

Does Nature Know Sex?: A Consideration of Difference between Pantheism and Panentheism

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Abstract

This paper is to critically compare R.S. Corrington's pantheism and C. Keller's panentheism by the medium of a thought of sex. Human sexual behavior is between the transcendental and the natural. It is really natural behavior in that it derives from the species' need for reproduction. However, there lies some transcendental feature in it in that human individuals appropriate its natural instinct in a subliminal way to think of love. When one says, 'Let's make love,' these words implicitly refers to both dimensions at once. The crucial difference between pantheism and panentheism is that God is Nature in pantheism, while God is bigger than Nature in panentheism. Here the end of panentheism points to the bigger part of God, which is the divine tran-

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scendental feature. What if sex in its subliminal form refers to the way of the transcendental in nature? Indeed, the sacred is always revealed in our quotidian lives. The transcendental does not mean any place in heaven. In this sense, sex has a potential to become the transcendental. Real love goes beyond the hormonal and algorithmic process of human biology.

- Keywords

pantheism, panentheism, Corrington, Keller, sex, gender

I. Introduction

The whole idea of this paper is that the *en* of panentheism may mean sex and that sex would be one of the examples of the *en* of panentheism. In so doing, it hopes to show that the “*en*,” which is placed between nature and god, is a pointer of the between. The idea of the betweenness is very important for Corrington to conceptualize nature into the difference between nature naturing and nature natured, which derives from B. Spinoza.¹ The division of nature is not separation, but it is to mark a linguistically indescribable aspect of nature, nature naturing. Like *Dao* in *DaoDeJing* (『道德經』), nature has dimension that cannot be named. It is not due to the limitation of human language, but it rather derives from the fundamental feature of nature transcending itself. Even the word ‘transcendence’ cannot capture it for human cognition. The ‘*en*’ of pan-en-theism may function as the transcending aspect of the divine when it comes to the relation between God and nature. Pantheism refers to a position that nature is god and that god is nature. However, panentheism sees that nature is (or belongs to) God and that God is bigger than nature. This difference of position is inscribed in the word ‘*en*’ of panentheism. Note that the *en* of panentheism is not about transcendence but about whether the transcendently ever-receding aspect is within the divine perimeter. The argument in this paper is not to check if this aspect belongs to God or nature. If one can see our quotidian lives potentially as the sacred locus of transcendence, the distance between panentheism and pantheism is not as far as is usually thought.

1 Cf. Robert S. Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 116-159.

One can rotate the question along the axis of difference between pan(en)theism and naturalism. It is to ask if the *en* of panentheism is religiously transcendental or natural. However, even this discernment of the transcendental and the natural cannot sustain when Keller sees divinity in the mundane multiplicities of the universe and when Corrington finds the sacred folds in our quotidian contexts.² So then, why does one have to distinguish one from the other? This is the question this paper asks both Keller and Corrington. If one has to distinguish one from the other, the reason for it resides in the necessity of the logic of the not-two, which does not mean that they are the same. Whether one sees the unnamable aspect as the excess of natural processes or as the trace (or residue) of divine activities in the world seems to me an East-Asian logic of the-not-two(不二), which means that they are neither the same nor different. Obviously, they are not the same. However, to say that they are not the same does not mean to say that they are different. Further, it does not even mean that they are partly the same and partly different. Rather, the logic of the not-two is that of the Between. Thus, the 'en' may refer to a process, in which the quotidian may turn into the sacred. The process is possible, for the *en* is located in the Between, which may be 'complication' for Keller and the betweenness for Corrington and me. If *com-pli-cation* may mean 'together-to-work-diligently',³ it seems to me that complication may be the locus of the community of interpreters, which creatively produces the excess(es) out of our existing interpretation of nature (natured).⁴ If

2 The term 'sacred folds' is Corrington's one to refer to "concrescences of the spirits" "within the worlds that we assimilate": R.S. Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 225.

3 Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 169.

so, one can have a thought experiment on sex whether it can turn into a process of the sacred within the human quotidian life through the works of the community of interpreters. In so doing, one can argue that the en in panentheism does not simply refer to the something-bigger of the divine but rather to the transformative potential of human quotidian life.

II. Sex in the Nature or Sex and the Nature?

Human sexuality may be transcendental in that it exceeds its biological purpose of design to reproduce. Humans appropriate it for the physical pleasure it offers and then transform it into a means for the communication of love. This aspect of human sexuality is concealed by the power of capitalism in the contemporary consumerist society, in which sex is commercially commodified. The commodification of sex is based upon the perverse fixation of sex on the binary structure of man and woman in which any possibility of wo/man is at the outset blocked. However, sex from the beginning is not confined to the binary way of thinking of man and woman. Let me introduce some part of Walt Whitman's poem:

*I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,*

4 Corrington defines the community of interpreters as "a categorial and semiotic clearing that represents the opening power of the human over the orders of nature": R.S. Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters: On the Hermeneutics of Nature and the Bible in the American Philosophical Tradition*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 3, 2nd printing (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 85.

*And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.*⁵

Indeed, when humans are described as 'beings,' they do not exclusively consist of man and woman. I am a husband, father, lecturer, pastor, intellect, son, old man, teacher, and so on. I am 'entangled' in these multiplicities. Each word of my professions and identities has its related word(s) of other part. For example, when I say I am a man, it is already and always related to the word 'woman,' although the latter is not mentioned. All human words are already entangled, consciously and unconsciously. Whitman says, "the woman the same as the man" and "it is as great to be a woman as the be a man." These days, we know some philosophers saying of 'becoming-woman.' I'm not saying that all of us ought to be women, regardless of sex, but I want to share with J. Butler that sex does not determine gender, but rather that gender determines sex. Here, Butler subverts our commonsensical understanding of the relationship of sex and gender. That is, sex is not what we may think of. It is not biologically determined. Our images of being-man and being-woman do not derive from our inborn biological, that is, genetic, propensities but from our culturally structured stereotypes of sexes.⁶ I do not want to argue that sex is culturally constructed, but I just want to point out that our understanding of sex(es) is not quite close enough to the sex in nature. Sex seems to have a dimension ever-receding from our human cognition.

Let's get back to our traditional binary understanding of sex, the so-called heterosexuality. In that humans takes sexual pleasure for itself

5 Recited from Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 202.

6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Korean Translation by Hyun-Jun Jo (Paju, Kyunggi: Munhakdongnae, 2008), 290.

beyond its genetic design purpose, one may say that it is transcendental. Further, in this sense, nature may be transcendental always. It may seem that sex has a spandrel effect, as S.J. Gould terms. That is, sexual pleasure is not originally evolutionarily designed for purpose but for a kind of bait to attract heterosexual animal organisms to reproductive acts. Sexual pleasure is not the purpose of sex, but reproduction is the purpose. However, humans seek for the sexual pleasure for itself, although their sexual behavior is still in most cases on the trek of reproduction. This is a very rare phenomenon in animal kingdom, for animals usually have sex or copulate only in breeding season. Sex requires much energy and effort for it, so most animal do not do it except in designated season by sex hormone. Sometimes or mostly in our commonsensical misunderstanding, sex is a kind of animal instinct, but animals do not do it whenever they want. For animals, sex is strictly genetically programmed behavior in that they copulate only when sex hormone is secreted. However, for humans, sex is not hormonally directed, but human desire for it enable the neurons to secrete the hormone. This is a huge difference between human and animal sexual behaviors although human sexuality still works based upon the biological mechanism, its driving force is not animal instinct but rather human desire. In human culture, sex or our judgment on it faces choice between animal instinct and human desire. Human beings still can regard sexual desire and act as part of animal instinct or as something semiotic in that they can appropriate it for a communicative token of love between sexual partners. If one is sane, nobody would say, "let's have sex." Instead, almost everyone put it this way: 'let's make love.' This kind of linguistic sublimation is quite human, all too human. Which means that humans don't take the natural in itself and

that they instead appropriate it into human cultural area. Here, the semiosis of sex is inverted, in that sign refers to something else rather than itself. Semiotic activity is to achieve something else, but, in the case of sex, genetic purpose becomes the byproduct of human cultural act. Indeed, heterosexuality may not be the biological norm for human sexual behavior. Rather, it may be the primal example of the cultural transcendence of nature or biology. Sex should not be defined as part of animal instinct because sex already transcends its animality towards human semiosis.

However, this transcendental dimension of sex does not transcend its animal realm, but it rather resides in it. This semiotically excessive aspect of sex does not come from any purely transcendental realm from the heaven. Rather, it comes from the underside of nature. By the words 'underside of nature,' I mean that nature has its ever-receding aspect from human cognition. Corrington calls it nature naturing, which may incarnate itself within human realm, as a form of the sacred fold, given that the sacred folds "as concrescences of spirits" refer to "the ever-receding underconscious of nature."⁷ Indeed, the sacred fold requires certain interpretation. For example, Saul of Tarsus's experience on the road to Darmascus is interpretatively applied to all his later experiences in life.⁸ Thus, this natural dimension needs interpretative acts for its incarnation or its concrescence. Semiosis always contain its interpretive aspect, at least according to C.S. Peirce.⁹ Then, it may be the fold in Keller, according to whom it originally means 'to work diligently.' However, when sex transcends its animal instinct, it

7 Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy*, 225.

8 Ibid.

9 Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 8.

may become a sacred fold, which can mean divinity or spirits in (folding) process.

III. The negativity of nature(*chora*) and the fold.

Then, what is sex, when it contains its undecidable aspect within itself? Can we say that sex is indeed multiplicity? Only in the sense that sex is not captured by our conceptual structure. This feature of undefinability is the fundamental feature of nature. For Corrington, nature is not a thing to be clearly defined, but it is more like the Thing (*Ding an sich*). Corrington mentions two dimensions (or sides) of nature, nature and natured, the un/saying and the said. These do not refer to two things, but one which cannot be said once for all. The diremption of nature takes place by a certain negativity, which is *chora*.¹⁰ It is a denial of the return of the sign signifying the origin, that is, nature. This is the fundamental feature of nature. This denial is for nature to communicate itself to us. So, we are denied our access to the origin. nature's apophasis. Fundamentally, we are destined to fail to conceptualize or explain Nature. Are we doomed?

The multiple is folded inward and/or outward. The way to fold itself is a kind of mystery of life. Proteins fold in a fourfold way. This three-dimensional shape of protein determines the information the protein contains. Shape determines information? Yes, not vice versa. We do not know exactly how they fold themselves, but one thing we know is that the way of folding is very important. Keller lets us know that fold, etymologically traced back to *ply* in English, means 'to work

10 Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 28.

diligently.’¹¹ Yes, indeed, the fold is a work, act, or activity. In other words, it is a process. And this is a way to conceptually speak of nature or thing.

For Corrington, fold is always “sacred fold,”¹² which is generated, for example, by the public works of art. The sacred folding is “the semiotic infolding of numinous and powerful psychanalytic material.”¹³ One remembers that nature for Spinoza is none other than God (*Deus sive Natura*). As a matter of fact, Corrington brings his notion of nature from this Spinozean concept of God as nature, which is ramifying into the naturing and the natured.¹⁴ However, he does not want to identify nature with God. Although he introduces the ever-receding or transcendental aspect of nature to his philosophy, Corrington wants to emphasize that there is no outside of nature. It is to be aware of the historically repeated unfortunate facts that religious transcendentalism easily falls prey to political manipulation. Instead of transcendence, Corrington puts everything into nature, and divinity now resides everywhere in nature. In nature, anywhere one finds any sacredness is sacred.

The difference between panentheism and pantheism is the matter of perspective. Corrington’s pantheism looks at the world from the above, and indeed, his philosophy is none other than the ordinal metaphysics. In contrast, Keller sees the world from the bottom-up. That is, from the multiplicities in quotidian ambiguous and uncertain lives. Thus, the “*en*” in pan-en-theism does not refer to the difference be-

11 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 169.

12 Robert S. Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness: An Essay in Ordinal Phenomenology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 91.

13 Ibid.

14 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 186.

tween panentheism and pantheism, but to the difference of the ways of understanding the one-and-many dyad. Panentheism emphasizes the manifold of nature, while pantheism puts its stress upon the unity of the wholeness of nature. According to Keller,

The world-all, as such, remains as unknown (consider dark energy) as any deity that could enfold it. In other words, the en is nothing other than the fold. In the en, theos is then not the same or similar to the all, but nonetheless its repetition. The pan repeats the theos that unfolds it. Theos is the repetition and thus the inhabitation of pan--the envisagement of difference itself. This is to be sure a deterritorialized and deterritorializing deity--entangled in a spatiotemporality that, at any point, clouds into the infinite. This being would be of little use to those who do not occasionally need to wrap their minds around it All. In time.¹⁵

Yes, the “deterritorialized and deterritorializing deity,” indeed. Is this exactly what Corrington wants to say by introducing the Spinoza’s distinction between nature naturing and nature natured and further by introducing his notion of “deep pantheism”?¹⁶ Yes and no at the same time. Keller asks a question to Deleuze: “how could the Deleuzean immanence purify itself of that infinite collective being that for Spinoza was, after all, *God*--hardly less than was the (not) God of the apophatic tradition?”¹⁷ To this question, Keller herself answers with

15 Ibid.

16 Corrington calls his pantheism “deep pantheism.” Here, the word ‘deep’ refers to the “under-conscious dimension” of nature: Robert S. Corrington, *Deep Pantheism: Toward a New Transcendentalism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), ix.

17 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 187.

a "plurisingularity (Elohim)" in scripture or "in Tertullian's trinity of 'different not divided' already a triple fold."¹⁸ After all, the en of panentheism may not be criticized by the pantheist perspective, because the God in Keller's panentheism does not mean any transcendent or transcendental being but it rather refers to "theopoiesis, 'God-making,'" which means "materializing in and beyond speech a love-relation to your widest world."¹⁹ Remember? *Theosis* by Gregory of Nyssa originally signifies " 'divinization' or 'becoming God' ".²⁰

The reason why Corrington avoids the term, 'God,' all the time is that God is associated with the classical Christian notion of the transcendental but personal deity. The Christian notion of God is full of contradictions and always tribal. However, this is the reason why Keller takes the paradox of God into her theology, for theology is not about explaining away mystery in the multiplicities of the world. Rather, it takes the paradoxes and ironies of life as its starting point, hoping that hope arises against and without hope. The fold is nothing but 'together(*com*)-to-work-diligently(*pli*)-with-sincerity(*cation*). After all, the sacred fold in Corrington is an experience of interpretative musement, which takes place against existing commonsensical interpretive frameworks. This experience of being against the existing and/or established experience and knowledge puts the self between the transcendental and the ordinary. It is none other than the experience of ecstasy in the sense of ec-stacy.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 306.

20 Ibid., 307.

IV. Nature, Genius and Sex

What does the word ecstatic naturalism mean? ‘Naturalist’ is thought of as the one who never thinks of the outside of nature. All existing things are just in nature, but the word ‘ecstatic’ in Corrington’s ecstatic naturalism seems to be against the commonsensical definition of naturalism or pantheism. What does the word ‘ecstatic’ mean here? Philosophically, ecstasy derives from the ancient Greek, *ekstasis*, which means “to be or stand outside oneself,”²¹ and, in this sense, existential philosophy defines self as always being outside one-self. As a matter of fact, one can redefine it as ‘being out of the existing’ (*ec-stasy*). In this context, ecstatic naturalism means ‘naturalism’ as always being outside it-self. For Corrington, nature has some excess beyond any existing concept or boundary. Although the divine is a sacred manifestation of nature (naturing and deep), the divine seems to point to a certain ‘transcendental’ or ‘excess’ or both. Thus, an ecstatic naturalist would deny that everything existing is just immanently within nature defined by the existing conceptual boundary. The divine is always illustrated as goddess which is a term to deny the traditional patriarchal Christian deity.²² Also, one can remember “nature’s continual self-transcendence through immanence and potent growth.”²³ In other words, nature for Corrington is like Dao in *Dao-De-Jing* (道德經): “The Dao which can be named as Dao is not eternal Dao” (道可道 非常道; my own translation). As a matter of fact, the terms ‘transcendence’ and ‘immanence’ are not realities but linguistic terms that refer to the absence of reality.

21 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecstasy_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecstasy_(philosophy))

22 Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness*, 83.

23 Ibid.

Indeed, nature is always receding from our capturing fingers of knowing. Here, nature seems to seek for some secrecy.

C. Keller captures this secret aspect of the divine in her reading of negative theology, in which God is defined not in terms of who/what God is but in terms of who/what God is not. So, her notion of God is always God under eraser. This denial is not the denial of the divine being, but it is actually that of our human cognition of divinity. The eraser mark in fact points to the human limitation of knowing. This is the primary task of philosophy from the beginning. Once, Socrates told us the goal of philosophy, “know thyself.” Know ourselves? Truth is that we do not know things exactly. To know this ignorance. Here, we sense Nicholas of Cusa’s “knowing ignorance.” So, we need to be humble before God. Well, can one say the same thing in the case of nature? I think one can: nature.

What about the en of panentheism as genius in Corrington? Genius does not mean a sort of elite, although the way we understand the word contains some aspect of it. Genius is the one breaking, destructing the existing rules and constructing her own new rules, launching a new age. When one places genius in the context of the Selving process,

Each individual is wrapped up in the Selving process, which requires individuation and emancipation from natural communities to communities of interpretation. While geniuses can, and have, worked under the tyranny of patriarchal natural communities, they create their own community of interpretation, even if by stealth under a repressive regime²⁴

In this quote, one can see genius is the one who creates her own in-

24 Ibid., 87.

interpretive community against the tyranny of patriarchal natural communities. A human being is born into natural communities whose basic features are patriarchal and tyrannical—maybe this feeling about natural communities derives from Corrington’s childhood experience.²⁵ The Selving process moves or grows from natural communities to interpretive communities, and this process requires “individuation and emancipation.” At the moment of shift from natural to interpretive communities, the Selving process “requires a radical openness to the flow of novel interpretants that bring the self to a new level of awareness.”²⁶ Genius is a self to radically open herself to the flow of novel interpretants against the existing interpretations. Here, one can still ask: Where do these new interpretants come from? What does this “radical openness” mean when there is nothing outside nature? Genius is the one who brings the newness into the community by her ‘free will’ and makes the community interpretive with the help from the spirits. Corrington introduces his term ‘god-ing’ between the spirits and the self, which “enhance[s] the potencies of the self.”²⁷ No wonder that Corrington does not have any notion of God in a Christian sense and that he does not allow any panentheistic move in his philosophy. However, what I see in his text, the continuous emergence of the acts of the en, especially in his notion of genius. In a shift from natural to interpretive communities, the role of genius is crucial in that she breaks down the existing hierarchical order and structure. Thus, genius is regarded as eccentric, deviant, pervert, and so on. s/he is al-

25 Cf. Robert S. Corrington, *Riding the Windhorse: Manic-Depressive Disorder and the Quest for Wholeness* (Lanham: Hamilton Books, 2003).

26 Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness*, 87.

27 Ibid.

ways the target for social witch-hunt. So, being a genius risks herself under social discrimination and hatred.

However, one needs to remember that genius does not exist for herself. No one lives in a solipsistic world. Humans are social animals. So, s/he always live in her community. In this sense and from evolutionary context, genius is not individual phenomena but species' event. For the species' well-being, evolution tries new one without caring her suffering. This is the cruel aspect of nature. Thus, Corrington even say, "Without the presence of a genius or statistically far more likely, the *works* of genius, the community of interpreters, logically and existentially tied to the Selving process, would have the profoundest difficulty in flourishing."²⁸ Maybe genius is species' experiment to de-territorialize. The meaning of Christ as the sacrifice for humanity is very closer to Corrington's genius.

Can we say that the third sex phenomena like LGBTQ and cyborgs are this kind of species' experiment? I do not know. If nature is in a constantly ecstasy (ec-stasy, out of the existing state), sex would be the same case as one of nature. Whether it is true or not, one as a religious person should care of the social victimization, demonization, discrimination, hatred and so on, remembering that Jesus Christ came down to the earth to be with the meek and humble. The sacred fold is among the marginalized.

V. The politics for the Third Sex

Bruno Latour talks of the politics of the crippled (or the disabilities).

28 Ibid.

For our political representation system cannot 'represent' the thing or people which/whom it aims at representing. Any human subject cannot represent any thing/person. So, any political representative act is nothing but crippled. Latour thinks that we take the role of "spokesperson"²⁹ for the unrepresented. In an age of Homo Deus, humans become like gods in its abilities, but they still have the faulty brains and minds. This would be a real crisis of human civilization. When President Trump trumps a possibility of human maturity of mind, Harari warns the doom's day if divine ability goes with childish mind. The index of maturity is humbleness, when Socrates says, 'know thyself.' In other words, this idea of the politics of the crippled is very close to the pragmatic idea of fallibility. Every idea or concept is crippled with its inherent error (the fallacy of misplaced concreteness according to A.N. Whitehead). The concrete, like the Thing, cannot be wholly represented, but in a partial way. Thus, the role of the community of interpreters is very significant. I think it is the politics of nature by (human) spokesperson for the unrepresented or the crippled or the eccentric or the deviant or the pervert. It is love, love for the ever-receding recalcitrant life/nature/god.

Indeed, sex is very transcendental phenomenon among human quotidian life. At first, it seems very primitive and animalistic. In fact, it is always transcendental from the given boundary of nature. This potential of being against the naturally given is the real potency of nature (naturing). Thus, when one talks of the divine dimension of nature and/or life and refers to the 'en' of panentheism, it does not refer to any 'outside' nature or life. Rather, it refers to something 'deeper,' as

29 Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 64.

in Corrington's usage of deep pantheism. When 'sex' transcends the realm of animal instinct and is transformed into the token of love for communication, it also transcends our existing heterosexuality, which just mean human hetero sexual behavior. As a matter of fact, when one talks of panentheism in the place of pantheism, it entices the hearers to think of something divine beyond human, natural or animal realm. However, this paper wants to show that the en in panentheism does not point to the heavenly realm beyond this earthly world but to the real potential of this worldly beings to seeking for always being outside the existing (ec-stasy).

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