Response to Commentators

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Abstract

The author responds to his commentators (see CGR Vol. 38, No. 3 and Vol. 39, No. 1). He expresses gratitude for the richness and care of their observations and challenges, and for heartily engaging with his efforts to "relate politics to the ground-facts of our lives," including "the ground where we find ourselves" and "the webs of affection" shaping our lives and identities. The author offers initial brief responses that focus on conceptions of nature, the monotheistic legacy, naturalism, creation, materiality, land claims, ethical, theological, and political considerations, and other matters.

Gratitude is my main response to all the contributors to this forum.[1] Paying attention is a great act of generosity, and time is precious. All of the contributors have given time and attention to what I've written. How could I be anything but grateful? I have learned a lot from the contributors—about conversations I hope to have, about things to read, about the richness of ideas and perspectives in disciplines and places where I am an outsider. At the end of some sixteen months of relative isolation, imposed by an ongoing pandemic, I feel I have met a very engaging set of new people. What a gift.

Joseph Wiebe's introduction is itself an argument, as well as a careful tour of what the other contributors have to say. (All of these essays defy summary.) I share his sense of what I am trying to do, in this[2] and other works:

[1] The author is responding to seven essays published in CGR on his work, particularly *This Land Is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth* (2019): Joseph R. Wiebe, "Jedediah Purdy's Environmental Politics"; Peter Dula, "The Accidental New Atheist"; Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, "Horizons, Political and Theological"; Daniel Sims, "Concerning Cruelty, Clemency, and Commonwealths", all in Vol. 38, No. 3 (2020), and Sunder John Boopalan, "Transnational Solidarities"; Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "God and Land: Remembering Dreams of the Commonwealth"; Isaac S. Villegas, "Wounded Life", all in Vol. 39, No. 1 (2021).

[2] Jedediah Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2019).

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to relate politics to the ground-facts of our lives, which include the ground where we find ourselves and the webs of affection that help to shape our lives and identities. When it comes to ground, he is unusual among commentators on my work in sending a scout to look at Chloe, West Virginia. The general store there (formerly one of two, and now several owners on from when I knew it as Coopers' Store), is much as his friend described it to him. There isn't a church house right in the little town, contrary to his source's memory, but several, and most of the life of the place, is up the hollows where people get their mail through Chloe's post office: Walnut, Walker, White Oak, and Little White Oak. There will be several other hollows further down the West Fork of the Little Kanawha that are now in Chloe's postal catchment as small post offices have closed.

I must say, too, how grateful I am to Joe Wiebe for his effort and generosity in assembling this forum, and for that of everyone involved in the creation of *The Conrad Grebel Review*. In a short reply I can't do justice to the richness and care of these observations and challenges, so I will do what I can with initial and partial responses, in the spirit of conversation. Two of the contributors, Peter Dula and Daniel Sims, offer fairly direct challenges to aspects of what I've argued. Dula has made an extraordinarily generous and thorough journey into everything I've written in this area, and contends that I've made a basic mistake. The mistake lies in thinking that the image of nature as having a point of view that speaks to our concerns is a specifically monotheistic legacy. (As Dula notes, this is an idea I've borrowed from others and advanced tentatively, inviting challenge, and I am heartened to find the challenge now arriving.) Dula suggests that I have monotheism wrong—it need not imply an "order of nature"—and that I have "naturalism" wrong, in that there are influential atheists of various kinds who think nature has a moral point of view.

I think that I agree almost completely with the criticisms. When I said (in a talk that Dula aptly quotes) that the idea of nature's moral standpoint "is only available if you are a monotheist," I overstated the claim and opened myself to Dula's telling counterexample of "new atheist" types who believe all truth is scientific and scientific truth includes utilitarian ethics. Clearly they think understanding nature implies an ethical perspective, and clearly they are not monotheists.

The other kind of counterexample might be captioned #NotAllMonotheists. Dula points me to rich theological and intellectual-historical work that makes clear that monotheistic traditions can foster many different perspectives on the moral significance of nature, creation, materiality, etc. Although he does not press the point, his account of Christine Hayes's *What's Divine About Divine Law*[3] (now high on my reading list) is an apt reminder that polytheistic traditions have cultivated strong views about the order of nature and its meaning for human life.

What I should have said is that the idea of nature's moral point of view (1) *makes sense* only from a broadly religious point of view and (2) has strong elective affinities with monotheism. To elaborate on (1): I take the new atheist utilitarians (or any other kind of physicalist who claims that the material world grants their particular ethics the imprimatur of science) as examples of how seemingly bright and trained people can hold incoherent ideas simply because the elements of those ideas are familiar. It seems to me that positivists are stuck with Hume's distinction between fact and value, even if they choose to ignore it. That some of them find it easy to ignore suggests either that they are participating obtusely in a non-positivist ethical inquiry that they misunderstand (much as we can use language, for example, without being able to give an account either of its grammar or of its origins) or that they are living on the leftover cultural legacy of religious traditions that they've disowned but not actually discarded.

To elaborate on my response (2): the specifically providential view that has pervaded much of American culture on these issues, and the Romantic view that has in many ways been its American counterpoint, have both been inseparable (the first in a self-aware way, the second often in a confused way) from an idea of a divine mind that pervades and gives meaning to the world's forces and events. On reflection, I think these examples reveal a lot about both the elective affinities and the actual legacies of monotheism, but not more than that.

Daniel Sims warns that "a failure to . . . snuff out White supremacy and settler colonialism in the United States, would result in a new commonwealth that has more in common with the Commonwealth of Virginia during the Civil War than with Purdy's new ideal." As I understand

[3] Christine Hayes, *What's Divine About Divine Law* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2015).

it, this criticism is based on the fact that I understand democracy to imply that "[f]or Indigenous peoples . . . the acceptance that they need to share the land with settlers, whether they like it or not." I agree with him and have stressed in all my writing on these questions that continuing, multifarious forms of inequality are of central importance, particularly those rooted in the legacies of enslavement, dispossession, and genocide. It does seem to me that these reckonings can only take place in the frame of politics, and that a democratic politics is for various reasons the best we have or can hope to have. I do not see a way forward for the position that "the land needs to be returned," as Sims puts it, can be a *precondition* to legitimate politics. In my approach to this question, I am deeply indebted to Aziz Rana's *The Two Faces of American Freedom*, which argues for a dialectical understanding of settler colonies as containing resources for both subordination and emancipation.[4] If I have understood Sims's argument, then it may be that we see this matter differently.

Sunder John Boopalan also raises the question of how indigenous peoples relate, and should relate, to states—not only settler states, but states per se, very much including those such as India's, whose relationship to Adivasi peoples may not compare favorably with that of, say, twenty-first century Canada. He favorably quotes George Tinker's claim that "states *must necessarily* oppress indigenous people . . . because our ancient claim to land is a constant and persistent challenge to the legitimacy and coherence of the state." This is a very interesting point. Politics necessarily problematizes claims to land, and states tend both to ratify one such kind of claim and to provide vehicles for competing claims. (When Sims says that in 1492 "America was owned by various Indigenous states," I take it he is saying that those political societies ratified their own claims, necessarily inconsistent with any previous claim that they had displaced.) But I would like to note the resonance, for me, of Boopalan's powerful and extended description of caste as a social reality built in the landscape itself. On a few occasions in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, I have encountered the village geography of caste that he describes (and have been struck by its similarity to the segregation of Roma neighborhoods in some Andalusian villages and towns). To go

[4] Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010).

here, as Boopalan does from my effort to see with Pauli Murray the old racial landscape of Durham's "bottoms" and its uplands, is just the sort of meditation I have hoped that *This Land* would invite—a mode of seeing in which there is no separating the social from the material, and in which our human bodies are also the bodies of our places, the relations of spaces also our relations. I am, to give back the words that conclude his response, most moved.

Two other responses share somewhat in this register, excavating the landscapes in which the authors share and reflecting on the ethical and political stakes of the excavation.

"Has it always come down to the hunger for God and land?" asks Julia Kasdorf in her fine meditation on the layers of her Anabaptist family's presence in eastern and central Pennsylvania. The younger William Penn, who founded the colony on the strength of one of the largest grants ever made to an individual, was the son of an English colonizer in Ireland, who had helped the English to establish their presence in Jamaica. (Although the younger Penn's grant came from Charles II, whose dynasty would soon be expelled in favor of the more reliably Protestant House of Hanover, the elder Penn's colonial adventures were under Oliver Cromwell, founder of the first republic in modern Europe, a relative liberal in matters of religious conscience, and still remembered in Ireland for the brutality of his conquest and expropriation—a reminder that these weavings of the best and worst and political possibilities are by no means only American ironies.) How, she asks, could this hunger ever be turned to an ethics of care? Could the way to that ethic run through memory? She quotes a late friend: "If you own land, you have blood on your hands." If we look to our foundings, there are no exceptions to this diagnosis, only variation in the precision and completeness of memory. I think of the records Assyrian kings left, many centuries before Christ, of the slaughters with which they extended and protected their empire—vivid and terrible with descriptions of dismemberment, the gouging of eyes, bonfires of the living and the dead—and of the description, early in Bathsheba Demuth's wonderful *Floating Coast*,[5] of a tale from one indigenous group in the Aleutian peninsula of the massacre and flaying of a

[5] Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

tribe of rivals. As states have grown larger and more sophisticated, they have been the means for greatly intensifying this violence and also for seeking ways to arrest and even repair it, beyond cycles of revenge.

How can we make political and ethical sense of our place in a wounded world, in which we are at once the wounders, the wounded, and the wounds? Isaac Villegas stitches his own dreamscapes into his work on this question, in a really lovely and subtle meditation which I am touched to have had a part in prompting. He valuably challenges my use of Thoreau—the radical, questioning, troubled and troublesome Thoreau—by emphasizing a difference between Thoreauvian reflections on and in nature and the Anabaptist "gospel of all creatures." The latter, he emphasizes, points us to "a practice of solidarity . . . a movement of radical reformation." I think this is indeed further than Thoreau goes and further than one can go without a strong idea of the moral quality of what connects us. I am not sure Thoreau ever developed quite such an idea. (Reading this essay helps me to a formulation that is probably not new, but which I have not seen: Thoreau as a kind of apophatic patriot, trapped and degraded by collective misapprehension of what it means to live together, seeking words for a kind of polity in which the spirit could flourish without lies.) I love, too, Isaac's contrast between the gospel of all creatures and the image of a mourning world awaiting redemption that Marilynne Robinson gives late in *Housekeeping*[6] (a novel I read during the pandemic, at about the same time Isaac was writing his essay, although I do not think we discussed it). In Isaac's account of the gospel of all creatures, grief and love are inseparable, both implied in incarnation.

I see Isaac Villegas's essay as very close in both spirit and argument with Sarah Stewart-Kroeker's reflection on the relationship between the theological and political transformation of woundedness and disfigurement. I love her use of St. Augustine's idea that the resurrection should include not just newly perfect bodies, but the mutilated bodies of the saints, testimony to the love for which they permitted themselves to be tormented. Could we generalize this idea, she asks, to imagine an eschatology that does "not efface earthly wounds"? If so, that religious vision might tend to converge with a political one that seeks to cultivate ongoing awareness of interconnection, not just in cheering ways but in ways that build solidarity on the sharedness

[6] Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980)

of suffering—and of "longing for healing, wholeness, and restoration." We share vulnerability, need, pain—and the power to give, or be, some redress for these. Here I begin to think of politics and theology as complementary ways of making sense of (many of) the same elemental facts of our existence. I am influenced by the tradition—sometimes called left-Hegelian but traceable in ways back at least to Epicurus—that sees religion as an illuminating but displaced treatment of earthly and human suffering and promise. I really welcome these replantings of religion in the earthly, these refusals to accept that it must be alienated from, or in contrast with, our soiled (in a double sense) lives.

From these facts, from our condition, there are many possible lessons. These days I find myself often poised on the edge between political hope and political despair. Interdependence and vulnerability are starting points that can lead both to openness and to closedness, to the fortified self and the generous posture, to the need for revenge and to the open hand—in the same polity, the same life, the same relationship, the same day. What we are able to sustain, in our belief and in our ways of seeing, of meeting the world, is eminently a matter of what others show back to us. I will say again how grateful this reflection makes me for the generous attention and challenging words of others.

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