

THE CHALLENGE OF SELF-GIVING LOVE

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Conventional wisdom sometimes holds that selfishness pays off and is even necessary for survival in a competitive world. Joseph Bracken here challenges that view, arguing instead that self-giving love for others is the mainspring of human life and even of the cosmic process as a whole. Basing his argument on texts from Scripture, church tradition, and philosophical reflection on the nature of I-Thou relations, he concludes that the goal of self-transcendence is paradoxically located not in the self but in the well-being of the other.

TWO PASSAGES FROM the New Testament (Eph 5:21–32 and Jn 6) are frequently juxtaposed. This juxtaposition of texts is especially apt since in the text from Ephesians a marriage between husband and wife symbolizes the relationship between Christ and the church, and in John's Gospel Jesus offers his body and blood (the gift of himself) to his followers under the symbols of bread and wine. Paul, to be sure, in Ephesians adds at the end: "This is a great mystery" (5:32). But what is the mystery here? My argument in this article is that the gift of one's self both in Christian marriage and in the Eucharist is as much a challenge as it is a mystery.

As fragile human beings, we find it daunting to envision the consequences for oneself of a total self-gift to another without thereby losing one's own rightful sense of self. For example, the wide circulation of Richard Dawkins's controversial book *The Selfish Gene*¹ was largely the result of his controversial thesis that human beings are controlled in their thinking and behavior by their genes. But the wide circulation might also have happened because readers, against their own better judgment, found themselves half-believing what Dawkins said about selfish genes, for in their own experience it often pays to be selfish.

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¹ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University, 1976).

Being consistently unselfish in one's behavior is presumably to risk far too much in the way of personal loss; thus it is an attitude reserved for great saints and other moral heroes in their better moments. But, as I see it, the great saints and other moral heroes have a clear-eyed vision of what is not merely possible but natural for human beings in their dealings with one another. Consistently selfish behavior toward others is, in the eyes of these far-sighted individuals, a negative attitude acquired over time in virtue of cultural conditioning and one's own previous moral choices. Accordingly, it is a state of mind that can be altered for the better by clear thinking and steadfast moral choices.

The basic thesis of the present article, then, is that spontaneous self-giving love for others is well within the range of normal human behavior. I will seek to defend this thesis through a variety of arguments from sacred Scripture, church tradition, and, above all, philosophical reflection about the nature of I-Thou relations (as opposed to I-It relations) originally set forth in the philosophy of Martin Buber.² None of these arguments are, strictly speaking, probative; but, taken together like a sturdy rope comprised of individual strands—to invoke John Henry Newman's simile—they should offer at least a reasonably plausible hypothesis. In what follows, I first briefly explain how Ephesians 5 and John 6 seem to complement each other. The physical gift of their bodies to each other in the act of sexual intercourse for husband and wife nicely illuminates what should be going on between Christ and Christians in and through the Christian's active participation in the Eucharist. Christ offers his entire self, his body and blood, through the sharing of bread and wine in the Eucharist; the Christian, in turn, as participant in the same eucharistic ritual is invited to make a return gift of self, equivalently his/her own body and blood, to Christ.

Second, I refer to Colin Gunton's *The One, the Three, and the Many*,³ where he claims that a new paradigm for the organization of life within contemporary society, based on a new understanding of the relation between the One and the Many, is already available in the classical notion of *perichoresis* or relationality among the Greek Fathers in their writings on the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet *perichoresis* as used by the Greek Fathers was presumably grounded in the philosophical worldview of antiquity and thus was heavily influenced by the traditional understanding of cause and effect, wherein the cause is active and the effect is passive. This does not readily correspond to the alleged mutuality of the divine Persons in their *perichoresis* with one another. Admittedly, the divine Persons are not individual entities in the same way that human beings are in their

² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner's, 1970).

³ Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University, 1993).

relations to one another. Hence, further reflection is needed on how best to present *perichoresis* as a model for intersubjective relations not only of the divine Persons to one another but also of human beings to one another in an I-Thou relation.

In my final part I propose a model for the workings of *perichoresis* based on a modest revision of the categories of actual entity and society in the philosophical cosmology of Alfred North Whitehead. Instead of appealing to the trinitarian theology of the Greek Fathers, I propose a more philosophical understanding of the God-world relationship that is still at once trinitarian and grounded in the notion of intersubjectivity as *perichoresis*, mutual self-giving. I conclude by noting once again the challenge that a life of self-giving love presents to Christians (and peoples of other faith traditions as well) to remain faithful to what in their hearts they know to be the natural, right way to live in this world.

ANALYSIS OF JOHN 6 AND EPHESIANS 5

What seems clear in reading John 6 is that here (as elsewhere in that Gospel), Jesus is depicted as using miracles to be signs or, better said, symbols of a deeper spiritual reality that his followers, including the Apostles, do not fully understand and appreciate at the time. For example, the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana (Jn 2:1–11) is described as “the beginning of his signs.” The introduction to John’s Gospel in the *Catholic Study Bible* indicates seven such signs that receive their full meaning from the reality of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.⁴ Finally, toward the end of the Gospel we read: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of [his] disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:30–31).⁵ So Jesus’ initial description of himself as the Bread of Life come down from heaven (Jn 6:33) is a sign or symbol for his claiming to give his “flesh for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51). Eating the flesh and drinking the blood of another human being is, of course, cannibalism unless further symbolism is involved. In much the same way that a pregnant woman is said to give of her body and blood to nurture the life of her unborn child, so Jesus gave his body and blood to his disciples under the sacramental symbols of bread and wine to show his self-giving love for them. The Fourth Evangelist clearly saw the deeper symbolism of this eucharistic ritual when, in his account of the Last Supper, he dropped

⁴ *The Catholic Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University, 1990) 145–46.

⁵ *Ibid.* 146.

the Institution Narrative already so familiar to his fellow Christians and inserted instead the foot-washing ceremony and the farewell discourse (Jn 13–17).

But still more symbolism is at work here, since the meaning of the Last Supper is only made clear with the passion and death of Jesus on the following day so as to redeem the human race by giving his fellow human beings the opportunity for new life in his name. Hence, the connection between John 6 and the passion narrative in John's Gospel would seem to be the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist. In that ritual Jesus offers his disciples the gift of his body and blood under the form of bread and wine. This gift is symbolic of the unreserved gift of himself to his disciples along with the exhortation to care for and serve one another as he cared for and served them in his dealings with them from the beginning of his public ministry. His subsequent capture, trial before the Sanhedrin, ridicule by others, and eventual shameful death on a cross were only the climax of a life of self-giving love of others.⁶

Perhaps even more important to note is that in a genuine I-Thou relation the self-gift of one person should be matched by the self-gift of the other. Thus the self-giving love of Jesus for his followers, indeed, for the whole human race, should be matched by the self-gift of the believer in his/her entire life as a Christian but, above all, in the celebration of the Eucharist with other Christians. There is little doubt in my mind that this attitude of self-giving love was prevalent among Christians in the early days of Christianity. Those who gathered in private homes to celebrate the Eucharist ran more than a little risk of persecution, imprisonment, and even death at the hands of Roman officials who deeply distrusted the Christian way of life as something potentially subversive of the good order of the empire. But the early Church Fathers like Justin Martyr worked hard to establish the reasonableness of Christian belief and ritual to intelligent nonbelievers in the Greco-Roman world of the day.⁷

With the Agreement/Edict of Milan promulgated in 313 by order of Emperors Constantine and Licinius, Christianity became legally recognized in the Roman Empire. This led, especially in the western half of the empire, to a rapid change of the institutional face of Christianity. It soon became more stratified in terms of church government and the multiple relationships between clergy and laity. As Bernard Prusak comments with reference to the medieval Western tradition,

⁶ Kenneth R. Overberg, *Into the Abyss of Suffering: A Catholic View* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger, 2003) 73–93.

⁷ Bernard P. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist, 2004 121–22).

the Church [was] viewed as a kind of divine franchise in which those empowered by ordination administer a system of sacraments, through which God distributes salvation by means of grace, sometimes misunderstood as if it were a thing rather than a transforming relationship. Instead of emphasizing communal concelebration and divine indwelling or participation in the divine life, the medieval focus will shift to the more individualistic categories of administering and receiving sacraments, with grace viewed as something that can be received, lost, and regained, given to some and withheld from others.⁸

This change led to a relatively passive approach to celebration of the Eucharist particularly on the part of the laity. Does this passivity still exist among practicing lay Catholics today? Certainly since the advent of the liturgical movement in the Roman Catholic Church at the beginning of the 20th century, which culminated in the documents on the church at the Second Vatican Council, there has been a notable increase in active participation of the laity in the celebration of the Eucharist. But the older more passive attitude toward attendance at Mass still lives on in some parishes and within certain groups in virtually all parishes.

Hence, the ideal of self-giving love between husband and wife in their life together as set forth in Ephesians 5:21–32 could be very helpful if seen as relevant to active celebration of the Eucharist. But here too problems arise. Not only is it sometimes hard to distinguish between genuine self-giving love for one's spouse and enlightened self-interest, but in my judgment something subtler seems to be at work in the classical relation of husband and wife to each other, namely, a largely unquestioned assumption that the husband should play the active role in decision making, and the wife should ultimately accept what he decides. This also seems to be Paul's view in Ephesians, which is presumably why many Christian feminists are not especially fond of the passage. But, regardless of how and when this traditional attitude of husband and wife toward each other historically arose, from a strictly philosophical perspective it is reflected in the classical Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of causality. That is, the cause is active in producing the effect but not vice versa; there is no simultaneous mutual causation.

Within the dynamics of intersubjectivity, however, causality is simultaneous and mutual. That is, for two interrelated subjects of experience (an I and a Thou) to become a We, both sides have to be simultaneously active, influencing each other's thinking and behavior. As Buber notes, "I require a You [Thou] to become; becoming I, I say You [Thou]."⁹ So, in saying "Thou" to you, I as the speaker am just as much, if not more, affected in my inner being about that statement than you are. I become an "I," achieve my

⁸ Prusak, *Church Unfinished* 153.

⁹ Buber, *I and Thou* 67. The decision to substitute "You" for the original "Thou" was that of the translator, Walter Kaufmann.

true identity as a self, in the act of addressing you as Thou. A corresponding change in you comes with your active response to me as also a Thou. If you remain nonresponsive to my addressing you in this way, nothing changes in our relations with each other. We remain relatively impersonal in our dealings with each other. One sees this dramatically illustrated in languages that distinguish between the conventional and the intimate forms of address. For example, in German, which distinguishes between the formal “you” (*Sie*) and the intimate “you” (*Du*)—as Buber himself knew well—when two people say *Du* to each other for the first time, their relationship changes dramatically, and both parties know this to be the case. But such an I-Thou relation comes to be only through what might be called simultaneous mutual causation.

This is no small point. It basically alters the classical understanding of the cause-effect relation between two human persons, and, I would argue, also between God and the individual human person. For example, in creating and sustaining me in my existence as a creature, the three divine Persons are internally affected by me as their creature. I in turn am internally affected by their action in my life if I respond with gratitude to their care for me. If I am unresponsive, then the divine Persons are still affected by me, their creature, as part of their responsibility for creation as a whole, but I am not especially affected by what they have done and continue to do for me. Moreover, in a Whiteheadian worldview the workings of simultaneous mutual causation extend well beyond human interpersonal relations; it can take place between any number of subjects of experience in this world, whether human or nonhuman, in their relations with one another. For example, as philosopher of science Ervin Laszlo points out, something like simultaneous mutual causation works at the quantum level in the mutual entanglement of subatomic particles separated from one another at a distance greater than the speed of light. Likewise, this mutual entanglement of subatomic particles accounts for the way living things are organisms, unified totalities of dynamically interrelated parts or members, rather than finely tuned machines.¹⁰ Hence, simultaneous mutual causation is the foundation for a new worldview, an integral theory of everything. Accordingly, in human interpersonal relations self-donation to the other for the sake of a higher good should be seen as quite natural despite the claim by Dawkins and others that self-centeredness, lack of concern for the other or for

¹⁰ Ervin Laszlo, *The Connectivity Hypothesis: Foundations of an Integral Science of Quantum, Cosmos, Life, and Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003) 3–38. See also Laszlo, *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything*, 2nd ed. (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2007). Laszlo does not use the language of Alfred North Whitehead but indicates his reliance on the latter’s cosmology to develop his own unified-field theory (ibid. 163–64).

the common good, is demanded by nature simply for the entity to survive and prosper.

In what follows, therefore, and with Colin Gunton as my guide, I first indicate how such a new dynamically interconnected or “organismic” worldview was already prefigured in the notion of *perichoresis* employed by the Greek Fathers of the church in their explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity. I then clarify how the notion of “internal relations” among actual entities as interrelated, momentary, self-constituting subjects of experience in Whitehead’s philosophical cosmology confirms this intrinsic interdependence of entities at all levels of existence and activity within nature. Here then are two more arguments to support the thesis that spontaneous self-donation to the other should come more naturally to us as human persons than self-centeredness, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Self-giving love or renunciation of self-interest for the sake of others is the divinely intended way the world should work and de facto does work most of the time.

SIMULTANEOUS MUTUAL CAUSATION OR SELF-DONATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ONE AND THE MANY

Gunton, in *The One, the Three, and the Many*, critiques modern Western culture as far too individualistic. He brings to this analysis of modernity the thesis that the ills of modernity in the West can be ultimately traced to the traditional understanding of the proper relation between the One and the Many.¹¹ Plato tried to resolve the tension between the materialistic monism of Heraclitus and the immaterial monism of Parmenides by stipulating that the empirical Many really existed, but that their order and intelligibility derived from their common relationship to a transcendent One. For Plato that One was the intelligible world of the Forms—above all, the Form of the Good. For Christians in antiquity and through the Middle Ages the transcendent One was the creator God of biblical revelation.¹² But in the early modern period with René Descartes’s focus on individual subjectivity as the starting point for philosophical reflection, the transcendent One became the individual human being as the ordering principle for his/her own perceptions and concepts.¹³ Immanuel Kant confirmed this ego-centered understanding of the relation between the One and the Many with his presupposition of the workings of a transcendental Self within human consciousness that catalogues and orders to one another the Many, the

¹¹ Gunton, *The One, the Three* 16–21.

¹² *Ibid.* 22–23.

¹³ See Joseph A. Bracken, *Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Intersubjectivity: A New Paradigm for Religion and Science* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation, 2009) 28–31.

empirical appearances of things.¹⁴ Thus, says Gunton, the only way to escape from this “tyranny” of the ego-centered One over the Many, the legitimate diversity of people and things in human life, is through sustained reflection on the classical doctrine of the Trinity in which three distinct divine Persons are nevertheless one God through their ongoing relationality to one another.¹⁵

Gunton singles out three distinctive features of this new understanding of the relation of the One and the Many as based on the classical doctrine of the Trinity. Instead of Unity, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty as transcendentals, Gunton proposes new trinitarian transcendentals: *perichoresis*, particularity or substantiality, and relationality or sociality at the human level of activity. Key to all three, however, is *perichoresis*.

In its origins, the concept was a way of showing the ontological interdependence and reciprocity of the three persons of the Trinity: how they were only what they were by virtue of their interrelation and interanimation, so that for God to be did not involve an absolute simplicity, but a unity deriving from a dynamic plurality of persons.¹⁶

Perichoresis itself is, for Gunton, the name for the activity of Spirit both among the Persons of the Trinity and in the works of creation; it highlights the need for particularity even as it bonds to one another those same individual entities in each case: “Spirit relates to one another beings and realms that are opposed or separate. That which is or has spirit is able to be open to that which is other than itself, to move into relation with the other.”¹⁷ What is not so evident here is whether Gunton has in mind with the term “Spirit” the third divine Person or the divine nature, that is, the divine principle of activity both within the Trinity and in creation. In either case, however, “Spirit enables a form of *perichoresis* to take place, between mind and world, world and God.”¹⁸ In this way, Gunton effectively replaces the classical paradigm for the relation of the One and the Many, in which the One is transcendent of the Many as their common principle of order and intelligibility. He uses instead a new paradigm that emphasizes the plurality of entities (the Many) dynamically united to one another through the unifying activity of Spirit so as to constitute a new corporate reality, a higher-order social reality rather than a strictly individual entity. With reference to human intersubjectivity, this new paradigm for the relation between the One and the Many implies a “We” distinct from but not separate from a number of “I’s” and “Thou’s” taken separately.

¹⁴ Gunton, *The One, the Three* 23–24; Bracken, *Subjectivity, Objectivity* 54–70.

¹⁵ Gunton, *The One, the Three* 210–31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 152; see also Bracken, *Subjectivity, Objectivity* 127.

¹⁷ Gunton, *The One, the Three* 181. ¹⁸ *Ibid.* 185.

While Gunton marshals the notion of *perichoresis* from the writings of the Greek Fathers on the doctrine of the Trinity to pinpoint some of the key shortcomings in contemporary Western culture and to offer a solution to the problem of excessive individualism at present, his proposal still involves two significant limitations. First, its appeal is largely to Christian readers who understand and appreciate the classical doctrine of the Trinity as a potential model for enhanced interpersonal relations among human beings. Yet many Whiteheadians like John Cobb, David Griffin, Lewis Ford, and Marjorie Suchocki, and naturalistic theists like Robert Cummings Neville understandably favor a more symbolic than a strictly ontological understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Furthermore, even for those who see the value of a communitarian approach to the doctrine of the Trinity for contemporary life in society, there is the danger that it may be interpreted too idealistically, namely, as the way human relations ought to proceed as opposed to the way they in fact do. *Perichoresis* as normative for human interpersonal relations is then viewed as an “impossible dream,” an ideal that will seldom, if ever, be achieved in real life.

A second and, in my judgment, much more serious, limitation is exemplified in Gunton’s approach to *perichoresis*, which I see as hampered by his adherence to the above-mentioned classical understanding of cause-and-effect relationships.¹⁹ But this evidently does not work as explanation of the *perichoresis* of the divine Persons within the doctrine of the Trinity; for there is neither ontological nor temporal priority of the Father to the Son or of Father and Son together to the Holy Spirit. One could respond that there is nevertheless a logical priority of the Father to the Son, and of the Father and Son to the Holy Spirit. But this is true only if one is thinking in terms of unilateral cause-effect relationships in which the cause is necessarily prior to the effect. The only model of *perichoresis* that avoids these conceptual difficulties would seem to be simultaneous mutual causation. Gunton, however, was apparently not aware of this alternative possibility and emphasized instead the traditional asymmetrical giving and receiving of the divine Persons in their relations with one another:

It is the Father’s giving of the Son, the Son’s giving of himself to the Father and the Spirit’s enabling of the creation’s giving in response that is at the centre. It is by such a means that we move from the economy to the heart of the being of God. It is as a dynamic of giving and receiving, asymmetrical rather than merely reciprocal, that the communion that is the divine life must be understood.²⁰

¹⁹ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. with commentary by Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, IA: Peripatetic, 1979) 1013a 23–33; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) 1, q. 44, a. 2 resp. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1951).

²⁰ Gunton, *The One, the Three* 225 n. 19.

But the point of simultaneous mutual causation is that it is symmetrical or completely reciprocal. That is, the three divine Persons constitute themselves in their individual self-identity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, acknowledging that the identity each possesses derives from “his” dynamic relationship to the other two Persons. The existence of the Father is necessary for the existence of the Son and vice-versa. Likewise, the conjoint existence of the Father and the Son is necessary for the existence of the Spirit and vice-versa. Accordingly, the relations of the divine Persons to one another within the Trinity are reciprocal and perfectly symmetrical. Everything they are and everything they do both within the trinitarian life and in relation to their creatures is corporate; nothing can happen without all three Persons being simultaneously involved.

SIMULTANEOUS MUTURAL CAUSATION IN WHITEHEADIAN METAPHYSICS

At this point I want to shift to Whitehead’s philosophy as offering a potentially better model for genuinely self-giving interpersonal relations among human beings with his notion of a “society” as a closely knit association of momentary self-constituting subjects of experience. In advance, however, I should note that many contemporary systematic theologians give a prominent place to relationality in their understanding of God and the God-world relationship, with the idea of fostering a better sense of communion or true sharing of lives in Christian community. Besides Gunton, one could mention the Greek Orthodox Bishop John Zizioulas and two American Roman Catholics, Catherine LaCugna and Elizabeth Johnson, all of whom use a relational understanding of the divine Persons to emphasize the importance of relationality in human relations and in the whole of creation.²¹ In other words, the relatively static classical understanding of “substance” as the first category of Being should be replaced by “person” to indicate the dynamism and the relationality both among the divine Persons within the Trinity and within human life. The common focus of all these theologians, therefore, is on what it means to be a person, namely, a relational reality.

But what is a person, whether divine or human? LaCugna claims that “persons are essentially interpersonal, intersubjective.”²² Yet what is the

²¹ For Zizioulas “the being of God is identified with the person” (*Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1997] 27–49, at 41). See also Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 209–317; and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 191–223.

²² LaCugna, *God for Us* 288.

proper starting-point for understanding the notion of personhood? Is it primarily located in the self or in the other? If it is anchored in the self, then the relationality of personhood is still subordinate to the substantiality of the self, its individual self-identity. It has to be itself before it can be a person in relation to another. If, on the contrary, personhood is anchored in the other, then the substantiality of the self, its individual self-identity, is derivative from its relationality with another/others. It is itself only insofar as it is intrinsically interrelated with and interdependent upon another/others for its existence and activity.

One may point out that I have set up an artificial dichotomy between the self and the other/others. Personhood, however, is primarily located neither in the self nor in the other, but in their dynamic interrelation, their interdependence on each other. This is what I mean by simultaneous mutual causation. But, I would argue, to properly understand what simultaneous mutual causation means, one has to begin with reference to the other, not to the self. Beginning with the self to explain simultaneous mutual causation will inevitably subordinate relationality to substantiality, one's individual self-identity, as already noted. Beginning with the other/others, relationality will take precedence over substantiality. For example, when I say Thou to you, the possibility of an I-Thou relationship depends upon your response to me. I cannot initiate an I-Thou relation, make relationality rather than substantiality the core of my personal identity, without your cooperation. Naturally, you too need me to institute an I-Thou relation with me. But in either case relationality as the key to personal identity must begin with the other, not with the self. *Perichoresis* among the divine Persons presumably works the same way. Each of the divine Persons is a "subsistent relation" (in Aquinas's terms) only in virtue of "his" concomitant interrelation with and interdependence upon the other two divine Persons.²³ Given these precedents for understanding human interpersonal relations, I now take up the philosophy of Whitehead with special focus on his key categories of actual entity and society.

A NEO-WHITEHEADIAN METAPHYSICS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Before proceeding, I want to forestall two objections to my use of Whitehead's metaphysics in defense of universal intersubjectivity. First, Whitehead himself did not discuss intersubjectivity as such at any length in *Process and Reality*. Presumably this is because he did not believe that actual entities could simultaneously influence one another's internal process

²³ Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 29, a. 3 resp. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1969) 39. Levinas stresses the ontological priority of the Other over the Self in human relations.

of self-constitution. There is a physical time gap between what you are saying and what I am hearing you say. So intersubjectivity between two simultaneously “concreting” subjects of experience is physically impossible: “actual entities in the contemporary universe are causally independent of each other.”²⁴ Admittedly, in this way, each actual entity is free to make a self-constituting decision within the privacy of its own immediate subjectivity. Yet, within an I-Thou relation, however brief in duration, two people seem to experience simultaneity in the sharing of their thoughts and desires. An answer to this speculative dilemma, which still respects the integrity of Whitehead’s thought, especially his claim that “the final real things of which this world is made up” are actual entities, momentary subjects of experience in dynamic interrelation,²⁵ can be found in my hypothesis that Whiteheadian societies are structured fields of activity for the succession of constituent actual entities from moment to moment. For example, even though successive moments of experience for an individual human being are technically different from one another, they still occur within one and the same consciousness, the same mental field of activity, with little or no change in content and feeling level. That is, from moment to moment, I experience continuity, not discontinuity, in my sense of self-identity. Even more importantly, within an I-Thou relation two human beings can legitimately claim that they are sharing kindred thoughts and feelings within one and the same intersubjective field of activity.

A second objection to this understanding of a Whiteheadian society as a structured field of activity for its constituent actual entities is that Whitehead seldom used field-imagery in *Process and Reality*. He does talk about an “extensive continuum” in which all objectified actual entities or “superjects” are located, hence, as something that “underlies the whole world, past, present, and future.”²⁶ Likewise, he notes that this extensive continuum is “a complex of entities united by the various allied relationships of whole to part, and of overlapping [parts].”²⁷ But his focus here is on the individual actual entities in their relations to one another, not on groups of entities or societies into which they are aggregated in terms of the same part-whole relations, overlapping, etc. Yet in his description of the nature of societies later in the text, he refers to societies as “environments” or “social backgrounds” for their constituent actual entities,²⁸ and then adds that “in a society, the members [actual entities] can only exist by reason of the laws which dominate the society, and the laws only come into being by reason of the analogous characters of the members of the society.”²⁹ Here Whitehead seems to be giving the society with its laws or governing

²⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 123.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 66.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 90.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* 91.

structures an objective identity over and above the subjective identity of its constituent actual entities taken individually.

On these textual grounds, then, it seems safe to claim that a Whiteheadian society is both more than and other than simply an aggregate of analogously constituted individual actual entities. Out of the interplay of two or more interrelated subjects of experience there emerges something common to all of them, namely, an objective field of activity that they have structured and continue to structure through their relationship to one another over time. In *I and Thou* Martin Buber described this encounter between two mutually engaged human beings as “the Between.”³⁰ He also claimed that human beings can have an I-Thou relation with still other living entities, e.g., a tree that one sees and admires in its full particularity,³¹ but presumably also with animals (e.g., household pets). Buber, to be sure, believed that this privileged moment of the Between is gone as soon as human beings once again relate to one another and to the world around them in terms of impersonal I-It relations in which the self is clearly the focus.³²

Yet, using this modified understanding of Whiteheadian societies as enduring structured fields of activity for their constituent actual entities/momentary subjects of experience, one can say that, *pace* Buber, the Between does not cease to exist as soon as the intimacy of a special interpersonal moment is gone, but rather that it remains as a permanent feature of intersubjectivity on all levels of existence and activity within nature.³³ This shared field of activity for the encounter of interrelated subjects of experience should be taken for granted in intersubjective relations wherever they exist. But, if that is the case, then Gunton’s claim is validated, namely, that *perichoresis*, the relationality that binds the three divine Persons to one another as one God, should be found everywhere in the created order. Intersubjectivity is characteristic not only of the life of the divine Persons, human persons, and other higher-order animal species, but also of the constituents of inanimate things. This is presumably what Gunton had in mind with his proposed “trinitarian analogy of being (and becoming).”³⁴

Thus the interdependence of all beings is normal, even necessary for the cosmic process as a whole to survive and continue to develop in complexity. That is, if higher-order, more complex social realities are to emerge out of the ongoing interplay of their lower-order, less complex component parts with one another and with the external environment, then these parts, actual entities as momentary self-constituting subjects of experience, have to find their individual existence only in combination

³⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York; Scribner’s, 1970) 68–69. NB: in this passage “the Between” is implied rather than directly stated.

³¹ *Ibid.* 58–59.

³² Buber, *I and Thou* 68.

³³ Bracken, *Subjectivity, Objectivity* 4–5.

³⁴ Gunton, *The One, the Three* 141.

with other actual entities, other momentary subjects of experience, on the same level of existence and activity on which they themselves exist and act within nature.

Analogously, then, the notion of *perichoresis* or subsistent relations, which Aquinas limits to the Persons of the Trinity, has to be a law of nature, if nature is to evolve in the direction of greater order and complexity. This is not to claim that nature is thereby predestined to achieve specific goals and values through the process of evolution, but only to propose that there is an unconscious directionality or orientation within nature as a whole toward greater order and complexity, which is clearly retarded if this ongoing interdependence of entities, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience, is interrupted in favor of a continued focus of the individual entity on its own survival at all costs.

Yet how is one to judge the alleged self-centeredness of animals as a consequence of the predator-prey relationship within nature? Higher-order organisms typically kill lower-order organisms for food.³⁵ Yet, as predators, they sometimes follow deeply-rooted natural instincts and kill their prey, quite apart from a need for food. Unlike human beings, they presumably do not choose to kill in this way simply for the sport of it. But for whatever reason it sometimes happens. When it happens, does this mean that something akin to “sin” is a feature of nonhuman animal behavior, something that also needs to be redeemed? In *The Groaning of Creation*, Christopher Southgate analyzes the possibility of everlasting redemption for non-human sentient creatures as well as for human beings within the divine life. He concludes:

We know that, in the physics with which we are familiar, self-organization—and hence the growth of complexity, and the origin of complex selves—depends on so-called dissipative processes, in turn based on the second law of thermodynamics. This is the way creaturely selves arise. Since this was the world the God of all creativity and all compassion chose for the creation of creatures, we must presume that this was the only type of world which would do for that process. In other words, our guess must be that though heaven can eternally preserve those selves, subsisting in suffering-free relationship, it could not give rise to them [free of suffering] in the first place.³⁶

As I see it, Southgate’s proposal logically involves the eventual redemption of the cosmic process as a whole within the divine life. For every actual entity, every momentary subject of experience, is a mini-self. But it comes into existence primarily not for itself alone but so as to become part of a

³⁵ “Thus, all societies [of actual entities] require interplay with their environment; and in the case of living societies this interplay takes the form of robbery. . . . Life is robbery” (Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 105).

³⁶ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) 90.

society, an ontological reality greater than itself as a momentary subject of experience. Authentic selfhood is thus ironically achieved by its ongoing self-negation, its continued transcendence into something greater than itself. This idea is strikingly brought out by Nancey Murphy and George Ellis in *On the Moral Nature of the Universe*. They argue that “self-renunciation for the sake of the other is humankind’s highest good.”³⁷ They then indicate the practical advantages to be gained by self-renunciation. But in the end they conclude: “All living things must participate not only in the taking of life in order to live but also in the painful giving of their lives that others might live.”³⁸

So self-renunciation for the sake of others so as to achieve a higher-order common good may well seem like a virtually unattainable ideal. But, as Murphy and Ellis argue, it is in fact an indispensable strategy for individual and corporate survival within the workings of the cosmic process. Realism, of course, also demands that one honestly face how difficult such self-renunciation for the good of others can be, especially if pursued on a regular basis. To quote the title of William Miller’s celebrated work on Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, the consistent practice of altruism is all too often “a harsh and dreadful love.”³⁹

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

Buddhism is unquestionably one of humankind’s great wisdom traditions. It embodies two key insights: there is no enduring human self, and its ongoing self-identity is continually being reshaped by events in the environment and one’s response to them. At the same time, this evolving self-identity of the individual human being fits nicely into an evolutionary understanding of the cosmic process wherein everything is necessarily interdependent on everything else for survival. From a Buddhist perspective, these insights into the nature of reality lead to the cultivation of two key virtues: wisdom so as to continue seeing reality as a dynamically interconnected world in which everything is linked with everything else for survival and well-being; and compassion, that is, a strong desire to serve the needs of others even at risk to one’s own self-centered needs and desires.⁴⁰

Within a Christian context, this linkage of wisdom and compassion is achieved as a result of two other specifically Christian insights: first, that

³⁷ Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 118.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 213.

³⁹ William D. Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2005).

⁴⁰ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University, 2002) 33–63, esp. 34–42.

the self-giving love of Christ for others, which he exhibited in his life, death, and resurrection, should lead human beings to lives of self-giving love; and second, that such self-giving love for others is the way that the triune God intended the world as a cosmic process to work. Hence self-giving love is natural, and habitual self-centeredness is unnatural, an unfortunate departure from God's plan for all of creation from its beginning in the Big Bang to its ultimate fulfillment within the divine life.

In *Religion in the Making*, Whitehead compares Buddhism and Christianity as world religions and then comments: Christianity "has always been a religion seeking a metaphysic, in contrast to Buddhism which is a metaphysic generating a religion."⁴¹ This leads me to believe that an appropriate combination of insights and motivation from Buddhism and Christianity could be the answer to many, if not all, of the problems of the contemporary world instanced by Gunton in *The One, the Three, and the Many*.

⁴¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Fordham University, 1992) 50.