creative search for the meaning of self in cosmos—a search for meaning that I think ultimately helped formulate his philosophy of religion, something many Peirce scholars today deny to him. Your introduction to your Peirce book touched on some of these issues—the chapter aptly titled "Peirce's Melancholy."*

RSC: Peirce always reminds me of Beethoven, both uncompensated and rather extreme manic-depressives who suffered to an extent that, frankly,

non-manic-depressives can hardly imagine. The high suicide rate tells the tale. Almost all geniuses are manic-depressives but almost all manic-depressives are very far from the rank of genius and often suffer alone, their careers and relationships a failure. Even today medicine can only do so much. Almost all medicines fail after a number of months so one lives with endless fine tuning. With the genius, the hypo-manic moments are the best, using an evolutionary surplus energy (so rare in our species) to forge products that probe into complexes of nature that have an uncanny depth and provenance. Some have argued that nature 'uses' the genius for species advancement (the Baldwin Effect) but savages the individual creator with a lethal disorder. A poetic teleology is ok here. To me this rings true. And remember what Hegel says about the world historical individual. Only a complete fool would choose to be one. Hence, they must be 'chosen.' A full-blown mania, on the other hand, has no creative value. Its attendant psychic inflation is only concerned with devouring the world and spitting it out again as divinely remade. Mild depressions can help in a pruning process that enables the hypo-manic product to better conform to canons of communicability.

When one is manic-depressive, there is a deeply pain-driven search for meaning. Manic-depressives rarely get it right in their day to day encounters and they leave a trail of failed relations behind them, always puzzled at the astonishing recurrence of what amounts to a tragic tale. As compensation, people like Peirce drive as hard as possible to find larger orders of meaning that bypass the innumerable failures in the quotidian. Remember that philosophizing is an activity that goes counter to our evolutionary imprints which are tribal and violent or praxis driven. To think generically, about whatever is in whatever way, is exceedingly difficult, and most of us quit our labors way too soon. But Peirce kept picking himself up out of pits that are terrifying in their aspect. His over compensation took him to hypo-manic heights that collectively constitute one of the treasures in world thought. By contrast, think about how he treated his second wife Juliette – real demonic energies were at play. Yet, at times, Peirce had the courage to leave some primary things ambiguous and underway.

*LJN: I apologize for digressing, and back to the previous question. How does ecstatic naturalism establish a dialogue between Continental phenomenology on the one hand, and American pragmatism on the other?*

*One finds ideas from Dewey, Hegel, and Schopenhauer in your writings, in addition to some Peirce.*

RSC: I am much closer to John Dewey who seems to me to be the most gifted practicing phenomenologist in the tradition. It is often noted that neither Husserl nor Peirce did much actual phenomenology but that they each framed its theoretical prospects and structure in foundational ways. As a side note, I am very pleased to witness the current Husserl revival in France, centered in the absolutely brilliant work of Jean-Luc Marion. For my generation, the word on the street was that Heidegger had trumped Husserl's Cartesianism and (perhaps) Neo-Kantianism with his own phenomenology of the *Dasein* as a thrown project fully being-in-the-world – the concept of consciousness simply dropped out of view. It is becoming clearer, however, that there is far more going on in Husserl than the Heideggerian's realized, or wanted to realize.

Dewey, then, somehow was a born phenomenologist. He describes the things and events in nature with a sharpness and clarity that honors both relations and relata. He refuses to overlay the self-giving of the phenomena with ersatz teleologies or grand causal links to an ultimate origin or goal. He let Darwin bite, and bite hard, although he had a long pilgrimage through British Neo-Hegelians and his own fading Christianity. And he did see the tragic side of things, a fact which eluded Reinhold Niebuhr in his grossly unfair critique of Dewey's so-called optimism. In fact, a good Deweyian naturalist has an analogue to the Christian doctrine of original sin; namely, the sense of our natural indebtedness that can never be paid off by some special divine agency. There are aspects about the human process that can never be fixed. Hence, Peirce's cosmic optimism simply has no place in a genuine naturalism.

A number of my graduate students, after paying court to the, admittedly, significant thinkers of Paris, have had a kind of epiphany in reading Dewey for the first time. They feel like they are reading about the 'real' world of human interaction and social/political struggle. In short, they are beginning to think that one might actually be able to *do* something to help democratization grow.

Taking a step backwards, my first encounter with non-technical philosophy was in my sophomore or junior year in high school when Emerson was taught in an English Literature course. It is not uncommon

for Emerson to take hold in those teenage years when ecclesial religion begins to feel stifling. For some reason my intense reading of Emerson got entwined with a growing fascination for Hinduism – a connection that Emerson would have instantly affirmed. I remember going to the Philadelphia Museum of Art to see their small but superb South Asian art collection. In my mind's eye I can still see a number of those pieces. During my three trips to India, that early encounter made it easier to enter into the power of temple art and architecture. For me, Hinduism allows almost unlimited room for ongoing philosophical query. At its best, Hinduism is remarkably un-tribal.

I would like to say a few words about Schopenhauer, whose works I have been reading off and on for three decades. If he is (fatefully) contrasted with Hegel, his courage, near perfect clarity, honesty, and deep sensuousness, put Hegel to shame. I have long felt that Schopenhauer and Dewey are the two great true Darwinians in the tradition. While I am never quite sure what to do with Schopenhauer's seemingly anti-naturalist Kantianism, there are moments when he talks about the objectification of the Will where he could put on the naturalist's hat. His metaphysical pessimism has always felt right to me, especially when contrasted with Hegel's 'victorious' Christian sacred history. I can think of few philosophers who worked so hard and so courageously on the very highest level, who yet had to endure the chilling effect of the indifferent academy. He got so much right and presented it so beautifully that he remains for me the model of the ever faithful outsider.

*LJN: In many ways your work seems critical of many of the contemporary trends in American philosophy: whether Rorty and neo-pragmatism, twentieth-century process philosophy, or the current attempt for a revival of "realism" and descriptive naturalism. How does ecstatic naturalism press forward in ways that these other movements do not, or cannot, when "describing reality"?*

RSC: I have an almost visceral reaction to Neo-Pragmatism; for its misuse of Dewey, its capitulation to constructivism, its almost total neglect of nature, and its failure to engage in sustained dialogue with Peirce's pragmatism. To be blunt, irony can be an important mode of comportment toward the world, especially when bloated philosophical claims threaten to render query powerless, but unless one is a master, like Oscar Wilde, it can easily succumb to the temptation to voyeurism and

elitism – itself ironic given the self-trumpeting claim that it is the best strategy for facilitating democratic reconstruction. A number of years ago I could contain myself no longer and I gave a speech about the ‘real’ Dewey who needed to be rescued from the “watered down” version. This was at a conference devoted to Rorty held by the Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought held annually in Highlands, North Carolina. After I was done Rorty said nothing, but interestingly, he didn’t seem to be angry or put out and that fact impressed me in a positive way. I do find it sad that for so many people world wide, pragmatism means Rorty’s weakened version of it, but I suppose that this fits into the ironic self-encapsulation of the intellectual classes.

So-called Paleo-Pragmatism, especially as affirmed by one of my most important interlocutors, Robert Neville, digs deeply into the classical Euro-American tradition but with the added benefit of knowing where some of the demons and abjections lie. In the context of my *ecstatic naturalism*, the added layer of psychoanalysis (psychosemiotics) makes it possible to probe into some of the over determined motives that became manifest even in the far reaches of cosmology or general metaphysics. Joseph Brent radically changed the rules in his outstanding Peirce biography when he opened out the force and power of Peirce’s manic-depressive disorder, exacerbated by self-medication and his physical pain. Great sufferers often write (or contrive important aesthetic products) in a compensatory manner. I would argue, and have done so in print, that Peirce’s crystalline, yet evolving, cosmology is his answer to the violent mood swings of his disorder, for in his cosmology thirdness brings rationality and stability to the world. Similarly, Alan Olson, in his book, *Hegel and the Spirit*, showed how Hegel’s fear of madness drove him to a pan-rationalism as compensation – for here the uncanniness of the unconscious can be negated by swallowing it up in the conscious lucidity of spirit. Of course, one must use such arguments with great care and a strong dose of humility, but to demonize psychoanalysis or the study of pathology represents a new species of dogmatism. Clearly, an analysis of motives does not settle the validation question which has its own set of criteria.

I developed *ecstatic naturalism* partly to rescue a far more capacious conception of nature that would, ala Buchler, clearly distinguish between descriptive uses of major categories from honorific uses that eulogize the designated category by making it more real, important, or valuable than its

sleepy descriptive cousins. Plato, in one of his best moments, wrestled with his own honorific use of the concept of the Forms by asking (in the *Parmenides*) about the status of forms like mud. He at least opened the door to a more descriptive use of his concept of the Forms.

And if there was ever a concept (for me, a pre-concept) that has been most likely to jump up into honorific status, it is that of nature. You see this in some eco-theologies, perhaps with an underlying Neo-Paganism affirming the Great Mother, that make nature into some kind of harmonic web of internal relations that even contains a divine memory which guarantees that there is no real tragedy. Of course, some are confining themselves to our planet and its organic envelope. The utter ubiquity of extinction and the terrible waste in nature are off of their radar screen. It takes constant self-vigilance to keep descriptive categories from the jump to the honorific, especially because the honorific move satisfies our own valuational commitments. For example, some process thinkers put the category of communication in the honorific camp, rarely noting that communication is frequently used to increase the kill rate while decreasing the predation rate against one's own group. And communication's role in the rough and tumble dynamics of sexual selection can involve semblance, cunning, and deceit – this is especially clear in the human order.

*LJN: I see. So ecstatic naturalism is a naturalism that honors a more capacious conception of nature in that does not seek necessarily to describe nature, but rather identify and honor nature as an availability for whatever can be described—and so involves the potencies of nature, discussed earlier. Thus it seems to involve an ecstatic act inasmuch as human beings turn toward the potencies of nature and in some sense must remain “open” to them. So the concept of “ecstasis” is put together with a unique variety of “naturalism.” Correct?*

RSC: This is well expressed Leon and indeed quite correct. From our side there is a movement from the unconscious, which has its own highly precise form of consciousness, toward an arising of meaning/energy that has, at first, a shaded or masked contour. Almost like magnetism the two are drawn together, each ecstatic in its own way. So in classical Heideggerian terms we have a standing out of the self that is also the entrance point for a return ecstasy from nature. Projection and transference facilitate this process. Non-ecstatic forms of naturalism tend to have a much flatter (safer) conception of nature. Some might see the

ecstatic form as positing a super-naturalism but this is very far from the truth. Granted, ecstasies are scary as they erupt without warning, seem to have no relation to efficient causality, and are clearly a force that is prior to any division into good or evil. They can even kill millions. I did not make them up and drop them into an otherwise tidy view of nature. One of our greatest moral demands is to shape ecstasies into energized prospects for social growth – if you like (tongue in cheek) a neo-pagan Deweyianism.

So far as I know, Tillich never uses the phrase “ecstatic naturalism,” but he does talk about ecstasy, in his correlation of technical vs. ecstatic reason, and naturalism as an important dialogue partner – just across the street at Columbia he taught a joint course with John Hermann Randall, Jr. Thus Tillich learned about American naturalism from one of its leading advocates. However, the phrase “ecstatic naturalism” did appear later among students of his work, thus falsely assuming that Tillich used the phrase in his three volume systematics. Briefly, as said earlier, naturalism (the view that whatever is in whatever mode it is, is in and of the ‘one’ nature that there is) becomes ecstatic when it courageously and oftentimes joyously becomes open to the self-othering potencies emergent from *nature naturing* (the underconscious of nature).

*LJN: Thank you very much Dr. Corrington. It seems we've covered some basic ground here, in terms of what familiar philosophical ideas one might encounter in your work; in addition to having covered some of the basic concepts, vocabulary, and issues of ecstatic naturalism. Do you have any closing thoughts on your approach in general, words to those who are considering taking up ecstatic naturalism as a serious philosophical approach?*

RSC: First, let me thank you Leon for such thoughtful and well crafted questions. You have obviously worked very hard to enter into the lineaments of my perspective and it shows. Would that all interviewers were as conscientious! Now to your question. I suppose that the ecstatic naturalist approach can become compelling for those among us who can let go of regional metaphysical systems, like process or materialism, and let our conceptual articulations arise out of the pulsations in nature. There is a sensitivity to what I have called sheer secondness, a mode of secondness that is almost pre-dyadic and involves a tremulous gifting that

has no upshot other than its own presence. These ecstasies can never be reigned into the circle of sufficient reason nor can they evidence a mapable shape. So an ecstatic naturalist has a special kind of openness to what can never be circumscribed. In addition, an ecstatic naturalist recognizes that almost all philosophical theology has taken the wrong tact toward the nature/divine correlation. As Tillich liked to say, we must look down, not up. The innumerable sacred folds of nature have their self-othering origin in the unconscious of nature.

Naturalism, as a self-aware movement, has many forms and takes on many guises. I suspect that most people would initially think of the materialistic and mechanistic naturalism maintained by evolutionary biologists and evolutionary psychologists. I applaud their struggles to keep teleology from getting too rambunctious. Clearly, it is a concept that is not needed in the Neo-Darwinian Synthesis. Yet the all-too-easy and lazy conjunction of efficient causality with a somewhat simplistic mind/brain identity theory can serve to blunt inquiry, and on a deeper level, query. More specifically, the reduction of mind to brain violates the insights of ordinality that demand a much more sophisticated understanding of pertinent and ordinally related traits. Once this process gets seriously under way it becomes obvious the identity theory is serving more of a polemical purpose than an ontologically illuminating one. I have found most naturalisms to be a betrayal of nature insofar as they select one or more traits to be both generic and honorific. I find it a bit amusing that identity theorists deny the possibility of immortality because of a fairly unsophisticated understanding of mind and consciousness. There is no reason why one couldn't believe in reincarnation, as I do, and still be an official card carrying naturalist. *Ecstatic naturalism* is not in the business of saying whether or not (subjective) immortality is possible in principle or ruled out before hand. A capacious naturalist can believe in either extinction or survival. These are subaltern questions. Naturalism should never shrink itself into a subaltern perspective that foolishly sets up entrance requirements that dictate what is 'allowed' to prevail.

There is a sense in which a pre-digested theory of god is an impertinence. It is an enterprise that has done far more harm than good – a kind of high-end, high-status tribalism. Strictly, primordial, consequent, willing, history-making, world crushing, and self-involuting gods do prevail in nature, but I suggest that they do so in ways that would disappoint many who seek some serious ontological thickness for these

conceptions. Yet an aesthetic appreciation of, say, protean goddesses and gods can enhance the imaginative life, as Santayana reminds us. Who is to say? A more pervasive impertinence, as I have noted, is to aggressively state what can or cannot be in nature, or what is genuinely knowable and what not. Query and wonder serve us well and keep us from those power-driven concretenesses that sadly continue to drive the many philosophical tribes. An ecstatic naturalist will, where humanly possible, move past and through any tribalism that blocks access to those uncountable prospects that open up endlessly throughout the infinite orders of the world and that can, sometimes, open out on a vista where one can even look down, yes, with fear and trembling, into the workshop of the potencies.

My recent discovery of Robert Corrington's unique brand of philosophical theology and adventurous metaphysical speculations, has precipitated just such an exciting discovery as I've been eagerly delving into the cloud of literature surrounding his thinking. In the process of my early exploratory readings, I've frequently found myself with an uncanny sense of being privy to a profound philosophical conversation between Corrington and the early Confucians as I imagine them. "An Introduction to Ecstatic Naturalism" An Interview with Robert S. Corrington. Save to Library. Download. Robert Corrington. Download (epub, 396 Kb). FB2 | PDF | MOBI | TXT | RTF.