The Anabaptist Tradition: Intellectual Problems, Resources, and Possible Conversations—a Response to Maxwell Kennel

Christian Early

Abstract

Using the work of Maxwell Kennel published in the same issue as a jumping off point, the author suggests further ways of inviting risky engagement with voices outside the Anabaptist tradition—such as those in philosophy, psychology, and biology—that have the potential to enrich and clarify Anabaptist convictions.

My response to Maxwell Kennel's stimulating and provocative paper is in the mode of "yes-and," drawing out directional lines for future conversations, imagining into possibilities, and at points, asking for clarification. I will not push back directly on what Kennel says in his paper because I wholeheartedly agree with the overall project of inviting risky engagement with voices from *outside* the Anabaptist tradition. In fact, that project animates my own work and offers a vision for the kind of intellectual work in which one might engage as an Anabaptist academic, and to which one might constructively contribute. Engaging voices on the margins and from the outside and working with dissonance are central ideas to what an Anabaptist philosopher might "do," and I commend Kennel for articulating them so clearly. This does not mean that I agree with everything Kennel says, but rather that it seems more constructive to expand on what he says in additional directions and to engage conversationally, requesting clarification at places where I register more hesitation.

To start, I like that Kennel pays attention to, and opens for conversation and investigation, the affective register and contributions from psychology. I agree that in order to work on the problems of difference or the problems of the relationship between Anabaptism and philosophy, however we define those terms, we also need to work on ourselves. We cannot only work on these problems theoretically and intellectually in a disembodied way, the

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work is necessarily self-involving. It will require courage and learning to face the discomfort of seeing what may be "inside," what it is that may unconsciously be driving our explicit responses, such as fear or anxiety. It will require an awareness of the way in which these emotions show up and shape reactions and the desire to protect or legitimate, philosophically and theologically, our convictional ground by running back to the source and safety of the tradition in order to re-establish and reaffirm our sense of identity. It can be difficult to tell the difference between our felt need to protect ourselves and the perceived call to protect and preserve the tradition. Cultivating self-awareness and owning that the line of distinction between a sense of self and the tradition is blurry at best might allow for a new space in which a more honest and vulnerable conversation could open up. I am imagining responses to difference that are not overdetermined by protection or rejection out of fear but that are creative and explorative of alternative ways to incorporate and move forward. It is uncomfortable and risky work to enter into. If we allow a wave of conversation to pick us up without having an idea of where it will put us down, we will need to let go of the sense of assurance that comes from already knowing the end. That courage of letting go of an assurance of the outcome requires a stance on the inside which I think Kennel is articulating and naming really well. In this way, it is self-involving work.

One of my complaints with the Anabaptist intellectual tradition has been that there is no real appreciation or accepted role for psychology—it is as if the inner world or psychological dynamics that manifest themselves in and that can take over communities do not exist—so stories of abuse, manipulation, and control seem constantly to surprise, which then evokes polarized responses of either wholesale rejection of the now-poisoned well or complete denial that anything is askew and subsequent protective re-narrating. The fact that Kennel is courageous enough to open up that conversation, which often shows up at the congregational and conference levels, is commendable.

By "no real psychology" in the Anabaptist tradition, I have in mind a comparison to the Catholic tradition. Beginning with Augustine's *Confessions*, there is a rich tradition of investigating the dynamics of our inner world as it shows up for us, our sense of self in relation to our

experience of God, and the way in which what we find inside interacts with our theological understanding of the Christian tradition. But for Anabaptists, it is as if the inner world either does not exist or that it is a flat landscape (nothing of importance to see). I will go out on a limb and say that it has had consequences for the relatively unsophisticated way in which we understand human beings, human emotions, and relational dynamics.

I agree with Kennel that we need to talk about "Anabaptists" and "Mennonites," being careful not to collapse those terms. I grew up in Copenhagen, Denmark. My family is originally part German, part Danish, and later I was adopted into the Early family, which has a long history in the United States. There are not many Mennonites in Denmark that I am aware of—they are across the border of Southern Jutland in Germany near Flensburg—but there is a vibrant free church tradition (Baptist and Pentecostal) in Scandinavia, and a sensibility that participation and membership in a religious tradition ought to be voluntary and that it is problematic when the nation state is involved. This was understood as the logical consequence of the Protestant movement: the freedom to say "no" in matters of religious conscience.

My introduction to the Anabaptist tradition and the significance of pacifism came in graduate school at Fuller Seminary through my teachers Nancey Murphy and James Wm. McClendon Jr. I became convinced that truth and power were inextricably linked. It followed that either what passes as true and good was at bottom a game of power supported by manipulation, coercion, and ultimately violence, or there was an alternative way to articulate an epistemological and moral project grounded in invitation and "following after" that Anabaptism claimed was embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. Having already rejected the Enlightenment project of pure rationality as a dangerous fantasy, I became a pacifist for epistemological reasons because I saw it as the only way to safeguard truth. If we eliminate our adversary, we also eliminate our means to discover whether our convictions hold water. I became an Anabaptist and joined Pasadena Mennonite Church because I realized that pacifism could not be merely a private conviction; it is a socio-political conviction governing social interactions (ethic) that can only honestly and genuinely be held communally. A coherent pacifist epistemology and ethic could be a way to engage Friedrich Nietzsche whom I had been reading. I

imagined identifying a convictional position and carving out a conceptual space that was identifiably *not* Augustinian, Cartesian, or Nietzschean in terms of how it imagined the relationship between truth, power, and good—but rather, Anabaptist. I much prefer thinking in terms of Anabaptism because I can be a full participant in that tradition and contribute to it, rather than thinking in terms of being a Mennonite because I was not born into the tradition and I cannot simply become one as I lack the family connections necessary to be recognized as a member of the tribe.

"Anabaptism and philosophy" is therefore a central and important subject area in my own work. And, again, we are dealing here with the relative poverty of our intellectual tradition. If you look at the Catholic tradition, there is a rich and long history of engagement with Aristotle through Aquinas. The intellectual work that Catholics have done over centuries to articulate and clarify their tradition is beautiful and (for some of us) overpoweringly persuasive. Protestants, by contrast, have often leaned on Immanuel Kant or David Hume, depending on which Protestant tradition, although lately many Protestants in the Reformed tradition seem to have rediscovered Aristotle's notion of formation as it applies to a theology of worship.

That leaves us with the question of what points of engagement we can imagine between Anabaptism and philosophy. Perhaps our tradition's relative intellectual poverty can be reframed as an opportunity. The fact that we do not have "a philosopher" on whose work we lean, may be to our benefit—we are free to choose. Earlier I used the phrase "carving out a conceptual space," and this is where I find Kennel's word "entanglement" helpful because I would want to preserve an open and pluralist attitude with respect to imagining into that space, rather than take a single philosophical author or a single philosophical insight, which would then constrain and narrowly define "Anabaptism and philosophy."

If we are to remain open to the possibilities, what lines of exploration suggest themselves? I can imagine drawing on Heidegger's critique of technology, looking at ways of being and becoming in the world. Who are we as human beings, and how do our tools, skills, and pathways shape our ways of knowing? Albert Borgmann has done some of this work, but I am also thinking of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. I can see drawing inspiration from postmodern Anglo-American philosophy, meaning

philosophy that takes its cue from the epistemological holism of William Van Orman Quine, appreciating that webs of belief and changes in webs of belief are underdetermined, and from the philosophical investigations of Ludwig Wittgenstein as he uncovers the way in which language is embedded in embodied forms of life. Both philosophers reject foundationalism as a metaphor for knowledge—and that could be a point of contention, but I would argue that foundationalism is radically and irredeemably flawed and that it would be a mistake for Anabaptists to shape convictional claims in its terms. I also imagine drawing on Nietzsche and Foucault on issues of power and the unmasking of power. They are "natural" conversation partners. Walter Wink would be in that stream of thought, and again, entanglements is a good word here.

I have also worked with William Connolly and his political philosophy. I am attracted to his use of Nietzsche to open the affective register because it allows one to identify and name the hidden work that resentment does, especially in the way in which difference is negotiated, which is a central concern. How do you respond to difference? Are you, fundamentally, resentful that you have to explain yourself and that "others" are not on board with living in the way that you think they should? Do you try to eliminate difference because you experience it as a threat to your own being in the world? As a radical pluralist, Connolly draws on William James and the American pragmatic tradition in rejecting the drive to the "one explanation" or the one God, which illuminates everything and through whom everything makes sense. The universe is one in which things are connected and there are wholes, but perhaps *not everything* is connected and perhaps everything *cannot* be gathered into a single connected whole under a One-God-who-rules. Perhaps matter itself is not inert and is potentially capable of agency.

These ideas provide openings for Anabaptists to engage philosophy and gain intellectual depth, insight, and clarity in their own work. These are not meant to be definitive and in fact the list should keep growing as new thinking and critical tools emerge.

Kennel asks a critical question that I want to highlight: What is the relationship between a particular way of life and the doctrinal commitments that it might have or the convictions that might inform it? Specifically, must you have Christian convictions or, say, pacifist convictions, to sustain a

Christian way of life? Is it possible to live and navigate your life peacefully but not have any substantive convictions about, for instance, the Trinity or God? Anabaptists and Mennonites who have grown up in their tradition and who go on later to leave their tradition are finding and reporting that it is perfectly possible for them to live a life that feels coherent. Others claim that it is neither sustainable nor coherent, and that you have to maintain some doctrinal commitments in order to maintain a peaceful way of life. I am a trinitarian and I have what I would consider to be substantial convictions about the nature and character of God, but I have not seen any persuasive arguments for the *necessary connection* between trinitarianism or a creedal conception of God and a pacifist way of life. There are plenty of folk who argue for the position of the necessary connection, but their arguments seem circular and beg the question. Naming this *as* an intellectual problem for the tradition and therefore also as a possible source of discovery is a significant contribution and represents a direction of inquiry in which this conversation could go.

What are the questions we need to ask here? One question relates to the way in which we understand and define violence. I am intrigued by Kennel's definition of violence as a violation of value-laden boundaries. I would want some examples to clarify what he means by that. What value-laden boundaries, specifically, are being thought of here? Let's say that I suffer from OCD and my boundary is that you should not move my stuff. If you, out of necessity, need to move my stuff and you violate my value-laden boundary, does that count as an instance of violence? I worry that this definition of violence will identify too many instances as violence, and non-violence will become impossible to imagine. My own strategy would be to define peace not psycho-dynamically with reference to value-laden boundaries, but politically and socially as a refusal to participate in the violent territorial politics of empire that target the body, a refusal to participate in the politics of occupation and domination that pits groups of humans against each other, and a commitment to creatively recover and imagine into a way of being human together that does not depend on coercion and retaliation but on cooperation and forgiveness grounded in a conception of God who is patient love. I understand that given what I said above about the need to open up the psychological register this may seem inconsistent and perhaps Kennel

can help me here, but I draw a distinction between emotional violence and socio-political violence that targets the body. We may experience something as threatening or as violating, but physical violence is not on the same continuum.

As a conviction, pacifism demonstrates its viability by showing it is possible to map the world intelligibly and to narrate human history from that point of view as well as to imagine a viable human future coming from a realistic place of peace without resorting to fantasy, idealism, or Deus ex machina resolutions. What does pacifism mean concretely? What do we hope for in our teleology or our eschatology? Where is human history going? Does a commitment to pacifism entail giving up control of where human history is going? What stance is required of us with respect to local or national politics? This leads to the question of what is the relationship between a commitment to pacifism and a commitment to Christianity, which we have already mentioned but return to with more nuance and texture in terms of the way in which we make sense of and navigate our lives. How deep does your commitment to peace go? Will you allow it to shift your understanding of what you mean by God? Which of the two is more central to you and can they be teased apart?

Now it seems that we have arrived at a place that is at the heart of the matter. I am intrigued by Kennel's use of the term "metaphysical" in the phrase "a rejection of metaphysical violence." I might like that phrase—I might—but again I would want to know more about what Kennel means. I take it to be addressing the way in which we conceive of difference. I mentioned working with William Connolly's use of Nietzsche to identify and describe the dynamic of resentment and to uncover the psychological register, which involves naming fear and anxiety as some of the unconscious emotions that may be motivating us to respond to difference in hurtful and violating ways. This awareness is, I think, critical in order to get any traction, and I very much resonate with Kennel's suspicion of certain distinctions that attempt to reify difference. I mean the distinction between secular and religious, church and world, in and out, orthodox and heterodox (or heretical), philosophy and theology, and so on. I think they are ultimately unhelpful, and they serve to protect us from opening up to a real conversation in which we do not claim the high ground; speaking from a protected and superior sense has

been our tendency when we double down on identity because we are afraid of where the conversation might take us if we let go of our high ground advantage.

I support Kennel's call for richer and more generous practices of recognition, which would include an acceptance of our condition during a conversation with interlocutors who challenge our central convictions. Quine is helpful here in recognizing the underdetermined nature of our web of beliefs and the narrative history of our tradition. I have relied on MacIntyre to make the claim that convictional difference is the necessary condition within which one can become open to challenging one's core convictions and testing their claim to truth. How else will we be able to test whether our convictions are ultimately true if we refuse to put them to the test in a conversational environment in which they are not accepted? The responsibility to test our claims to truth in turn requires us to let go of any assurance that the convictions will not be overturned or altered in radical ways. Anabaptism faces serious intellectual problems, and we will need to resolve some of these problems in new and unfamiliar ways to demonstrate the viability of our tradition of enquiry. The overdetermined insistence that we must end up supporting the Nicene creed on the other side of the conversation is fundamentally dishonest. We have no idea where we are going to end up with respect to our understanding of God or Jesus of Nazareth. Here we get into issues of incomparable and untranslatable difference, which is to say incommensurability: dealing with a rival tradition or another tradition with a radically different set of convictions and language such that we fundamentally do not understand what they are trying to say, and we cannot translate their convictional claims or speech into something that is familiar to us now. How to address incommensurability is itself a whole subject and I have neither the time nor space to address it with the attention that it deserves here.

Finally, I will make two more comments. Kennel mentions *Integrating the New Science of Love and a Spirituality of Peace*, the book Annmarie L. Early and I put together from a conference at EMU. A common response to the book was "there isn't any theology in here." Going back to a theme I mentioned at the beginning, however, the response also expresses a hesitance or perhaps unwillingness to sit with a psychological theory long enough for

it to challenge us and to help us Anabaptists to articulate our theology and tradition better or perhaps perceive resonances or points of difference, or whatever it is we find.

The intention was to open up a conversation between Anabaptism and attachment theory. We wanted to build bridges and gather folks from outside to a conversational event. We did not intend to offer anything close to a theological "evaluation" or an "account" of attachment theory from the privileged position of Anabaptist convictions. We were suspicious of unconscious energies that are protective and anxious—opening up the psychological register might expose things of which we are ashamed and have carefully kept secret all these years. One colleague signaled to me that there would be dire consequences if the conference caused a disturbance in their home life. Mennonites seem to have a lot of secrets—perhaps this is a feature of most closely knit extended family communities—that they would like to keep under wraps. Some of those secrets seem to be coming out now, which is probably a good thing, even though the fallout can be difficult to process and hurtful. It seems that inviting psychology "in" so that it is part of the conversation might be both healing and preventative.

For me, the conversation with attachment theory also makes room for a conversation around evolution. This might seem like a leap from psychology to biology, but those who are familiar with the work of John Bowlby, the first to articulate attachment theory as a theory, will see the connection. Attachment is a mammalian invention that addresses the problem of having few offspring in a dangerous world. Bowlby wanted to call it a theory of love, but he was concerned that it would be dismissed and chose instead the more clinical term, attachment.

One of the problems I have worked on, in terms of articulating an Anabaptist philosophical ethics, is an understanding of our environment and the account that we offer of human nature—what I would call a philosophical anthropology. Who are we as human beings? Is our "nature" something that we fundamentally ought to resist? Do we think of human nature as fundamentally competitive and violent, and how then do we imagine Christian discipleship and life? My aim was to initiate that conversation to hear what evolutionary biologists have to say, and to engage those voices from the outside in order to counter the conviction that pacifism or an ethic

of love had to be grounded in a divine command against our (natural?) inclinations toward violence, dominance, and competition. Pacifism or an ethic of love has often been presented as a spiritual way of life that is in opposition to the carnal or bodied ethics of violence. What I found from reading Bowlby and Harlow, however, was a very different account of animal life. It was one in which connection, curiosity, and relational reconciliation was foregrounded. I discovered that there was an important difference between inflecting "survival of the fittest" toward adaptation, which was Darwin's notion, as opposed to inflecting it towards domination, which was Herbert Spencer's idea. This seemed promising as a way to imagine a politics of pacifism grounded in an ethic of love emerging "naturally" as it were and not in fundamental opposition to selective processes. Inspired by Peter Kropotkin and his interest in evolution, mutual aid, and love, it could perhaps be a way to get at the question: Does love "work" in the long run? I would like to be able to answer that question by saying, "yes, and for human beings it may be the only thing that ever has."

Putting it too simply, life found a way to sustain an organism as complex and vulnerable as a human being through parental care, friendship, and cooperation. Care is a necessary survival practice for human beings, and our species will not make it without care. In strictly evolutionary terms, evolution requires reproduction and selection requires differences in reproductive rates in populations. But reproduction is not sufficient for the survival of a species. Survival of a species requires reproductive reproduction—the next generation must also be reproductive, otherwise the experiment dies out. That is a risky proposition when the time from birth to reproductive age is long and costly, as it is in humans. It means, however, that adaptive pressures among humans shift away from the numbers game of having many offspring and towards the parental and social game of raising offspring. What matters is how many offspring make it to reproductive age. After birth, you need a mother-infant connection (or a connection with a caretaker) and out of that relationship and other relationships, the child is able to form a sense of self, sustained by a communal network of giving and receiving in which, as children, we are largely on the receiving end, though gradually we begin to reciprocate with giving. That child has to be sufficiently protected and stay alive long enough to initiate the process again. If we call that sustained, self-

sacrificial caretaking necessary for survival "love" —love is more than that, but it is at least that—then love can be understood as a survival strategy. It reconfigures how we imagine human nature and what sustains human life, which in turn reconfigures the possibilities we imagine for an ethical way of life and the possibilities for living into what we can talk about as the kingdom of God. I am not suggesting there is a straight and smooth line from an evolutionary account of cooperation and care to a theological account of love—in fact the conversation regarding how those might relate and where there are significant differences seems important—but I would insist that our commonly held dualist notions of carnal and spiritual ethics grounded in a conception of a human competitive and narcissistic nature are outdated and mistaken. It seems that Anabaptists have an advantage over other theological traditions entering that conversation as it has resources to think of Christian community as an experiment of love, sharing a commitment to the way of peace, as we have received it following after Jesus of Nazareth who is the Christ.

Concluding Remarks

In my response to Kennel's stimulating and provocative paper, I have tried to sketch out how an Anabaptist might conceive of engaging philosophy. In my response, I have foregrounded what I perceive to be intellectual "problems" in order to communicate that there is work for us to do. Anabaptism does not have the rich tradition that Catholics and Protestants enjoy, but we have instead an open possibility, an opportunity to imagine in fresh ways how to articulate and clarify our convictions. Some of the work involves investigating the relationship between doctrines and a way of life. Another part of the work will be to invite new disciplines and voices—I have mentioned psychology, philosophy, and biology—into the conversation in order to enrich and clarify our tradition. It is encouraging to encounter the energy and vision that Kennel brings to the task of what Anabaptism might gain from and contribute to a philosophical discussion that is on the margins.

Christian Early is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Director of Ethical Reasoning in Action at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia.