

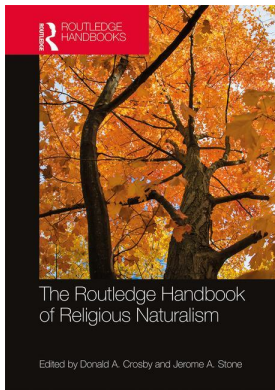
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ECSTATIC NATURALISM AS DEEP PANTHEISM

Robert S. Corrington

Ecstatic naturalism is a form of religious naturalism that has multiple roots. It is a form of *naturalism* because it affirms that nature is all that there is. It is a form of *religious* naturalism because it affirms the place of the sacred *in* nature, but does not see nature per se as sacred, only certain orders and in certain respects. Its initial roots lie in my discovery of Ralph Waldo Emerson in my junior year of High School (1967), which was the same time that I discovered Advaita Vedanta Hinduism as found above all in the *Upanishads*. In each it became clear to me that one could be both a monist (nature is all that there is) and a pluralist (there are archetypes that project innumerable gods and goddesses). For Emerson and the unknown writers of the *Upanishads* there is a sense of wholeness combined with a sense of multiplicity. Thus, following William James we can say that there are many ones and many pluralistic centers.

The second encounter with a different kind of naturalism occurred during my undergraduate days as a philosophy major at Temple University in a class taught by the Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey scholar Philip Wiener. There I encountered the major pragmatists and was immediately drawn to various forms of naturalism. Dewey became important to me, as he continues to be, through his metaphysics that places the human process in and of nature along with his rejection of supernaturalism. Peirce's three categories of "firstness," "secondness," and "thirdness," applied both cosmologically and phenomenologically (his phaneroscopy), appealed to my sense of capaciousness *and* precision. From Dewey, I gained a sense that naturalism need not be reduced to simple causal materialism but could envision a much wider and more multi-layered nature. Further, his insistence that naturalism goes with a form of democratic socialism and creative forms of education satisfied my hunger for social justice. My continuing appreciation of Peirce led me to write a book on him in 1993.

The third encounter with naturalism, more loosely defined, occurred when I discovered the Martin Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*. His transformation of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology into hermeneutic phenomenology paved the way for his sense of our thrownness into the world. By speaking of Being-in-the-world, he paralleled Dewey's 1925 *Experience and Nature*, as others have pointed out. While Heidegger had not studied Dewey, his special kind of naturalism augmented Dewey's slightly more austere version. Heidegger's later writings unfolded his own form of ecstatic naturalism, albeit with some serious moral problems in his life and writing.

The fourth source for my kind of naturalism came from an in-depth encounter with the Columbia naturalist Justus Buchler, whose 1966 *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* ranks with Alfred North Whitehead's 1929 *Process and Reality* as one of the two great metaphysical systems in the Euro-American traditions of the twentieth century. While I believe that Buchler's system is much the superior and that Whitehead's pantheism is more like science fiction, I appreciate the boldness and sweep of both perspectives. I had the privilege of working with Buchler personally as an unofficial student and learned more about the craft of philosophizing than I had learned from anybody else, except perhaps Karl Jaspers. Buchler's concepts of ordinality, ontological parity, natural complexes, strong and weak relevance, and a host of others have become central to my delineations of the innumerable orders of nature. While Buchler did not focus on religion, I believe that his categories can help in the search for a more robust religious naturalism.

These sources became enriched by further readings in Jaspers and new readings in Buddhism. From Jaspers, the concept of the "Encompassing" (*das Umgreifende*) became for me an analogue to the idea that nature envelopes or encompasses all that there is. I continue to use this concept, especially in my twelfth book, *Nature and Nothingness: An Essay in Ordinal Phenomenology* (2017). From Buddhism, especially the Mahayana tradition as embodied in Nagarjuna, I learned of the power of nothingness *in* nature and as its "surround." I will delineate the four forms of nothingness in nature at the end of the essay. In all these influences, from Emerson, to Hinduism, to Dewey, to Jaspers, to Peirce, to Heidegger, and to Buddhism, two themes have been constant: nature is all that there is and it has sacred potencies *within* it.

The scientific backbone of ecstatic naturalism is the Neo-Darwinian synthesis and its elimination of purpose or teleology from the innumerable orders of nature. This gives a somber tone to my form of naturalism, but that is offset by a sense that ecstasies prevail (self-transcendence) in nature as well. Note that these forms of self-transcendence still take place on the plane of immanence and do not entail a supernatural escape hatch. An ecstatic moment means a standing outside of one's previous self if only for an instant. This will connect the self to nature in a deeper way. As will be seen, this notion requires an expanded idea of the unconscious that has a triad: the personal unconscious, the collective unconscious, and the unconscious of nature. The notion of an *unconscious of nature* is perhaps the most criticized of my concepts and I can see why its acceptance requires a great sea change in understanding, as it did for me.

My version of ecstatic naturalism is a project that first appeared in print in my 1987 book, *The Community of Interpreters* and has been followed by other books and some 80 articles articulating ecstatic naturalism. However, there are many antecedents to my form of this kind of naturalism, just as there are many other forms of naturalism. I divide the forms of naturalism into four varieties: 1) the descriptive, 2) the honorific, 3) the process, 4) and the ecstatic forms. The descriptive form emphasizes a more scientific flavor that still has a great place for nature that is all that there is. It has slight tendency toward materialism and efficient causality but may have a place for formal causality. Among its chief exemplars are Dewey, George Santayana, and Buchler. Note that its concept of "matter" is usually an expanded one. Honorific forms of naturalism place a stress on the spirit or creativity within nature, while still rejecting supernaturalism. Among its chief exemplars are Friedrich Schelling, Emerson, and Heidegger. Process forms of naturalism, if they truly are naturalistic, stress plural centers of awareness that are connected to an alleged web of internal relations. Time and creativity are elevated in status and there is usually a more optimistic tone and a slight softening of Darwinism. Among its chief exemplars are Whitehead, Teilhard de Chardin, Charles Hartshorne, and Robert Neville. Finally, ecstatic naturalism has deep roots in history, and my work is deeply indebted to them. As noted, it stresses the potencies within nature that bring ecstasies when they are encountered. Among its chief

exemplars are Peirce, Paul Tillich, Ernst Bloch, Carl Jung, and Julia Kristeva. Of course, no form of naturalism has absolute boundaries and they often entwine with each other, requiring strenuous phenomenological efforts to untangle the threads. Thus, ecstatic naturalism has strands from the other forms of naturalism and is enriched and challenged by them.

Nature is all that there is

The central themes that run through all forms of naturalism are that nature is all that there is and there is no supernatural realm. Thus, nothing exists outside of nature that could have created it out of nothingness. Nature has always been and always will be, both prior to the Big Bang and after, whatever the fate of the universe of astro-physics turns out to be. Nature was neither created nor can it be destroyed. There is no time when it was not and no time beyond time when it will cease to prevail. The categories of “time” and “space” are intra-natural rather than being ultimate and super-creative in some process sense. There is no one trait that is found in every complex. Thus, ecstatic naturalism rejects the imperial notion that somehow each order of nature must boil down to some *one* thing. Chief candidates for this imperial move have been: matter, energy, monads, actual occasions, spirit, will, substance, internal relations, divine immanence (as in *previous* forms of pantheism), will-to-power, sense data, atoms, objects, proper names, forms, biomorphic energy, orgone, and a rich variety besides. This view insists that the world would not make sense if there were no single trait found in *every* order. For the aesthetic imagination, a plurality of traits, with no one thing in common, is hard to envision. We long to have nature tidy and explainable, without ambiguity and with limits that we can fathom to preserve our sense that we are somehow the center of it all. The above-mentioned concept of “ontological parity” insists that nothing is more real than anything else, just differently real. A building is neither more nor less real than a passing idea in my head, just real in a different way. This entails that there is no one trait that is somehow more real than any other trait.

For ecstatic naturalism, nature has no outer contour or center but prevails as innumerable orders in innumerable ways. All container analogies must be rejected as they compel thought to reduce nature to a shadow of itself. There is no ultimate order nor is nature a super organism. Any attempt to circumscribe it fails to grasp, and be grasped by, the infinity of nature. Nor is it like Peirce’s continuum of all continua, which denies the real tears and breaks within nature. That is, there are non-relations as well as relations between and among orders (natural complexes). For some, especially those who believe that nature is a vast web of internal relations, the very concept of non-relation is difficult to accept and weave into one’s metaphysics. But naturalism, religious or otherwise, must let go of the longing for total inter-connectedness.

To put even more pressure on our notions of nature, we must assert that there is no actual *referent* to the term nature. This may sound strange, but the following reflections might help in showing why it is so. For Aristotle, definitions entail locating a specific difference under a genus that is more encompassing in scope. For example, Socrates is an individual member of the genus humankind. He is located under the larger genus and, in a sense, receives his being from the genus. If you add all the genera together you still do not get to the indefinite infinity of nature, which can never be the ultimate genus or have a specific difference from something else. Ironically, to *define* nature, as *per impossibile*, entails positing a supernatural realm “outside” of nature, under which the specific difference of nature can be located. Thus, for naturalism, nature cannot be defined. I suspect, however, that this argument already appeals to naturalists, religious or otherwise. Nature’s ever-unfolding capaciousness eludes all efforts to define it.

Following a strategy of Heidegger, we can cross out the reference idea all together. In his continuing efforts to crack open the Being problematic he crossed out the word *Sein* (and *Seyn*) to show that language cannot refer to the other side of the ontological difference between a thing in being and Being. Following this strategy, we can cross out the referent **nature** to indicate that it is “nothing” to which we could possibly refer. Instead of crossing out the word **nature** each time, we will put double quotes around it to signal that we are using the word in a strictly non-referential sense. We will not do this throughout, but the special use must always be kept in mind. If there is no referent, then, as we shall see, the concept of nothingness must be introduced into the problematic. This brings the religious aspect into naturalism and is a special dimension of ecstatic naturalism. Thus, in the end, as in the beginning, “nature” is no thing, i.e., nothingness.

From the above arguments, ecstatic naturalism, with its *deep* pantheism, rules out any form of process pantheism. A brief discussion is in order since so many religious naturalists feel comfortable listing themselves as process thinkers. Ecstatic naturalism moves in an opposite direction from pantheism and its surprising non-naturalism. My claims and further arguments will certainly not dishonor pantheism of the process variety, but will attempt to show some categorical weakness in the system, noting that process pantheism can take many forms.

There are several problems with Whitehead’s system from an ecstatic naturalist perspective. We have argued that there can be no one trait found in or as each order of the innumerable orders of nature. To posit actual occasions/actual entities as the universal trait of nature is to impose an imperial construct *onto* nature. An actual occasion (and its society) exists in the web of internal relations that my perspective rejects. The model is well known; namely, that each occasion feels (prehends) every other just dead actual occasion in the universe either positively or negatively. The other occasions need to be just dead (concreted) so that they are fully what they chose to be. No moving subjectivity can remain. Thus, all perception is memory of the just past, not an immediate prehension into a self-transforming actual occasion. A positive prehension allows a trait to enter the actual occasion’s subjective form and subjective aim. A negative prehension is a rejection of any form of ingression into the actual occasion. There is an initial aim from God who holds out a lure for each occasion leading it to a richer realm of experience and creativity.

So far we have two critiques of process pantheism: 1) the positing of one trait for the indefinitely complex orders of nature, and 2) the untenable belief in an unbroken web-work of internal relations. A relation is internal when it enters the subjectivity of the relata, while an external relation merely affects some trait in nature by various forms of causality, especially material and efficient. The God problematic further heightens the differences between process pantheism and ecstatic naturalism (as a form of religious naturalism). In the process version God exists as a primordial mind just on the nether side of nature. This mind is constituted by eternal and essential forms or essences, which have internal causal efficacy through their luring effect on actual occasions (and their societies). This introduces final causality into the system that puts pressure on the Neo-Darwinian synthesis. Also, the realm of essences constitutes a sphere of formal causality. The latter form of causality is being rescued in subdued versions as it can help explain the drive for form in organisms and the human process. It has also proven to be especially useful in Gestalt theories and frameworks, whether applied to art or to the self-in-process.

The consequent dimension of God physically prehends all solidified (dead) actual occasions and remembers them for eternity via superjection. Thus, we have two more critiques of process pantheism: 3) the privileging of final causality and 4) the positing of two modes of Deity, one of which transcends nature—a tenet of pantheism, which affirms that God is both in and beyond nature.

There is at least one more critique of process panentheism. It was created to avoid the extremes of patriarchal theism (especially in the Western monotheisms) and a pantheism that simply equates God with nature. Clearly, theism and a simplistic pantheism are not philosophically viable: the former because it not only violates the principle of ontological parity insofar as its God is held to be more real than any subaltern orders, but it also privileges culturally shaped male traits. The latter is not viable because, as Arthur Schopenhauer argued, if you have two equivalent terms, then one is irrelevant and should be dropped; thus one must use either nature or God, but not both. We conclude with a final critique: 5) process panentheism fails to articulate a possibility between the two extremes it is avoiding; namely, that pantheism can be resurrected in a radical new form that does not equate God with nature but sees the sacred within nature in certain orders, but not all. I call this new form “deep pantheism” insofar as it uses a very different categorial structure that places a strong emphasis on the unconscious of nature.

The two methods of ecstatic naturalism: ordinal phenomenology and ordinal psychoanalysis

For Peirce, the concept and use of method was an all-consuming concern. He developed his own phenomenology to probe into the realities of perception and of the larger world. Further, he developed a unique logic of relatives to augment and transform traditional syllogistic logic. Ecstatic naturalism has developed two specific kinds of method to probe into the realms of “nature” and into the deepest momenta and structures of the human process. In both cases the concept of *ordinality* is basic to the structure and power that transform these two traditional methods. The first method radically shifts the focus of the Edmund Husserl/Martin Heidegger trajectory in phenomenology toward a multi-layered form of query that insists that phenomenology must go all the way down and that it must allow the world to grasp *us* as we struggle to grasp *it*. The second method transforms traditional psychoanalysis, moving it toward a more robust encounter between the self-in-process and its sheer locatedness in the innumerable orders of the world—what I call the Selving process. It is decidedly post-Freudian and works hard to remove the patriarchal elements from the early psychoanalytic movement centered in Vienna. Two key dialogue partners in this process are C.G. Jung and Otto Rank. Jung is important for his discovery of the archetypes and the collective unconscious, which has roots in the unconscious of nature, while Rank is important for his post-patriarchal focus on the mother/child relationship and the life-long problems of the birth trauma. Further, like Jung, Rank has a central role for art and the creative process wherein the genius (cultural creative) both creates great works and creates a great personality in that process.

Ordinal phenomenology locates all objects (natural complexes) within the infinite momenta and structures of the world, and probes, as far as is possible, into the depth structures of nature. For Husserl, for example, we take an object, usually spatial/temporal, and rotate it through as many perspectives as possible, transforming the hidden co-given into the unhidden given. It is a process of shadowing that rotates around the phenomenon and paints a portrait of it that can be presented to other phenomenologists. Husserl combines this idea with a near obsession with certainty as he seeks the Evident. This quest for certainty and an alleged pure and unambiguous showing of the phenomenon is firmly rejected by ordinal phenomenology, which goes beyond the spatial/temporal phenomenon and acknowledges both our finitude as working phenomenologists and that ontological ambiguity goes all the way down.

For ordinal phenomenology, one must probe into as many orders of the phenomenon as is humanly possible, given time and energy. This is a communal process insisting on interpretive input from a team of phenomenologists working on the same project. The goal is to render as

many unhidden traits of the various (innumerable) ordinal locations of the phenomenon as possible. Here we use the word “phenomenon” rather than natural complex because the former term has played such a key role in the history of phenomenology, but the richer concept of “natural complex” must be held in mind. The exact procedure is as follows: one must begin the process of slowly rotating the phenomenon through both its spatial/temporal traits (if they apply) and then move onto its larger relationality. An example will help. Take the instance of a scholarly monograph that has recently been published. Husserl would stop at its given and co-given traits within a narrowly located band of the world. The ordinal approach is different.

First, the book is indeed a spatial/temporal phenomenon that has easily accessible traits such as size, weight, coloring, type fonts, front and rear covers, and a binding of varying degrees of quality. But one must not stop here. The book is multiply located in orders that may or may not be spatial/temporal. The following *abbreviated* list is of other genuine ordinal locations that can be probed by ordinal phenomenology: 1) the book exists in the minds of the writer and editor; 2) in the mind of the reviewers; 3) in the perhaps fragile economy of the publisher; 4) in the ecosystem from which its paper material was harvested; 5) in the sphere of trucking and whether its driver was union or non-union; 6) in the economy and spatial arrangements of the warehouse; 7) as a felt sense of satisfaction (or not) in the mind of the author; 8) in the minds and lives of its readers, perhaps changing them in dramatic or important ways; 9) as a social/political event within the communities for which it was written; and 10) in the history of its genre. Obviously, this is an abbreviated list that could be expanded indefinitely, but it gives some idea of the power and scope of ordinal phenomenology. It can probe into spatial/temporal phenomena or non-spatial/temporal traits within the same phenomenon, or into phenomena that don't have spatial/temporal traits, such as the rules of games.

Ordinal *psychoanalysis* is slightly different in that it confines itself to the ordinal locations, conscious and unconscious, of the human process. Yet, as noted, the human process is fully rooted in nature from whence it has come and into which it will return; it cannot be outside of nature in any sense during its life trajectory, or, perhaps beyond. This new form of psychoanalysis does not privilege the conscious or the unconscious. Both are equally real in the ways that they are real. Further, their interaction can be partially examined and rendered unhidden, but not through a rigid topology such as that of id, ego, and superego. There is such fluidity in the conscious/unconscious dialectic that any proposed topology much be used in a loose hermeneutic fashion rather than as a container structure that claims to know all things about the psyche. The psyche has an uncanny way of overthrowing our topologies, no matter how refined.

The method of ordinal psychoanalysis goes beyond the rigid patriarchal systems of the past to embrace the pre-Oedipal connection between the mother and child and its correlation to attachment theory. Further, it probes into the maternal per se, from the biological birthing mother to the archetype of the Great Mother, who represents the oldest naturalist religion in human history, going back to the Paleolithic era. In fact, ordinal psychoanalysis is linked to theories about the world's great myths and with how they have enhanced or demoted religious naturalism, ecstatic or otherwise.

The work of Jung and Rank is augmented, and sometimes challenged, by objects relation theorists (e.g., Melanie Klein, Heinz Kohut, and Donald Winnicott) who continue to stress the maternal/child infant relation but drop the birth trauma theory, which I consider to be a mistake. Yet they have pushed beyond earlier reflections on bonding with the maternal. Kohut stresses that there are “self objects” that can substitute for the mother/infant relationship, especially if the attachment between them was weak. The failure of the caregiver to provide deep connection and affirmation can have dire consequences in the future trajectory of that infant. I believe that self objects, like transitional objects (teddy bears, blankets, etc.) are manifestations

of the ongoing effects of the birth trauma and provide some minimal relief for the young child and the adult. They stand in for the biological and cosmic wombs, both interconnected. Any object has the potential to be a self object, such as a person, a religion, a work of art, a historical event (however mythologized), gardening, special rocks and crystals, and so on.

Ordinal phenomenology and ordinal psychoanalysis work together to give the most complete picture of the way of the orders of nature and of that order known as the human process. The methods require each other in a deep way. The reason is that ordinal psychoanalysis cannot attempt to locate the human process within the one nature that there is without a larger phenomenological probe into the innumerable orders of the world that surround and ground the self-in-process. In the other direction, ordinal psychoanalysis opens up the unconscious of the self and of nature in such a way that they can be further probed phenomenologically and, as always, be probed by phenomenology.

Nature naturing and nature natured

Perhaps no distinction is as basic to ecstatic (religious) naturalism as that between the two modes of self-fissuring *within* the one “nature” that there is. These terms have a rich provenance from the medieval period to the present. While Spinoza has been given the credit for the use of these complicated terms, many others have used them to great effect. Ecstatic naturalism uses these terms in new ways. Nature naturing (*natura naturans*) is herein defined as: “Nature perennially creating itself out of itself alone.” The use of the word “perennially” is used to signal that there is no notion of eternity outside of time and the idea that nature continually creates itself out of itself rules out any notion of creation out of nothingness. Nature natured (*natura naturata*) is herein defined as “The innumerable orders of the World without any collective contour.” Note that the Latin term “natura” is feminine, which ties in with our themes from ordinal psychoanalysis.

Clearly, the notion of nature naturing is more elusive to examine than are the realms of nature natured. The later term denotes any order within nature that is both co-hidden and hidden but is on the surface, as it were. Thus, we can communally probe into the orders of the World but, as noted, can find no contour or outside for them. There are just innumerable orders without any exclusive web of internal relations. No order of the World connects with all other orders, thus entailing, as noted, that there are genuine breaks in continua. There are also strong semiotic reasons why this is so, as I demonstrate in my 2000 book, *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy*. There, among other things, I describe four types of semiosis that exist in the World and the limits and roles of each.

Nature naturing is more radical in momenta and structures. It represents and is the unconscious of nature and is manifest from out of the dark depths of “nature.” Here we go to the very edges of ordinal phenomenology and ordinal psychoanalysis. Insofar as nature naturing is largely hidden, it is far less available to probing by finite mortals, even with communal support. However, all is not lost, as there are strong and weak manifestations of the unconscious of nature, especially as it erupts into the personal and collective unconscious. As best as I have uncovered thus far, nature naturing is manifest by innumerable pulsations that may or may not have a collective integrity. Such pulsations are prior to the distinctions between good and evil (or Nietzsche’s good and bad). These pulsations seem to have two modes of manifestation. One is the eruptions that generate archetypes that straddle the divide between nature naturing and nature natured, while the other is a gentler manifestation of an ongoing series of emanations upon emanations in Emerson’s sense. These emanations have neither beginning nor end and do not come from a Plotinian One. They are smaller, as it were, than what Neo-Platonism describes.

The ejections from nature naturing are thus the focus of more attention as they come from deeper down in “nature” and have a greater force and velocity than emanations. For some, of course, such talk of ejecting archetypes from an alleged unconsciousness of nature seems far from any reasonable form of religious naturalism. Many religious naturalists have a deep suspicion of the use of psychoanalysis in any case, let alone as one of two methods to probe into and be probed by the uncanny depths of nature naturing. But as I will attempt to show, naturalism cannot be truly religious if it doesn’t take account of the seemingly bizarre fissuring at the heart of “nature.” Again, there are not two separate natures but one nature in two modes. Aquinas was tempted to simply equate nature naturing with God, while deep pantheism refuses to do so. Without an unconscious of nature in the picture, one is at a loss to explain the emergence of archetypes (forms that combine power and meaning) or the myriad, but never closed, endless series of emanations that assure nature’s fecundity. Any use of Occam’s razor here (a bloody and clumsy “method” at best) would violate the phenomenological and psychoanalytic evidence and reduce nature to a bland caricature of itself. Nature is complexity and fecundity all the way down and all the way up, and this endless complexity (and ambiguity) must be dealt with, no matter how much energy it requires—for query is unending. Further, as argued by Dewey, the very quest for certainty has been a curse throughout human history, especially as allied with an obsession with simple and clear-cut categorial structures.

Archetypes are not only found in the collective unconscious of the human process, but are manifest throughout nature. For Joseph Campbell, they are manifest as both instinct and ideation. As instinct, the archetype is a triggering potency that enables innate release mechanisms to function, while as ideation, the archetype is strongly manifest in human dreams, world and local religions, global art, and psychopathology, which often parallels global ideations, that is, has the same roots. Hence, for example, the delusions and hallucinations in manic-depression, schizophrenia, and schizoaffective disorder, are directly parallel to major themes in global culture and are intertwined with them. On the other side, the manifest archetypal images in culture are a form of collective dreaming or even collective psychosis, as in fascist states. The dream of Armageddon, for example, is a pathological twisting of the archetype of growth and transformation. Yet this bizarre fantasy has grasped millions and threatens to undo democratic structures that use amelioration and care rather than some quick and dirty apocalypse. This communal fact shows that the archetypes must be wrestled with and integrated with care.

Nature naturing, then is partly the birthing ground for those archetypal determinants that shape both “nature” and its specific order—the human process. If archetypes are not taken seriously, then havoc could result. Note again that nature naturing and its “products” exists/prevails prior to the distinction between good and evil. It is solely up to human individuals and communities to struggle relentlessly to transfigure the potential evil into the good, however ambiguous that good may be. While intense suffering exists in nature, evil only exists in the human process. But such evil cannot be eliminated, as *per impossibile* by use of reason or argument, but only by fearlessly entering the powers and potencies as they are, not as we would wish them to be.

Fourfold nothingness

Several times we have noted/argued that “nature” has no outer contour or shape-of-shapes that would somehow limit “it” and contrast it to something other. There is nothing outside of nature; indeed, we have hinted that the “surround” for nature is nothingness. The concept of nothingness (*sunyata*) has strong family resemblances to Jaspers’s concept of the Encompassing (*das Umgreifende*), also translated as the Enveloping. I suspect that many religious naturalists are

at this point ready to jump ship, but I will argue that the concept of nothingness is entailed in naturalism per se. For if the word “nature” has no referent, then just “what” is “it?” It can only be nothingness, albeit in a fourfold sense. The underlying concept here is that of “nihilation,” in the robust sense of nothingness “doing” something. Heidegger’s brilliant use of his often ridiculed phrase: “The nothing nothings” (*das Nicht nichtet*), is phenomenologically astute and psychoanalytically rich. It points out that nothingness is an event that nothings or nihilates. It cannot be a thing or Being-itself. It neither prevails nor is hostile to what prevails. But its nihilating events make nature naturing and nature natured possible.

I have suggested that the ordinal phenomenological evidence points to four forms of nihilating nothingness “in” nature. Of course, they are all part of the “one” nothingness and not separate realms, even if each realm can be delineated and partially described on “its” own. As we shall see, some realms call forth a human response that exists on a spectrum from total rejection to mindful acceptance. The axiological goal of ecstatic naturalism (and deep pantheism) is to help the Selving (individuation) process move from the former to the latter mode of relation.

The first modality of nihilating nothingness is what I call “holes in nature,” that are more finite moments of emptiness that punctuate both nature and the Selving process. For example, these holes can appear as death, loss, anxiety per se, blinding self-discovery of one’s shadow dimension, sexual failure, political conflict, natural disaster, and mental illness, to name just a few instances. These holes, as like miniature black holes in astronomy, draw metaphorical light into them, thus deflecting the light-filled Selving process into what seems a yawning abyss. More often, one’s reaction to encountering modes of nihilation is to experience anxiety, fear of fragmentation, and loss of identity structure. This generalized ontological anxiety can recoil back on the self as it seeks reconstituted identity. The problem with this type of recoil is that it negates the negation by forming a rigid and highly armored self that believes it is immune from nihilation per se.

The extreme example of this negation of the negation is found in born again experiences wherein the so-called “old” self is firmly negated/abjected along with its openness to nothingness. This produces innumerable problems for psychoanalysis and the democratic social systems. In the end, it devolves into a naked will-to-power that wishes to conquer anything that might remind one of the “old” self and its associated memories. The rigid fundamentalist communities that come out of this abjection and a continual negation of the negation are among the more dangerous forces in communal and cultural life. Herein lies the origin of barbarism within the self and within the community.

This abjection of the old self in the face of the holes in nature immediately translates into an abjection of nature. This requires for its continuance a patriarchal theistic system that makes nature “less real” than the self or the divinity, thus violating the principle of ontological parity. The abjection of nature (*natura naturata* and *natura naturans*) can only portend tragedy for the ecology of the planet, as its dramatically lessened ontological status makes it of little concern for immediate corrective action on global warming and its human disasters.

However, at the opposite extreme and the one less often attempted, one can face a hole in nature with a mode of mindfulness that lets the nihilating event open out and richly transform the self. Instead of attempting to negate the negation by a manic and armored “personality,” one lets the event of nihilation clear away armoring and any detritus that stands in the way of the Selving process. Mindfulness, as attentiveness to the fecundity of nature and the depths of the self, gives the Selving process its method for plumbing the depths of nature, while being fully engaged in the spiritual practice of ontological parity. For the self of mindfulness, instead of the one of armoring, nature is resplendent and fully real in the myriad ways in which it is real.

The second mode of nihilation is what I call “totalizing nothingness” that is best experienced in moments of horror. For the Selving process, this encounter can become one step removed in literature or cinema so that cathartic possibilities remain at the end of the tale or film. Totalizing nothingness is experienced when horror puts the entire world, and its normative structures, into question. This negation is absolute and seemingly inescapable. Horror’s main effect/function is to show the absolute indifference of nature to its foundlings. In the confrontation with mighty powers that dwarf the human or the power of religion, the Selving process experiences its total littleness in the face of the seeming nihilating void that ensnares the self in gloom and terror.

As before, the Selving process has two choices (on a continuum). Either it can remain ensnared in the utter abyss of the uncanny or it can learn to accept the indifference of nature and embrace it in a freeing way. In the latter case, there is something liberating about letting nature be the non-telic reality and potency that it is. This moment of a higher mindfulness can be called sublime, to replace religious language with aesthetic nomenclature. The sublime occurs on the edges of “nature” through its infinitizing potency to shatter all local meaning horizons. The two final forms of nothingness are also encountered as the sublime, which goes beyond and envelopes beauty, but without negating or rejecting it.

The third mode of nihilation is that of “naturing nothingness.” Here the ordinal phenomenological evidence points to the correlation of the infinite unconscious of “nature,” i.e., *natura naturans*, with the mobile and expanding horizontality of the Selving process. The collective unconscious of the Selving process embraces the unconscious of nature. The archetypes become activated in earnest as the overwhelming and vast powers that they are. As noted, one cannot encounter an archetype *an sich*, but only its manifest images and instincts. The archetypes are the ultimate determinates of nature and the human process. Above all, they are encountered in art and grand scientific theories. This mode of nihilating nothingness is especially correlated to the mobile and seemingly chaotic unconscious of nature, which has roots that go deeper down than ordinal phenomenology can go. At this point, one needs to introduce an abduction (retroduction) in Peirce’s sense; namely, a logical/methodical process in which one makes a conceptual leap from the conditions of the observed (using deduction and induction) to the posited necessary conditions “behind” the observed. Peirce called this a method of “guessing,” but it is impossible to function without such procedures in building a conceptual architectonic. This produces an a priori, but not in Kant’s rigid transcendental sense. Rather, the abduction generates a “pragmatic a priori” that is self-adjustable as the deductive and inductive structures shift.

Finally, the fourth form of nihilation is the “encompassing nothingness” that has best been articulated in Mahayana Buddhism and by Jaspers. Hints have been made about this ultimate manifestation of nothingness (*sunyata*). It is the non-container “surround” for nature and is the final goal of ecstatic naturalism as a form of religious naturalism. Very little can be said about it, if anything at all, but as language users we struggle to do so in a way analogous to any “discussion” of Peirce’s “firstness.” This goes directly back to our argument that the word nature has no referent and is thus, by implication, nothingness. “Nature” and nothingness are the Same. The encompassing nothingness, which “contains” the other modes of nihilation, is the pre-linguistic fore-structure for anything and everything in whatever way or mode that they “are.”

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