

Directed toward Relationship: William Stoeger's Immanent Directionality and Edward Schillebeeckx's Mystical Eschatology

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Julia Feder

Creighton University, Omaha, NE (USA)

Abstract

Astrophysicist and theologian, William Stoeger, SJ argued that evolutionary processes manifest an immanent directionality toward increasing complexification and diversification. Though he did not explicitly prioritize full relationship to God as the end of all creation, a priority on relationality does permeate his analysis of the natural order. A more explicit emphasis upon relationality would bring Stoeger's arguments more in line with recent developments in evolutionary theory, viz., the "extended evolutionary synthesis" as well as mystical strains of the eschatological Christian tradition, namely Edward Schillebeeckx's claim that "God is the future of man."

Keywords

eschatology, evolution, extended evolutionary synthesis, mysticism, niche construction theory, relationality, Edward Schillebeeckx, William Stoeger, union

In his foundational essay, "The Immanent Directionality of the Evolutionary Process, and its Relationship to Teleology," William Stoeger sounds a theme characteristic of his entire career as a scholar and priest: something of God's nature is revealed in the processes described by the natural sciences.¹ His fundamental belief that observation (including scientific observation) reveals something to us about reality

1. William R. Stoeger, "The Immanent Directionality of the Evolutionary Process, and Its Relationship to Teleology," in *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. R. J. Russell et al. (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1998): 163–90 at 166.

Corresponding author:

Julia Feder, Creighton University, 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68102, USA.
Email: JuliaFeder@creighton.edu

(including ultimate reality: God) serves as a philosophical starting point that can open up a vast terrain of transdisciplinary² theological and scientific inquiry. From this base in critical realism, Stoeger can claim that we do not need to impose or discover “global or holistic regularities, directionalities or teleological mechanisms or embodiments *beyond* the types of such regularities and mechanisms which are discovered and described at the level of the sciences”³ in order to support the eschatological faith claim that God is acting creatively in the world to bring it to completion with the eschaton. This is not because natural processes are parallel to and have nothing to do with eschatological faith, but rather because, as Stoeger writes, “God’s creative action is immanent in the processes revealed by the sciences”⁴ and the details of these processes can tell us something authentic about how God acts. Stoeger argues that we can discern a level of “order” or “directionality” immanent in natural processes.⁵ This directionality is manifest in the gradual narrowing of evolutionary possibilities through history accompanied by a focused diversification and complexification. This process is at once directional and open and, consequently, Stoeger describes the order of natural processes as a kind of “flexible determinism.” Even more promising than a recognition of the implicit order of natural processes, however, is Stoeger’s emphasis (however latent or underdeveloped) on the implicit relationality of natural processes. A more explicit emphasis upon relationality as the end of all natural processes would bring Stoeger’s arguments more in line with recent developments in evolutionary theory, particularly the “extended evolutionary synthesis,” as well as with mystical strains of the eschatological Christian tradition. In the spirit of Stoeger’s penchant to “combine faith and science in a seamless and radiant pattern,” as Robert Russell writes,⁶ this kind of

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2. In contrast with interdisciplinary approaches (which aim to carve out a space between disciplines for a relational connection and joint collaboration) or multidisciplinary approaches (an approach in which disciplines are united for the purpose of a shared investigation without an attempt to work out a shared language or framework) transdisciplinary approaches are post-foundationalist and seek a thoroughly integrated framework of theology and anthropology without the necessity of securing overarching universals. See J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*, The Gifford Lectures (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006) and *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Agustín Fuentes, “Evolutionary Perspectives and Transdisciplinary Intersections: A Roadmap to Generative Areas of Overlap in Discussing Human Nature,” *Theology and Science* 11 (2013): 106–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2013.780430>; Sung Kyu Park, “A Postfoundationalist Research Paradigm of Practical Theology,” *HTS Theologesie Studies/Theological Studies* 66 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i2.849>; Erin Green, “A Primer in Interdisciplinarity: J. Wentzel van Huyssteen and the Postfoundational Approach,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 27 (2010): 27–36, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tjt.2011.0031>
 3. Stoeger, “The Immanent Directionality,” 166, emphasis original.
 4. *Ibid.*, 166.
 5. *Ibid.*, 165.
 6. Robert John Russell, “William R. Stoeger, SJ (1943–2014): Physicist, Cosmologist, Friend, and Leader in Theology and Science,” *Theology and Science* 12 (2014): 293–95 at 295, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2014.954392>.

holistic scientific–spiritual approach is a tribute to Stoeger’s achievements and life mission. In this essay, then, I will use both niche construction theory (a key component of the contemporary extended evolutionary synthesis) and Edward Schillebeeckx’s mystical–political eschatology as supplementary resources in order to claim that the radically relational nature of evolutionary processes reveals to us the relational nature of creation’s ultimate end: that is, full intimacy with God.

Though Edward Schillebeeckx does not address evolutionary processes in any depth, his claim that “God is the future of man” articulates well the relational destiny of humanity (along with all of creation) without narrowly delineating a positivistic portrait of the *humanum*.⁷ This mystical eschatological orientation deepens Stoeger’s claim that, rather than posing a threat to the recognition of God’s saving action in the world, contingency in evolutionary processes is the condition for the possibility of free intimacy with God.

The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis and “The Layered Interrelationality of Reality”⁸

Several contemporary evolutionary biologists, anthropologists, and philosophers of science⁹ have begun to develop a rich framework for describing processes of evolution as a means to critique overly gene-centric portraits of evolutionary change¹⁰ popularized in the twentieth century. They term this new framework the “extended evolutionary synthesis” in order to highlight that this is an expansion of mainstream evolutionary theory which takes special account of the role of developmental plasticity and non-genetic forms of inheritance in evolutionary development. A major aspect of the extended evolutionary synthesis is the development of “niche construction theory.”

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7. The *humanum* is Schillebeeckx’s term for the eschatologically transformed human person. This transformation has already begun but is not yet complete.
 8. Stoeger, “The Immanent Directionality,” 178.
 9. This scholarly group includes (but is not limited to) Kevin Laland, professor of behavioral and evolutionary biology at the University of St. Andrews (UK); evolutionary ecologist Tobias Uller at Lund University (Sweden); Marc Feldman, evolutionary biologist at Stanford (USA); Kim Sterelny, philosopher of science in the Research School of Social Sciences at Australian National University and Victoria University of Wellington; Gerd B. Müller, theoretical biologist at University of Vienna (Austria); Armin Moczek, evolutionary biologist at Indiana University (USA); Eva Jablonka, geneticist at Tel Aviv University; John Odling-Smee, biological anthropology, University of Oxford (UK); Agustín Fuentes, biological anthropology, University of Notre Dame (USA).
 10. The reduction of evolutionary processes to genetic change is perhaps best represented by the (in)famous statement by molecular geneticist James Watson meant to promote the work of the Human Genome Project, “We used to think that our fate was in our stars, but we now know, in large measure, our fate is in our genes.” Leon Jaroff, “The Gene Hunt,” *Time*, March 20, 1989, 67. This statement was one of the most frequently used quotations of the 1990s. See Jonathan Marks, *Tales of the Ex-Apes: How We Think about Human Evolution* (Oakland: University of California, 2015).

Niche construction theory calls attention to the ways that organisms actively build and destroy niches in their environments, thus creating a dynamic of mutual feedback within which organisms modify their environments and, conversely, environments exert pressure on organisms.¹¹ The “niche” is an intentionally broad term that is both spatial and social referring not only to the landscape or ecology in which an organism is situated, but also to the social behaviors of a species—including shared skills, beliefs, and patterns of relationship and learning—within that ecology.¹²

Mainstream evolutionary theory, especially in the context of twentieth-century gene-centrism, has tended to treat the environment as merely a background condition for the really significant work of change over time—genetic change within a species population—whereas niche construction theory illuminates the reality that organisms usually co-evolve with their environments. In other words, organisms co-direct their own evolution by systematically changing their environments and therefore biasing selection. Thus, the consideration of community niches in evolutionary development adds ecological inheritance to genetic inheritance and, consequently, is able to narrate the evolutionary significance of physical changes in local environments as well as the evolutionary significance of cultural knowledge and behaviors. Ecological inheritance is able to describe more than unidirectional processes of descent (*viz.*, the process of parents passing along replicas of genes to their children) but can also describe the ways that children affect the niche of their parents or how different species can affect the future of each other (*i.e.*, allowing descent to be conceived in both bi-directional and horizontal fashions). Thus, niche construction theory as part of the broader extended evolutionary synthesis dramatizes the ways in which all organisms are embedded in networks of relationships—relationships with other organisms in and through the niches they inhabit.

Stoeger’s persistent description of evolutionary development as systemically oriented even (and perhaps, especially) when one cannot accurately judge the boundaries of the system resonates with this recent development in evolutionary theory. What is often described as “pure chance” or “randomness” is perhaps more accurately described as indeterminacy or even a “flexible determinacy.”¹³ Stoeger argues that physical reality unfolds or develops with a measure of “inevitability”: he writes, “Genuine surprises are possible only because we are ignorant of some aspects of the processes dominating the system or of the conditions which obtain.”¹⁴ While one may not be able to predict evolutionary outcomes, evolutionary outcomes are not random;

11. Celia Deane-Drummond and Agustin Fuentes, “Human Being and Becoming: Situating Theological Anthropology in Interspecies Relationships in an Evolutionary Context,” *Philosophy, Theology, and the Sciences* 1 (2014): 251–75 at 252, <https://doi.org/10.1628/219597714x14025664303164>; Agustin Fuentes, “Human Evolution, Niche Complexity, and the Emergence of a Distinctively Human Imagination,” *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 7 (2014): 241–57 at 244, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1751696X.2014.945720>.

12. Deane-Drummond and Fuentes, “Human Being and Becoming,” 255–56.

13. See Stoeger, “The Immanent Directionality,” 180.

14. *Ibid.*, 168.

they are understandable “within a context of regularities, constraints, and possibilities.”¹⁵ Within the framework of the extended evolutionary synthesis (if we can overlay it here), relationships between elements in a niche are foregrounded. In fact, the niche is both the horizon and content of the relationality of the system. Systemic outcomes are not predictable largely because the system contains within it so many different actors (or “constructors”), but (as Stoeger suggests) neither is it wholly random. Outcomes are always grounded in the system itself. As anthropologist Agustin Fuentes writes, “Humans are not about to evolve wings for flight and tortoises’ legs will not evolve into wheels, no matter what chance mutations arise. . . . evolutionary change is constrained by the structure, development, and history of organisms.”¹⁶ For Stoeger, this lack of predictability does not push against a conclusion that natural processes can be ultimately characterized by an immanent directionality because the end to which all is directed is not a static or concrete outcome, or as Stoeger calls it, “a rigidly defined terminus,” but rather it is the inherently dynamic end of greater and greater relationality via increasing complexification and diversification. In language that is very similar to that used by proponents of the extended evolutionary synthesis, Stoeger both critiques a popular assumption that genes function as a “blueprint” for development¹⁷ as well as the idea that teleology must be supported by something that can function as a blueprint in advance of the end.¹⁸ Instead, “what is essential is that the system moves towards realizing its proximate and more remote possibilities in an ordered way.”¹⁹ I argue that this order is precisely an orientation toward relationship.²⁰

Evolutionary constraints and possibilities are regulated in and through the passage of time. Stoeger writes about this as the “fundamental ‘togetherness’” of “past, present, and future.”²¹ Thus, the evolutionary development of an organism is conditioned by that organism’s relationships—both historical relationships as well as spatial relationships—revealing to us that, as Stoeger writes, “this togetherness is

15. *Ibid.*, 180.

16. Agustin Fuentes, *Race, Monogamy and Other Lies They Told You: Busting Myths about Human Nature* (Berkeley: University of California, 2012), 44.

17. Stoeger, “The Immanent Directionality,” 178. He suggests instead that the genotype is “more like a ‘recipe’—it specifies the necessary ingredients and the stage, place, and way at which they are to be introduced, but the actual shape and structure is determined by the hundreds and sometime thousands of proteins acting at just the right moments and with the right strengths.”

18. *Ibid.*, 183.

19. *Ibid.*

20. The reader may note that relationality is a constant throughout evolutionary processes. Indeed, evolutionary change is not possible apart from relationality. Thus, relationality is not only the end of a processes but also a salient characteristic of the process itself. In this way, relationality is eschatologically “already.” At the same time, insofar as relationality is increasingly intensified and made more complex with evolutionary change it is “not yet” complete.

21. Stoeger, “The Immanent Directionality,” 170.

fundamentally what space and time, and the laws of nature operating within them, do for us—at a very basic level—bringing disparate entities into relationship.”²² Thus, the laws of nature bring all into relationship with all. Past evolutionary developments become future environments or “laboratories”²³ for new developments, bringing past, present, and future into relationship; and landscapes situate organisms’ histories and futures such that they affect and form the conditions for other organisms’ histories and futures, bringing biotic and abiotic elements within a niche into relationship. This process of constructing and maintaining relationships between organisms, landscapes, pasts and futures is not a process of homogenization but rather one in which relationality (or “unity”) is cultivated in and through diversification and complexification. As Stoeger writes, “Nature evolves as a constantly diversifying unity, which at the same time respects—to a greater or lesser extent—the individuality and autonomy of the components, and yet uses those components as the basis for higher level organization.”²⁴ Indeed, all evolutionary processes are directed toward greater and greater diversification and complexification²⁵ revealing to us something important about the nature of intimate relationality applicable to our understanding of God’s saving action (and God’s relation to creation): autonomy is the condition for the possibility of rich relationality; diversity is the condition for the possibility of rich intimacy; and contingency is the condition for the possibility of free intimacy with God. In many ways, this is a classic Thomistic principle and one to which William Stoeger is deeply committed. But, it is also apparent that Stoeger’s observation of evolutionary and cosmological development strengthened this commitment and gave it weight. Stoeger, for example, argues that the “the actualization of [evolutionary] possibilities are not independent” within a natural system²⁶ but instead that the building of possibilities and constraints over time and between elements of a natural system create a “nested set of directionalities which gradually emerge with ever greater specificity in certain locals within the overall evolutionary manifold.”²⁷ This configuration can support “a very rich notion of directionality and teleology, which gives freedom and autonomy to the laws and processes of nature and encourages them to explore and realize the full range of proximate and more remote potentialities of the universe.”²⁸ As these ends gradually narrow over time, some possibilities are focused and others are excluded.²⁹ An explicit appropriation of niche construction theory can deepen this

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 171.

24. *Ibid.*, 181.

25. *Ibid.*, 167.

26. *Ibid.*, 184.

27. *Ibid.*, 183.

28. *Ibid.*, 185.

29. *Ibid.*, 184. Stoeger is aware of more complex process than standard accounts of evolutionary theory usually admit. The genome is not absolutely deterministic, but rather the expression of genetic information is, as Stoeger writes, “radically context-dependent, as all information is, relative to each pair of levels between which it is communicated. Its meaning and its functional expression is always relative to the whole organism [and, I would

commitment to a rich theology of creation even further by highlighting how the autonomy of elements within a niche does not contradict their fundamental relationality. In fact, autonomy or contingency is a condition for the possibility of diversity and complexification and builds, as Stoeger would put it, “the layered interrelationality of reality.”³⁰

Directed toward Relationship with God: William Stoeger and Edward Schillebeeckx’s Mystical Eschatology

Stoeger distinguishes between the immanent directionality that we can discern scientifically and a “conscious” or “intentional” directionality that we can discern through the eyes of (Christian) faith: he writes:

At this level we become aware that God is somehow working within the immanent dynamisms and interlocking directionalities of the evolutionary process—despite and even through its autonomy, contingency, inner freedom, and apparent blindness. This conscious divine purposiveness is only unambiguously manifest in God’s revelation of God’s action and intention to us.³¹

While Stoeger does not detail what kind of Christian theological vision can arise from an attention to the conscious divine directionality of creation, he creates a space to argue that (a) a Christian teleology is not contradicted by a scientific view of the natural world as well as that (b) the immanent directionality of the natural world tells us something about the way that God’s intentional action with respect to creation—namely, for Stoeger, that God respects the autonomy and contingency of creation and works in and through this autonomy and contingency in order to bring creation to its ultimate end. But, I wonder if we can discover even more resonances between the immanent directionality observable in nature and Christian eschatology. Can the kind of directionality that we observe scientifically in natural processes inform our Christian eschatological language? More specifically, can this dynamic of flexible determinism and the layered interrelationality of all reality observable in nature highlight some key eschatological insights about the possibilities and limits of discerning our ends? The flexibly deterministic but also interrelational nature of evolutionary processes can point us toward the relational and yet also open nature of creation’s ultimate end: that is, full intimacy with God.

Edward Schillebeeckx very rarely reflected on human evolution in his theological writings. In one notable essay, “Man and His Bodily World,” from the early part of his

add, relative to the whole environment, niche in which the organism operates]—the organism itself establishes a proximate context for understanding what the information means and how it is to be used (what it is for)—and to the conditions obtaining at each stage of its development and its life.” *Ibid.*, 177.

30. *Ibid.*, 178.

31. *Ibid.*, 186; see also 189.

career, however, Schillebeeckx addresses the relationship between biological evolution, the human body, and the human spirit. He argues that the non-dualistic duality of body and spirit within the human person enables both the reality of evolution of the human body *qua* body and a certain kind of independence of the human spirit from the forces of evolution. Yet, at the same time, the human body *qua* human is always an expression of the human spirit. As Schillebeeckx puts it, “the *humanity* of the body is something of the soul itself, the soul’s communication of itself to the body, by means of which man is man. In this way, the human body is the spirit appearing in our world.”³² Guiding his formulation in this way is a concern that if the human spirit is wholly elided with the human body, then this may compromise human freedom. For Schillebeeckx human freedom and, in particular, the distinctively human capacity to distance oneself from the “biological” is in contrast with other animals’ supposedly purely instinctual modes of behavior. If Schillebeeckx was clearer about the distinctiveness of human bodies from the bodies of other animals,³³ he might be able to avoid some of the mental gymnastics involved with needing to separate the spirit from the body while still avoiding a stark dualism.³⁴ Even despite these limitations, he articulates in this essay an insight that guides my argument here: that the natural processes of evolution point to God as the creator and orchestrator of a profound degree of interrelationality among creatures. As Schillebeeckx puts it:

It is up to the natural sciences to demonstrate to us whether there is evolution—philosophy and theology cannot make any judgement here. But if there is evolution, we are bound to say that there is, horizontally, certainly a vast process of development, but that precisely this development, vertically, is the object of God’s creation. God’s creative activity cannot be added to the inward forces of evolution within this world. God creates things in their structure of mutual dependence.³⁵

It is this kind of natural dependency among and between creatures, which God has created, that points to the ultimate relational destiny of all of creation. In the later

32. Edward Schillebeeckx, “Man and His Bodily World,” in *World and Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1971), 238–68 at 243.

33. See, for example, the work of anthropologist Terrence Deacon who argues that human cultural behaviors (especially human language and symbolic modes of thought) have shaped human bodies in significant ways. Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: the Co-evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997). Interestingly, he frequently uses biblical language to describe this phenomenon, for example, “the word became flesh” and “we are made in the image of the word,” perhaps indirectly illuminating the debt that the scientific community owes the Christian theological tradition which has long wrestled with how to articulate the material significance of symbolic thought and behavior for humans.

34. This certainly is not Schillebeeckx’s only problem here. In addition, his description of animal behavior as purely instinctual is too simplistic. Biological anthropologists today largely describe humans as both similar to and distinct from other animals. Both sides of this dialectic need to be given weight in order to arrive at an accurate understanding of the human person.

35. Schillebeeckx, “Man and His Bodily World,” 242.

part of his career, though without reference to evolution specifically, Schillebeeckx provides us with a firm foundation for this kind of argument with his claim, “God is the future of man.” The statement that God is our future articulates well the relational destiny of humanity without narrowly delineating a positivistic portrait of the *humanum*. If God is our future, creation has (as Stoeger also argues) both an open yet also deterministic end.

Edward Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the teleology of creation, like Stoeger’s, also eschews the idea that a blueprint or “rigidly defined terminus” is at play. For Schillebeeckx, all creation tends toward God as its end and God, *as* an end, is “new each moment.”³⁶ Therefore, the end of creation is both radically relational and dynamically open. This end in God is not discernable in history apart from the promise of revelation for Schillebeeckx, just as for Stoeger a conscious directionality of history is not discernable scientifically, but can only be discerned in light of the history of God’s faithfulness interpreted as a promise, that is, as an expectation of “continuous fulfillment” of divine faithfulness.³⁷ Creation’s completion in God “discloses itself as essentially a *promise*. . . which of its very nature implies an openness to the future and to new historical realizations.”³⁸ History, insofar as it is inflected by a promise, is oriented toward future fulfillment and this fulfillment can only come about in and through our participative action. Therefore, claims by Christian eschatological faith about the conscious directionality of history are not merely statements of orthodoxy, but also delineations of orthopraxis. As Schillebeeckx explains, dogma “is a question of being oriented towards the grace of the future, remembering God’s promise and being active in faith and, in so doing, *making* dogma true. The profession of faith and dogma, after all, proclaim a future which must be realized in hope and is therefore not exclusively the object of contemplation but a task to be accomplished.”³⁹ Thus, our ultimate end is not something that simply happens to us, but instead is a transformation in which we participate. We work (alongside of God) in constructing the future that brings us to completion. You can notice in my language an intentional calling upon the language of niche construction—an insistence on the idea that organisms exercise co-agency in carving out their evolutionary futures. God, in Schillebeeckx’s view, is the “One who is to come” and in so coming makes everything new.⁴⁰ And, yet, this process of making things new is a transformation that does not happen from without. As Schillebeeckx writes,

Because God has promised us a future of salvation in grace *despite* our sinful history, it is easy for us to believe that this future in grace falls vertically into the terrestrial event, which would otherwise simply continue to take place as history without salvation. But eschatological hope implies faith that the Christian, by God’s justification, is responsible for the terrestrial

36. Edward Schillebeeckx, *God is New Each Moment* (New York: Seabury, 1983).

37. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 6.

38. Edward Schillebeeckx, *God, the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 36, emphasis original.

39. *Ibid.*, 38.

40. *Ibid.*, 182.

event itself becoming a history of salvation. . . . Just as our sinful freedom makes our human history into a history without salvation, so too will God transform this history without salvation into a saving event *in and through* our freedom into which we have been liberated in faith. The believer not only interprets history—he above all *changes* it.⁴¹

Thus, this God who respects the autonomy of creation (who Stoeger also describes) is the same God who invites us into the eschatological project and calls us to participate in the process of arriving at our own ends. We both receive our eschatological future as a gift as well as construct this future. We are, at once, promised a future and we create this future ourselves. Only a rich theology of creation that insists on the primacy of autonomy and contingency can support these kinds of paradoxical statements. As Schillebeeckx puts it, “[This] is the paradox of Christianity—we tread in the footsteps of the God who is to come to us from the future and, in so doing, it is still we who make history.”⁴² In the construction of our niche we make history and yet (in a non-competitive way) we are being directed toward an end in God.

Because, for Schillebeeckx, salvation is a promise and nowhere yet objectively complete,⁴³ we cannot definitely envision the wholeness of salvation. Like Stoeger, Schillebeeckx rejects a “blueprint” or narrowly deterministic vision of creation’s end out of fear of both totalitarian visions of the human and idolatrous visions of God.⁴⁴ A rigidly deterministic vision of humanity (or any created reality) can only function to limit both God and creation, cutting short the full possibilities of grace as well as of the human imagination. As a result, any vision of created good can only be partial or, even more often, a *negative* vision, that is, a sense protest, a feeling “this cannot go on,”⁴⁵ an experience of negative contrast. As Schillebeeckx explains:

The believer, who knows of the eschatological fulfillment promised to mankind and to man’s history, will be unable to recognize in anything that has already been accomplished “a new heaven and a new earth.” Unlike the Marxist, for example, he will not even venture to give a positive name to the ultimate fulfillment that is to come. The Christian leaves the future much more open For the Christian, it is an ideological misconception to call one concrete stage in the development of history the ultimate point.⁴⁶

Schillebeeckx connects this kind of perpetual critique of the *status quo* as informed by Christian eschatological hope to both political and mystical strains within the Christian tradition. In particular, political protest and apophatic understanding of God come together in an insistence upon constant criticism of both the past and the present.⁴⁷

41. Ibid., 185–56, emphases original.

42. Ibid., 190.

43. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 25. See also Schillebeeckx, *God, the Future of Man*, 194.

44. Ibid., *Christ*, 731, 795.

45. Schillebeeckx, *God, the Future of Man*, 164.

46. Ibid., 186.

47. Ibid., 197.

To name *God* as our future critiques the structure of the past and present while still leaving open the possibility of the fundamental goodness of creation: creation is able to disclose God even partially or in absence. This functions as a way to refuse to nail down in a positivistic fashion our *telos*, especially insofar as God is new each moment. God remains radically transcendent (i.e., ever receding and ever new) while, at the same time, radically immanent (i.e., finding expression in history).

The person of faith has just as little a grasp of creation's end as does the person who has no faith: both have no access to a concrete vision of the end. Yet the person of faith does have an awareness of God's promise to bring creation to fulfillment. In other words, the person of faith has an assurance that a *telos* exists and that this *telos* is possible,⁴⁸ without a concrete vision of how and when this end will be brought about. The nature of this *telos* is unclear apart from the reality that it is a promise of wholeness and full communion with God. In other words, it is promise of coming to completion in relationship (relationship with the Divine, relationship with oneself, and relationship with other creatures). Both the person of faith and the person of no faith must "seek fumblingly and consider various alternatives, keeping in the back of his mind, as he searches, human values already realized in history."⁴⁹ Instead of a positivistic vision toward which we are headed, Schillebeeckx offers a set of seven "impulses and orientations, values and spheres of value,"⁵⁰ "co-ordinates" of salvation.⁵¹ These are particularly focused on the shape of human eschatological good, but (especially as the first co-ordinate highlights) human eschatological good is fundamentally related to the eschatological end of all of creation. These "anthropological constants" do provide an authentic directionality, particularly insofar as they narrow down a range of possibilities focusing on some and excluding others (as Stoeger would put it⁵²), but they stop just short of providing a concrete positive vision of the flourishing of creation. All seven of these co-ordinates are understood negatively—that is, they function to point out that which cannot be human good, in other words, that which cannot represent the eschatological fulfillment of creation.⁵³ First, the eschatological end of all creation cannot leave behind or exclude the corporeal, the natural and the ecological. We cannot escape our bodies and our ecologies. We either thrive or are doomed within the context of our natural environment(s). Put positively, then, eschatological salvation must somehow involve materiality. This brings us to the second anthropological constant: the eschatological end of creation cannot leave behind the interpersonal. In a parallel fashion, we either thrive or are doomed in relationship with others.⁵⁴ Schillebeeckx explains:

The person is essentially related to other, to fellow persons. . . . It is precisely through this mutual relationship to others that the limitation of man's own individuality is transcended in

48. *Ibid.*, 193.

49. *Ibid.*, 191.

50. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 733.

51. *Ibid.*, 734.

52. Stoeger, "The Immanent Directionality," 184.

53. He does not offer these a definitive number. There could be more.

54. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 736–37.

free, loving affirmation of the other, and the person himself arrives at personal identity. The co-humanity with which we encounter one another as people, i.e., as an aim and an end and not as a means for something or other, is an anthropological constant which looks for norms without which whole and livable humanity is impossible here and now.⁵⁵

Here would be a natural place to consider human relationships with non-human animals and organisms, but Schillebeeckx's reflection remains rather anthropocentric. With an awareness of niche construction theory, we can affirm in ways that Schillebeeckx did not that humanness is always constructed in and through relationships with the other biotic and abiotic elements within our niche. Consequently, we must modify Schillebeeckx's formulation to insist that the interpersonal reality of the eschaton includes human animal and non-human animal relationality.

Schillebeeckx's third anthropological constant reinforces that the eschatological end of creation cannot leave behind or exclude the transformation of social and institutional structures. He argues that because "there can be no permanent life worthy of men without a degree of institutionalizing," these institutions must become transformed so as to reflect the good of humankind in their particular time and place.⁵⁶ And this leads directly to the fourth anthropological constant: "the conditioning of people and culture by time and space."⁵⁷ Human good is always expressed and embodied in history. Schillebeeckx warns, "the presumption of adopting a standpoint outside *historical* action and thought is a danger to true humanity."⁵⁸ Fifth, the eschatological end of creation cannot be achieved in the separation of theory from practice. Human meaning and well-being only can be found in real, historical time and in robust cultural expression.⁵⁹ Sixth, the eschatological end of creation cannot fail to involve the religious and "para-religious" dimensions of humanity. A fundamental trust is basic to human experience. This trust, this "form of faith" is "the ground for [human] hope" and makes possible action in pursuit of the good.⁶⁰ Therefore, "any liberation which by passes a *religious redemption* is only a partial liberation, and furthermore, if it claims to be the *total* liberation of man by nature, destroys a real dimension of humanity and in the last resort uproots man instead of liberating him."⁶¹ Seventh, these co-ordinates form a synthesis that "cannot be reduced either idealistically or materialistically" to any one of these alone.⁶² Consequently, relationship is primary even between co-ordinates in determining the integrated shape of eschatological salvation. Schillebeeckx explains,

Thus *Christian salvation*, in the centuries-old biblical tradition called redemption, and meant as salvation from God *for men*, is concerned with the whole system of co-ordinates in which

55. Ibid., 737.

56. Ibid., 738.

57. Ibid., 738.

58. Ibid., 739, emphasis original.

59. Ibid., 740.

60. Ibid., 741.

61. Ibid., 741.

62. Ibid., 741.

man can really be man. This salvation—the wholeness of man—cannot just be sought in one or other of these constants, say exclusively in “ecological appeals,” in an exclusive “be nice to one another,” in the exclusive overthrow of an economic system . . . , or in exclusively mystical experiences: “Alleluia, he is risen!” On the other hand, the *synthesis* of all of this is clearly an “already now” and a “not yet.”⁶³

Thus, we (along with all of creation) are in the process of achieving this integration, this wholeness of relationship both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. Salvation, for Schillebeeckx, is indeed “being whole” or possessing “integrity.”⁶⁴ For Schillebeeckx, living into this reality, this eschatological end (however partially) is cultivated in authentic Christian mysticism.

In an intentional contrast to the caricature of Christian mysticism popularized in the seventeenth century (following the rise of the natural sciences and the disenchantment of nature) as an exclusively inwardly focused form of personal relationship with God,⁶⁵ Schillebeeckx characterizes authentic Christian mysticism as the “theological life of faith, hope and love” therefore embodied in the exercise of virtue, action that is at once political, interpersonal, and representative of “cognitive union with God.”⁶⁶ Thus, it is a holistic “way of life.”⁶⁷ Mystical relationship with God is always negatively inflected because of the distance between the kind of beings that we are (created, finite) and the kind of being that God is (uncreated, infinite). The reality of our borderline eschatological existence—in which salvation is not yet complete—is that this distance is experienced as a “painful feeling of absence: not-seeing.”⁶⁸ Despite this, a mystical relationship with God supports a deeper relationship with all of creation. As Schillebeeckx explains, “Authentic mysticism is never flight from the world but, on the basis of a first disintegrating source-experience, an integrating and reconciling mercy with all things. It is approach, not flight.”⁶⁹ It is this kind of mystical relationship with God that is the source of Christian life and the center from which we can understand the significance of theological statements. Consequently, when contemplating our end and the end of all creation we should understand the theological statement “God is the Future of humankind” according to a “triplex via” of all mystical

63. *Ibid.*, 743, emphases original.

64. *Ibid.*, 746.

65. This is a dangerous kind of mysticism because it can function as an uncritical affirmation of the *status quo*. It can function to uphold an illusory dualism of persons and structures “speak[ing] of the priority of the human realm and the merely secondary significance of the institutional element in human life.” Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 744. I would add that this kind of mysticism can also function to uphold an illusory dualism of the human realm as separate from nature. Schillebeeckx argues that this kind of misinterpretation of mysticism “makes an active appearance precisely where the churches become socially and politically aware . . . [in order] to tone down opposition to social impoverishment.” Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York, Crossroad, 1990), 68.

66. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 69.

67. *Ibid.*, 71.

68. *Ibid.*, 71.

69. *Ibid.*, 72.

speech: it is simultaneously an act of saying and unsaying in such a way that transcends both affirmative and negative statements.⁷⁰ In the first moment, it is an affirmative statement: we have a future (an end) and that end is the fulfillment of relationship with God. In the second moment, it is a negative statement: we cannot positively grasp this end precisely because we have not experienced this fullness of relationship.⁷¹ And, in the third moment, it is a statement beyond affirmation and negation that immerses us in the task of living with a concern to transform our history into salvation history.⁷² Our eschatological future is both a gift and a task in ongoing relationship with a God who respects the autonomy of creation and, particularly, our capacity for creative construction. We live into a flexible determinism, participating with God to bring creation to its *telos*, observing the constraints and possibilities of this moment in evolutionary history and carving out a future which has been both given to us as a gift but is also ours to make.⁷³

When William Stoeger's insight about the immanent directionality of natural processes is viewed in light of recent developments within evolutionary theory—namely, the extended evolutionary synthesis and its key component, niche construction theory—relationality emerges as the enduring order of natural processes. The radically relational nature of evolutionary processes reveals to Christians the relational nature of creation's ultimate end: that is, full intimacy with God. Rather than posing a threat to the recognition of God's saving action in the world, the kind of contingency and autonomy that we observe in natural processes (and especially in our own patterns of niche construction) is the condition for the possibility of free intimacy with God. The end to which creation is directed is the fullness of this kind of relationship with God. As Schillebeeckx argues, God is our future. The profoundly interrelational nature of reality points to relationality as both the order of natural processes as well as creation's open, yet final, end.

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70. Ibid., 76–77.

71. It should be noted that even if we might have the opportunity to experience the fullness of mystical union with God (our end), this experience would not be able to be captured in a definitive way by existing conceptual categories (either linguistic or non-linguistic). Yet, this point is not nearly as central to a dialogue with William Stoeger's approach as is the one above: namely, that our end in God (especially insofar as it is not yet) remains both open and deterministic.

72. Here I am deliberately echoing Schillebeeckx's concern that the *via eminentiae*, the third moment of the *triplex via*, is not "a philosophical or purely conceptual, dialectical thought-process" but rather is an enacted in a "history of solidarity, justice and love made by men and women in a world of egotism, injustice and lovelessness." Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 77.

73. Schillebeeckx, *God, the Future of Man*, 190.

Author biography

Julia Feder is Assistant Professor of Theology at Creighton University (Omaha, NE). She specializes in contemporary Christian thinking at the intersection of theology, science and human suffering. She is in the final stages of revising her book, *Trauma and Salvation: A Theology of Healing*, for publication with Fortress Press and at work beginning another project on the centrality of symbol-making in the human niche.