

A Theo-Eccentric View of God and Everything Else

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*People keep asking me to spell out what I mean by "Christo-eccentric" and "Theo-eccentric." Basically it is the insight/conviction that a **"proper" understanding of the relationship between God and everything else puts everything somewhat off-center, including God.** This is convergent with some of the most basic insights of Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy (see, e.g., John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985]), though at times its defenders must be subjected to an immanent critique. It is also convergent with what Clark Williamson calls a "neo-process relational model of God" (the "neo" part added because process thought must likewise be subjected to an immanent critique). And obviously it converges with my "ontology for practical wisdom" (see below) which of course needs no critique. Here are what I presently consider the most basic points:

1. Both we and God are truly ourselves only in true communion with true others. (Furthermore, a self *is* that communion.)
2. This is both our condition and our vocation (God's too): we are as we are called to be--eccentric centers of our own shared worlds.
3. God is the original caller, the eccentric center of all (including even God's own self).

Explanations:

Self, Selfhood ("ipseity")--This is an inherently tensive concept which cannot be further analyzed without distortion. I have called it "a relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances" (see below), but that only skims the surface. To be oneself means in certain respects to be simultaneously other than oneself, and how that is possible I don't propose to explain. Its truth, however, seems inescapable. (See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992].)

True--This has both ontological and ethical overtones. To say that communion is "true" is to say that it is both the real thing and something we can trust (obviously a rare and fleeting commodity). To say that others are "true" is to say that they remain really "other" no matter how intimately we try to imagine their communion, and that we can trust them to respect one another's "otherness" in that relationship. Perhaps the most intriguing idea suggested by all this is that **the full reality of God's selfhood, as well as ours, depends at least in part on fostering just relationships among us all**--a further boost to liberation theologies.

Comments:

Both classical and revisionary versions of Christian theism (some of them, anyway) seem to me to have held these insights in common. Where they tend to part company is over which set of metaphysical categories most faithfully illuminates these insights. While I lean toward a more revisionary Christian theism, I still find the idea that God is the original caller of all (a focal concern of classical theism) to be worth preserving and emphasizing. (But I don't think we need "classical theism" to do that.) Part of its value is that it helps keep everything somewhat off-center (eccentric).

Supporting Explorations

By what right do I make these assertions?

*I support them first by drawing upon the heritage of the more or less (mostly less) responsibly confessing communities to which I belong--principally the Church.

*But I also find further support from my ability to imagine an account of reality as a whole (a "metaphysic" or "ontology") that seems consistently to illuminate everything from my highest moments of (imagined?) communion to the most mundane, tedious, and even atrocious aspects of my creaturely existence.

*Accordingly, the following explorations fall into two sections, one more confessional, the other more philosophical.

I. The Knowledge and Selfhood of God as Confessionally and Communally Mediated

*All genuine knowledge of God takes place from a confessional starting point (which always remains a starting point).

*A confessional starting point is an historically implicated, communally nurtured, relatively singular context in which we find ourselves claimed most radically by a restless variety of truths. (Thus all genuine knowledge of God is a matter of practical wisdom or *phronesis*. For more on this subject see my "The Primacy of *Phronesis*," *Journal of Religion* 69 [1989]:359-374.)

***We begin to know God only as the reality of God's presence claims us in our confessional starting point, and our initial knowledge of God receives all the confirmation, illumination and correction it could conceivably hope to gain as we participate actively in a responsibly confessing community.**

*A responsibly confessing community is one that a) confesses itself to be claimed by certain truths most radically, and b) confesses that its attempts to live by these truths are 1) fallible, 2) subject to self-deception (due to inordinate self-concern) *but* 3) still inescapable, owing to their radicality.

*Because its attempts to live by such claims are fallible, subject to self-deception, yet inescapable, such a community, to be responsible, must agonize over the extent to which it must welcome or resist the influence of competitive claims (and those who hold them). (Space must be allowed for responsible disagreement, but not all disagreement is responsible.)

*This is more a normative concept than a descriptive one: it is what communities are called to be, but rarely do they answer that call consistently.

***In revelation God comes to us, in another, as God truly is and thereby assures us that always and everywhere God is, at the very least, not wholly other than the one thus revealed to us.**

*This suggests that it is not just our knowledge of God but God's own selfhood that is mediated confessionally and communally: **God's selfhood is always and everywhere constituted in acknowledgement by and communion with another.**

*Such "otherness" within God's own selfhood suggests that, while God remains the center of all existence, this is an exceedingly **eccentric center: we know no other God than the God of otherness.** So instead of calling ourselves theocentric, we should consider ourselves **theo-eccentric.**

*While fully acknowledging our confessional starting point, we can claim the audacity to speak of God as God truly is. On the other hand, while we are assured that God is never wholly other than the one thus revealed to us, we are still obliged to remember that God does remain "other" even in self-communication. Indeed, the ways in which God comes to us must be at least as variable ("otherable") as our own confessional starting point(s). So our audacity must be tempered by a considerable dose of humility.

*Because God comes to us in and through another as God truly is, we can likewise say that **"self-giving" describes not only what God does but what (or who) God is--as at once the giver, the gift and the giving.** The pattern is thus set for any number of Trinitarian formulations, although it should be kept in mind that other patterns for speaking of God's self-giving may be possible.

*I did not borrow this terminology from Stephen Webb. I borrowed it from a doxology by Brian Wren, set to the hymntune *Lasst uns erfreuen*: "Praise God the Giver and the Gift. / Hearts, hands and voices now uplift. / Alleluia, alleluia. / Praise, praise the Breath of glad surprise, / freeing, uplifting, opening eyes: / Three-in-oneness, Love communing, / Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

*But Trinitarian formulations are not an automatic consequence of such general reflections. They follow, not from the *fact* of occupying a confessional starting point, but from *what* we Christians confess from *our* distinctive and peculiar starting point.

*As Christians we find the pattern of God's self-giving established by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is, **in and through our communion with Jesus Christ (presented through the sacramental words and deeds of our confessing community) we find ourselves to be in communion with none other than the one God of Israel, who loves us and everyone unconditionally and calls us and everyone to embody that love for the whole world.**

*If we Christians confess that in our communion with Jesus Christ God comes to us as God is, we must also confess that communion with Jesus Christ is inextricable from what and who

God is for everyone: God's very selfhood is somehow inextricably bound up with a particular history that includes the calling of Israel and the birth of the church as pivotal moments.

*Note however: if the inescapability of our confessional starting point allows us to get away with making such bold claims, we are in no position automatically to discount others who make comparable claims from their own confessional starting points. We may have been assured that God is not wholly other than the one we have come to know, but that does not by any means exhaust or render fully predictable just who God is or can be in other circumstances.

*We need to keep in mind that God can be truly and fully one God in more than one way. The center around whom creation and redemption pivot remains an eccentric one whose unity is multiple in ways we can't pin down. If this makes any sense, then it makes sense to say that God's redemptive work can pivot just as crucially around more than one event (though of course these other events would all be in some sense "one" just as the Trinity is "one").

*So along with calling ourselves theo-eccentric, we should likewise consider calling ourselves, not simply Christocentric, but **Christo-eccentric**.

*So far I have not mentioned the Holy Spirit by name. But I have nevertheless implicitly been focusing on the Spirit all along. For I want to suggest that we turn the tables on traditional formulations and say that **the Spirit**, far from being an afterthought, **is God in all God's fullness**.

***The Holy Spirit makes communion possible within (among?) the God of Israel and Jesus Christ, within the world, within ourselves, and among all of these, simply because the Holy Spirit is communion in the fullest sense of the word.** Again the point here is to say that, **communion is not just what God does but what and who God is.**

*We furthermore find this communion to be exceedingly elusive and should not expect our assertions about God to be any less so.

*Part of the elusiveness (or mystery) is that God's loving presence and our creaturely response seem to encounter each other at a level so fundamental that we have difficulty saying precisely where God's activity ends and ours begins. (Pelagius' solution is inadequate for not recognizing this; Augustine's and Calvin's solutions recognized this but still wound up sounding as if God were finally the only one who really does anything.)

*That is partly because at this level we begin to note that just being oneself not only seems impossible to do but also impossible to comprehend: **Being oneself always seems to involve being simultaneously other than oneself in ways that cannot be completely sorted out.** (Again see Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself As Another*.)

*For that reason, we should not expect to be too tidy in sorting out the differences and relationships between God and creatures. Nor should we expect to be too tidy in outlining distinctions within the very selfhood of God.

*As a community ordered by the mutual generosity of God's very selfhood, the church, whenever it "happens" (and that's pretty rare) is the responsibly confessing community which confirms, illuminates and corrects whatever we have begun to know about God as God's presence has claimed us in our confessional starting point. This is the church's "teaching office," in which all are called to participate.

*Thus all genuine knowledge of God, besides being confessional and practical, is also ecclesial and political.

II. An Ontology for Practical Wisdom

*I call this an "ontology for practical wisdom" because it is an outgrowth of previous work I have done on the concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as the most fundamental and inclusive way of making sense of things, from which all other ways of sense-making derive whatever merits they may legitimately claim. Practical wisdom is to be understood more specifically as "*the historically implicated, communally nurtured ability to make good sense of relatively singular contexts in ways appropriate to their relative singularity.*" For more on this subject see my "The Primacy of *Phronesis*," *Journal of Religion* 69 (1989):359-374. As we'll see below, **practical**

wisdom can also be defined as a relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances.

Does radicalizing practical wisdom require an ontology?

*The only practically wise answer I can give is a colloquial "Sort of." That is, radicalizing practical wisdom "sort of" requires a "sort of" ontology or metaphysics (i.e., an account of "how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term"--to quote Wilfred Sellars). I have to use these peculiar hedges because, if I am to take my own account of reasoning seriously, no (or at least very few) ontological conclusions follow with the strict necessity of a logician's formal operations, and the only ontological affirmations I am willing to make might be considered too vague or ambiguous to be worthy of being called an ontology. Furthermore, other affirmations in tension with these might also be suggested.

Nevertheless, insofar as practical wisdom involves taking the fullest possible account of what we are doing *as we do it*, it already qualifies as a "sort of" transcendental move. So I do think the position I have staked out in "The Primacy of *Phronesis*" calls for assertions such as those I am about to make (and note when I say it "calls for" such assertions I mean to say more than that these assertions are merely optional, without going so far as to say that my position strictly implies such assertions).

Does radicalizing practical wisdom permit an ontology?

*Obviously if it "sort of" requires one then it "sort of" permits one. It does not, however, encourage ontological moves that are too likely to detract from our practical, confessionally radical engagement with relatively singular contexts, communities, institutions, etc. As I have argued in "The Primacy of *Phronesis*" and elsewhere (e.g., "Faith, Reason and Public Life: Are They Compatible?" *Encounter* 55 [1994]:237-251) transcendental, ontological or metaphysical moves (call them what we will) cannot be divorced from the practice of confessing the truths that claim us most radically. But insofar as they help us to pay better attention to what we are doing as we do it, they are not to be rejected as intrinsically foundationalist, imperialist, patriarchal, etc., but are instead to be welcomed for the precarious exercises that they are. They are, of course, hazardous and can turn oppressive, but so can anything else we do.

Will such ontological moves rob Christian faith of its distinctiveness?

*Not these moves. (Well, not automatically.) While the ontological assertions I am about to make do not refer specifically to Christian faith, they have been radically influenced all along by at least one peculiar rendition (i.e., mine) of the gospel of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, they are elastic enough to be of use to people who do not have to share exactly the same confessional starting point. That does not make them more "reality-depicting" than the more peculiar affirmations of a specific faith community. In other words, this ontology may allow me to speak of the triune God of Israel and of Jesus Christ as the greatest conceivable "relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances" (more about *that* in a moment), but that more technical formulation is not a superior or more directly referential replacement for the God identified in specifically Christian terms. Rather, asserting a "tensive coherence" between the two formulations allows each to illuminate the other. To the extent that they do seem genuinely to illuminate each other, one might say that both become more "reality-depicting" than they would have been apart from each other. But that does not rob either formulation of its own peculiar referential power.

Will they "domesticate" God's transcendence?

*No, not if *phronesis* retains its primacy. While there is a sense in which I, like Whitehead, wind up making God the "chief exemplification" (or "instantiation") of these ontological assertions, I repudiate the likely charge that this domesticates God's transcendence. As my rendering of *phronesis* implies (sort of), "to exemplify" or "to instantiate" does not necessarily mean "to be subordinate to." It might mean that if we were operating with a binary logic of strict identity and subordination. But (as mentioned below) I have relativized that logic to a more fundamental "logic" of selfhood ("ipseity") and "interpermeation" (cf. *perichoresis*).

*Even if I identify God as the chief "relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances," I am not saying that God differs from the rest of us only in degree,

rather than in kind. That is because *a crucial point of this ontology is to deny that any genuine difference can ever really be just a difference in degree.*

The Ontology in Outline

*Reality is most coherently and holistically described as a network of relatively singular instances (that network itself being one of those instances).

*No such instances exist apart from their relations with other instances. They are *relatively* singular.

*All such instances involve more than their relations with others. They are *relatively singular*.

*As relatively singular *instances*, all these are more or less occasional "instantiations" of their relations and of themselves (set-theory be damned). While they do illustrate more general properties, they are always more than mere illustrations.

*The relationships between the relativity (or relationality) and singularity of a given instance are inescapably *tensive*: neither is precisely the same as the other, nor is either completely different from the other. All attempts to specify precisely how they are related or distinct will at least implicitly presuppose this very tension that they aim to resolve.

*But our ability to recognize this indicates that such tensions are not the nonsensical self-contradictions of formal logic. Reality does not dissolve into an endless play of differences where nothing ever gets resolved. (At the very least we have to affirm what Stephen Korner calls the "minimal principle of contradiction," which holds that not every statement is true.)

*For an instance to count as relatively singular there must be a kind of coherence to it (not a strict, formal consistency) every bit as fundamental as any tensions it might display.

*The relationship between such tensiveness and coherence is itself both tensive and coherent (or coherently tensive and tensively coherent--cf. Ricoeur's "discordant concordance").

*In abstraction from full engagement with constantly shifting, relatively singular contexts, we find many aspects of reality amenable to the strictly formal operations of traditional, truth-functional logic. But these remain partial abstractions from reality in its full concreteness. Put more cryptically, **the logic of identity and subordination follows what could be called a more dynamic "logic" of selfhood ("ipseity") and "interpermeability."** (See Ricoeur's *Oneself As Another* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], pp. 2-3.)

*Thus we may distinguish between universals and particulars and for many purposes treat both as stable realities. But we must not overlook the fact that intelligently relating a universal to a particular situation requires noting how the situation in all its particularity seems to call for that particular universal in its own particular way. In practice, then, **universals are chock full of particularity.** Conversely, any attempt even to think of what distinguishes particulars from universals and from one another must rely upon universals in order to do so. So in practice **particulars are chock full of universality.**

*All reference to universals is but an aspect of relatively singular instances of relating relatively singular instances to one another; and all reference to particulars is but an aspect of relatively singular instances of distinguishing relatively singular instances from one another; and relating and distinguishing are themselves but two sides of the "same" tensive coin.

*In fact, **we do not know of anything altogether beyond relatively singular instances of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances.**

*From this we can plausibly hazard a more dynamic understanding of reality, not just as a network of relatively singular instances, but as itself a relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances. (But given the elusiveness of the terminology here, we should not say that this conclusion follows with strict necessity from the preceding reflections.)

*Since practical wisdom can itself be alternately defined as a relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances, we could then say that this is not only an ontology *for* practical wisdom, but an ontology *of* practical wisdom.

How does this compare with process philosophy?

*Loosely speaking this qualifies as a kind of process cosmology. Where it differs from the cosmologies of Whitehead and Hartshorne is in its skepticism about process philosophy's attempts to present itself as a formally coherent account of "becoming." So far as I can tell, no such account (as opposed to a "tensively coherent" account) is possible. More specifically, **I reject or at least question the following tenets:**

--that genuine becoming can be strictly self-identical even for a moment;

--that there must be precise distinctions between possibility and actuality (surely the two "interpermeate" at least fleetingly whenever possibilities get actualized);

--that distinctions in general must be precise and "impermeable" (yes, process thinkers are to be commended for recognizing that things can be distinguishable without being separable, but that isn't enough);

--that there must be a unit of becoming that cannot be further subdivided;

--that there can be a univocal account of reality-as-a-whole (Whitehead is ambiguous on this);

--that there can be no contemporaneous influence from a concrete "other" (even though self-determination and "subjective immediacy" seem to call for this).

*Other differences could no doubt be listed, but this gets the idea across.

*This is not by any means to deny or discount the heuristic value of process philosophy's attempts to get more precise. It does seem that the past (actuality) is largely a settled affair in a way that the future (possibility) cannot be. I thus tend to side with process thinkers as opposed to those who would claim that temporality is ultimately an illusion. But beyond the weak claim that the process view seems to fit my tradition-shaped experience better, I cannot come up with many reasons for the side I have taken. Still, even if there might be a relatively singular instance in which actuality and possibility are more "interpermeable" than in any other instance I currently know, I would still have to insist that this could not happen to the extent that the distinction dissolved altogether. If anything is an illusion, surely it would be that such a dissolution makes even tensively coherent sense.

*In any case, with a more elastic interpretation I do still find attractive and fairly plausible what I have elsewhere identified as process philosophy's most basic principles:

*"All things are activities or features of activity" (but the distinction between activities and their features is not impermeable).

*"No activity is completely determined by other things" (though what counts as an "other" may not always be precisely determinable).

*"All activities are partly determined by other things" (ditto).

*"All activities are partly self-determined" (though distinguishing between the determining self and the determined self may be the most "interpermeable" and problematic of all distinctions).

How does this compare with Continental philosophy?

*The influence of such Continental thinkers as Gadamer and Ricoeur, with all their indebtedness to Hegel, should be obvious. My ontological moves are intentionally a bit looser, because I believe practical wisdom requires more elasticity. But the indebtedness is there nonetheless. With Ricoeur I would call this a somewhat "truncated" ontology, one that exceeds our grasp even as it illumines our practice.

*Deconstructionists will predictably charge me with smuggling in a few more spent versions of "logocentrism." Big deal. Why is it that in the name of difference deconstructionists try so hard to make everybody else look the same?

*Here one may have to choose, with John Milbank, between the deconstructionists' "nihilist philosophy of the simultaneous occurrence of univocity and equivocity" and a more "Catholic" philosophy of "analogical difference" (see his *Theology and Social Theory* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1990], pp. 303-304). For the former, ironically, "every differential happening is also the eternal return of the same" and both difference and mediation are equated with violence (p. 306).

*For the latter, all unity and diversity are seen to be peaceably related through analogy's dynamic fusion of identity and difference. (But interpreting analogy in such a dynamic way is possible only "if one jettisons the genera/species/individuals hierarchy and recognizes, *with* the nihilists, only mixtures, *continua*, overlaps and disjunctions, all subject in principle to limitless transformation" [p. 304].)

*This seems convergent with what I am trying to say, but it strikes me as even more cryptic, if that be possible.

*Milbank furthermore insists, as I do, that God is not simply *actus purus*, as "classical" theism has (stereotypically?) claimed. Instead Milbank claims that in God "infinite realized act and infinite unrealized power mysteriously coincide" (p. 423). As long as the coinciding is "mysterious" we may be in agreement here (though unfortunately that crucial modifier drops out later--see p. 425). He may in other words mean that God is, as I prefer to say, the "relatively singular instance in which actuality and possibility are more 'interpermeable' than in any other

instance," so long as he does not mean to dissolve the distinction altogether. And surely he does not mean to dissolve it, given his aversion to an "eternal return of the same." But in that case his choice of "coincide" rather than "interpermeate" seems misleading. It sounds too stable, perhaps even static (which Milbank clearly does not intend). **In God, actuality and possibility may interpermeate *limitlessly* and *unsurpassably*, but even so their interpermeation remains *tensive*. In which case there must at least be an analogue to "before" and "after," contra Milbank (p. 424), even for God.**

Summation

*From a confessional starting point, in what we the church take to be communion with Jesus Christ, God comes to us, in another, as God truly is, and thereby assures us that always and everywhere God is, at the very least, not wholly other than the one thus revealed to us.

*From a loose progression of ontological reflections (which never take place outside a confessional starting point) we find it plausible to describe "that than which no greater can be conceived" (i.e., God or "Ultimate Reality") as the unsurpassable relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances.

*Together these explorations support a theo-eccentric (and Christo-eccentric) view of God and everything else: Both we and God are truly ourselves only in true communion with true others.

*Finally, one of the most important consequences suggested here is that the full reality of God's selfhood, as well as ours, depends at least in part on fostering just relationships among us all.