PERSONHOOD AND COMMUNITY IN A NEW CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

What it means to be a person is a key issue in contemporary bioethical issues. A new socially ordered metaphysics with greater emphasis on the long-range interests of the community might provide common ground for resolving points of difference. Colin Gunton's trinitarian approach to contemporary social issues and a somewhat modified notion of "society" in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead are used in this essay to sketch such a new social ontology and to indicate how its use might at least change the tone of the current debate.

The meaning of the terms personhood and community have been analyzed and debated for many centuries. It will be the argument of this essay that what is needed for a better contemporary understanding of these terms is a new social ontology based on a revised understanding of the classical paradigm for the relationship between the One and the Many. Given the explosion of diverse thought- and behavior-patterns available to contemporary human beings as a result of global electronic communication and other forms of modern technology, one has to work much harder to articulate a strong sense of both personal and communal self-identity. The temptation is either to withdraw from those notably different from oneself or to seek to impose one's sense of self-identity, one's own beliefs and values, on others by whatever means one has at one's disposal. Persuasion to one's point of view through dialogue with others is often seen as too time-consuming and apparently fruitless. Hence, for many the urge is to use force in one form or another to get one's way with others. Yet the sense of mutual trust and harmony among both individuals and groups which is sorely needed

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for the nurturing of a strong sense of both personhood and community is then almost totally lacking.

Among contemporary philosophers and theologians who have grasped the seriousness of this problem for our day is the late Colin Gunton. In his Bampton Lectures at the University of Oxford, England, published in 1992 under the title *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*, he too claims that only a new paradigm for the relationship between the One and the Many—in effect, a new social ontology—will provide the necessary framework for thinking through the rights of individual persons versus the alleged needs of their communities in terms of the common good. Furthermore, as the title suggests, he makes appeal to the classical doctrine of the Trinity at the hands of the Cappadocian Fathers of the Eastern Church to illustrate what he means by a new understanding of the One and the Many. In what follows I will first summarize his views on this trinitarian paradigm for the relationship between the One and the Many. Then I will indicate how the trinitarian reinterpretation of the God-world relation in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead which I have set forth over the years in various books and articles nicely complements Gunton's scheme and perhaps even improves on it by putting it in a more properly philosophical (rather than strictly theological) context. One should not, in other words, have to be a Christian who believes in the Trinity as a community of divine persons in order to see the significance and value of this new paradigm for person-community relations in contemporary life. Finally, in the third and last part of this essay, I will indicate how this new approach to the One and the Many, unity and diversity within the context of community life, might be of assistance in thinking through and establishing one's own position on some highly controversial issues in the field of bioethics within the United States at the present time: i.e., abortion, stem-cell research and euthanasia. I offer no practical solutions to these complex issues, of course, but only a new frame of reference for thinking about them and perhaps coming to agreement with others on what is to be done by way of the common good.

I. Gunton's Analysis

Gunton divides his book into two parts. In the first part he analyzes what he considers to be the major problems of modernity and postmodernity (in his mind, late modernity), and in the second he sets forth his solution to those problems, namely, finding a new way for human beings to relate to one another and to God without sacrificing their proper sense of self-identity along the way. The problems of modernity

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are summed up in the word "disengagement," a strong tendency to deal with others not as persons or ends in themselves worthy of one's respect and affection but more or less as instruments or means for the achievement of one's own goals and values.[1] This pervasive feeling of disengagement, of course, did not arise by chance but has a long history, beginning with two ancient Greek philosophers, Heraclitus and Parmenides.

Heraclitus, focusing on the experience of change or becoming emphasized the priority of the empirical Many over the rationally conceived One. Parmenides, focusing on permanence and continuity within human experience, emphasized instead the priority of the timeless One over the time-bound Many.[2] Plato attempted to mediate between these two extremes but basically favored the One over the Many with his doctrine of the universal forms. Likewise, early Christian theologians tended to emphasize the priority of the One over the Many but with the understanding that the transcendent One was not the form of the good as with Plato but the God of the Hebrew and Christian Bible.[3] Beginning with Descartes in the early modern era, however, the transcendent One was no longer God the Creator but the individual human being in her or his individual subjectivity. Yet, since such an extreme individualism is impossible to sustain in competition with others, human beings either consciously or unconsciously surrender their personal autonomy in favor of a "false universal," some finite goal or value as a substitute for God.[4] Thus, says Gunton, "the paradox of the modern condition is that a quest for the freedom of the many has eventuated in new forms of slavery to the one."[5]

Gunton's conclusion at the end of Part One of his book is that contemporary human beings are overwhelmed by the reality of the Many, the sheer diversity of life-styles and perspectives in modern life, and so find themselves unable to make a decision as to what is true and good except in terms of individual preference. His solution to this problem is to make a careful study of the doctrine of the Trinity set forth by the Greek Fathers of the Church and to find therein new trinitarian "transcendentals."[6] Instead of Unity, Truth, Goodness and Beauty as in the classical tradition, Gunton proposes *perichoresis*, particularity or substantiality, and relationality (or sociality at the human level of activity). The key to all three, however, is *perichoresis*: "In its

[1]Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 13–14.
[2]Ibid., 17–18.
[3]Ibid., 22–27.
[4]Ibid., 34.
[5]Ibid.
[6]Ibid., 149–54.

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origins, the concept was a way of showing the ontological interdependence and reciprocity of the three persons of the Trinity . . . so that for God to be did not involve an absolute simplicity, but a unity deriving from a dynamic plurality of persons."[7] The transcendental Unity of God in the classical tradition was absolutely simple and undifferentiated, since to have parts or members was considered an imperfection characteristic of finite being.[8] But from a trinitarian perspective the Unity of God must be differentiated, a unity-in-diversity or community of three co-equal but distinct divine persons. Furthermore, since the world of creation should reflect its Creator, it too "is perichoretic in that everything in it contributes to the being of everything else, enabling everything to be what it distinctively is."[9] The world is a cosmic community of entities which find their self-identity not in themselves but in their ongoing relations to one another.

This leads into discussion of the second trinitarian transcendental, namely, particularity or substantiality. Whereas in modernity and postmodernity the individual entity is one among many things of the same kind, a homogeneous unit, particularity or substantiality insists that each individual entity in its concreteness is unique. Just as "the *substantiality* of God resides not in his abstract being, but in the concrete particulars that we call the divine persons, and in the relations by which they mutually constitute one another,"[10] so individual material things are constituted in their particularity not by what they are in themselves but by what they are in relation to one another: "Something is real—what it is and not another thing—by virtue of the way it is held in being not only by God but also by other things in the particular configuration of space and time in which its being is constituted."[11] Drawing the parallel with the doctrine of the Trinity even closer, Gunton argues that, just as the Holy Spirit within the inner life of the

[7]Ibid., 152. Not only Gunton, of course, but many other contemporary theologians have seen the value of the notion of *perichoresis* for the "social" or "communitarian" model of the Trinity, e.g. Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine LaCugna, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and, in the Greek Orthodox tradition, John D. Zizioulas with his influential books *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985) and *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006). As one might expect, they do not all interpret the concept the same way, with some like Johnson, LaCugna and Zizioulas emphasizing personhood as the indispensable precondition for community, and others like Moltmann and Pannenberg stressing community as the result of ongoing interpersonal relationality. I favor the latter approach since it better fits a social ontology in which the emphasis is more on the totality than its constituent parts or members.

[8]See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.3, art. 7.

[9]Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 166.

[10]Ibid., 183.

[11]Ibid.

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Trinity not only unites the Father and the Son but makes them "to be particular *persons* in community and as communion,"[12] so the work of the Holy Spirit in the world of creation is to relate to one another individual entities or groups of entities (institutions) which seem to be opposed or separate: "That which is or has spirit is able to be open to that which is other than itself, to move into relation with the other."[13]

The third and last trinitarian transcendental is relationality with respect to all created entities and sociality with respect to other human beings. "Personal beings are social beings, so that of both God and man it must be said that they have their being in their personal relatedness: their free relation in otherness. This is not so of the rest of creation, which does not have the marks of love and freedom which are among the marks of the personal. Of the universe as a whole we should conclude that it is marked by relationality rather than sociality."[14] Relationality, accordingly, is a transcendental because it applies to all finite entities, both inanimate and animate, to indicate their necessary ontological interdependence. Sociality is not a transcendental in the strict sense since it applies only to entities who are likewise persons capable of relating to one another in freedom and love. Human sociality, in other words, should mirror the sociality of the divine persons, their free self-gift to one another and their ongoing reception of that self-gift from one another within the communion of the divine life.[15]

Accordingly, the ideal of human interpersonal relations is not in-

[12]Ibid., 190.

[13]Ibid., 181.

[14]Ibid., 229. From my perspective, this is an important distinction which I do not find, for example, in the work of John Zizioulas. While he rightly emphasizes that personhood is a relational reality, his emphasis on being as "personal" (*Being as Communion*, 41, n. 37), on God the Father as the personal Cause of everything that exists (ibid., 40–42), on Christ as the divine person who mediates between God and creation (*Communion and Otherness*, 29), and on the way in which not only human beings but also non-human creation must be "hypostasized," incorporated into the person of the Incarnate Word (ibid., 32), suggests to me that Zizioulas is still working with the classical Platonic paradigm for the relationship of the One and the Many in which ontological unity is always grounded in an individual entity, not a social totality. In describing the relation of God the Father to the other two divine persons, for example, he says that the Father "is himself One of the Many and at the same time *the* One of the Many who, in his capacity as a *radically other person,* yet inconceivable without the radically other persons, causes otherness and its ontological content [otherness as constitutive of the notion of communion]" (ibid., 36). This is certainly defensible theologically, but it is very different from the vision of community entertained by Gunton (see on this point his essay "Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Toward a Renewal of the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*," in *Persons, Divine and Human*, ed. Christopher Schwoebel and Colin E. Gunton [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991], 59: "To be a person is to be constituted in particularity and freedom—to be given space to be—by others in community"). Gunton's notion of "space to be" is quite comparable to how I will reinterpret the Whiteheadian doctrine of "societies" later in this essay.

[15]Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 225.

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dividual self-fulfilment through the other but ongoing mutual transformation through self-gift to the other and reception of that same self-gift from the other. Some sacrifice of self-interest is inevitably involved in this exchange, but such sacrificial acts are transformative, not demeaning.[16] Moreover, through the dynamic of gift and reception among human beings, the rest of creation can be incorporated into the rhythm of the divine life: "The sacrifice of praise which is the due human response to both creation and redemption takes the form of that culture which enables both personal and non-personal worlds to realize their true being."[17]

II. A Trinitarian Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics

At this point we are ready to consider my own trinitarian reinterpretation of the God-world relationship within Whitehead's metaphysics. As already noted, however, the doctrine of the Trinity within my scheme is an illustration rather than an argument or proof for the validity of my hypothesis. That hypothesis is that reality is intrinsically social, constituted by innumerable momentary self-constituting subjects of experience which through their dynamic interrelation from moment to moment spontaneously co-generate higher-order unities which Whitehead calls "societies" and which I call "structured fields of activity" as their unifying principle of structure and continuity. This is my own solution to the problem of the One and the Many. The One is emergent out of the interplay of the Many with one another from moment to moment rather than timelessly transcendent of them as their enduring principle of order and intelligibility. At the same time, as I shall explain below, the One is not simply an incidental byproduct of the interaction of the Many with one another but serves as a necessary context or condition for preservation of the structure or pattern that holds them together as one socially organized group of entities rather than another.

This is, of course, not quite the same as what Whitehead set forth in *Process and Reality*. Therein he claimed that "the final real things of which this world is made up" are actual occasions, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience.[18] I believe that he was only half-right with this hypothesis. The "societies" into which actual occasions aggregate should likewise be counted among "the final real things of

[16]Ibid., 226.
[17]Ibid., 231.
[18]See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology,* corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 18, 34–35. See also Bracken, *The One in the Many: A Contemporary Reconstruction of the God-World Relationship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 146–55.

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which this world is made up". Admittedly, this does not seem to fit well with the ideal of coherence noted by Whitehead at the beginning of *Process and Reality:* one should not have more than one first principle.[19] But, from my perspective, the notion of actual occasion and the notion of society are together a single first principle; they are co-equal in ontological status with neither derivative from the other.[20] For, as Whitehead himself years later conceded, "an actual occasion has no history. It never changes. It only becomes and perishes."[21] Thus, unless it is viewed as the latest member of a "society" which alone endures and has "an essential character,"[22] an actual occasion is equivalently a "trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space"[23] without further meaning and value.

Furthermore, if one thinks of Whiteheadian societies as likewise constituting the building blocks or "final real things of which this world is made up," then from still another important perspective one can say that reality is intrinsically social. That is, reality is not made up simply of individual entities whose membership in various "societies" or socially organized units is something derivative or purely contingent. On the contrary, reality is made up precisely of such socially organized units or totalities in virtue of the dynamic interrelation of their constituent parts or members. The totalities, admittedly, cannot exist apart from the activity of those interrelated parts or members, but their parts or members only make sense as parts or members of a more comprehensive social reality. Even human beings derive their basic meaning and value from being members of a much larger social reality, namely, the human race as divided up into various ethnic groups and local communities.

There are, moreover, innumerable levels of social organization within the human world and the world of Nature. What is itself a socially organized reality on one level of existence and activity is normally a part or member of an even bigger social reality on a higher level. Atoms, for example, have dynamically interrelated parts or members (electrons, protons and neutrons), but are themselves constitutive parts or members of molecules which in various combinations make up the

[19]Whitehead, *Process and Reality,* 6.

[20]I find support for this idea in the notion of "non-duality" which has been so prominent in East Asian philosophies, e.g., the non-duality of *Atman* and *Brahman* in Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, Form and Emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism, and *yin* and *yang* in classical Confucianism. For that matter, with proper qualification, it seems likewise to characterize the non-dual reality of matter and form within finite reality in the philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas.

[21]Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 204.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 18.

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living and non-living things of this world. Everywhere one looks in this world, reality is socially organized, composed of individual things which are themselves dynamic unities of interrelated parts or members and parts or members of still larger social totalities.

Does such a scheme, however, lead to totalitarian ways of thinking in which the good of the individual entity is always subordinated to the good of the totality to which it belongs? My contention is that this would indeed be the case if "the final real things of which this world is made up" were subatomic particles or other inanimate things rather than actual occasions, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience. This is why in my judgment a genuinely social ontology has to be at the same time a metaphysics of universal intersubjectivity. Only a relatively autonomous self-constituting subject of experience has the necessary ontological independence of the social context out of which it is arising and to which it ultimately contributes its individual pattern of existence and activity. For a Whiteheadian society depends for its continued existence on the interplay of its constituent actual occasions as much as they depend on it as the necessary context or environment for their origination and the survival of their distinctive pattern of existence and activity.

At this point it should be clear why I prefer to describe Whiteheadian societies as structured fields of activity for their constituent actual occasions rather than as composites of individual actual occasions. For, if a society is a group of actual occasions with a "common element of form" or analogous self-constitution, as Whitehead proposes in *Process and Reality,*[24] then there really is no objective higher-level unity proper to the society as such. Whatever unity the society possesses is only an abstract and partial reflection of the concrete unity of each constituent actual occasion in and through its process of individual self-constitution.[25] Admittedly there are, according to Whitehead, "struc-

[24]Ibid., 34–35.

[25]That is, for Whitehead the "common element of form" for the society as a whole is a derivative reality, an abstraction from the concrete unity of each of its constituent actual occasions. My own position, on the contrary, is that the objective unity proper to the society is primary and that the subjective unity proper to the individual actual occasions is derivative from that higher-order reality. At stake here is the difference between a "concrete universal" where the whole is more than the sum of its parts and an "logical universal" formed by a process of abstraction from particulars. Whitehead would presumably defend his position by arguing that unity presumes an antecedent process of unification and that "agency belongs exclusively to actual occasions" (*Process and Reality*, 31). Yet, for me, Whiteheadian societies (structured fields of activity) also exercise agency, albeit of a different kind than what Whitehead had in mind for actual occasions: namely, the agency proper to a group of entities working in collaboration. I am, for example, the collective unity of all the agencies at work in my body at any given moment. My mind is only one agency, albeit the most important single agency, within me as an integrated totality of agencies, both organic and inorganic.

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tured" societies or societies composed of subsocieties of actual occasions corresponding to organisms of various kinds. These "structured societies" have an objective principle of unity and organization, due to the activity of a "regnant nexus" of actual occasions or "soul" in its relations with all the other subordinate subsocieties of actual occasions constituting the "body" of the organism.[26] But this is clearly an instance of the classic Platonic understanding of the relationship between the One and the Many. The Many (the subsocieties of inanimate actual occasions) derive their unity and order from their common relation to the One (the "regnant nexus" of living actual occasions).

What I have urged as a new paradigm for the relationship of the One and the Many, however, is that the One is emergent out of the ongoing interplay of the Many with one another and thus is as much dependent upon the Many as the Many are dependent upon it as the One. But, if that is the case, then the notion of a Whiteheadian society as an aggregate of actual occasions, each with its own internal principle of unity, breaks down. For, there is no objective higher-level unity proper to the society as such. Only if a Whiteheadian society is understood to be an objective field of activity structured by the interplay of all its constituent actual occasions (or, in the case of a Whiteheadian structured society, all its constituent subsocieties of actual occasions) can one think of the objective unity of the One as genuinely emergent out of the interplay of the Many with one another. A "soul" or "regnant nexus" of actual occasions at work within a structured society, of course, will inevitably play a larger role is structuring that society than any of the subordinate subsocieties of actual occasions. But the activity of the "soul" or "regnant nexus" has to be coordinated with the activities of all the subsocieties of inanimate actual occasions at any given moment in order to produce the here and now unity of the overall structured society or organism.

Whitehead suggests that the emergence of complex structured societies "exemplifies the general purpose pervading nature."[27] But what he fails thereby to explain is how this emergence of higher-order ontological unities takes place. For, if "agency belongs exclusively to actual occasions,"[28] and if the "common element of form" for the society is only analogously present in each constituent actual occasion at any given moment,[29] how do these analogously related actual occasions together ever produce something new and quite different from themselves as individual subjects of experience? What is needed, as I

[26]Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 99, 103.
[27]Ibid., 100.
[28]Ibid., 31.
[29]Ibid., 34.

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see it, is my own revised understanding of a Whiteheadian society as a structured field of activity for its constituent actual occasions. The field already has a form proper to itself as a society as a result of the interplay of antecedent sets of actual occasions. But that form can gradually undergo change as a result of minute changes in the relationship of new constituent actual occasions to one another with the passage of time. In brief, then, there is a reciprocal relationship between the field with its relatively stable structure and ever new sets of actual occasions which in responding to one another and to their common environment will over time assume new patterns of interrelation. The actual occasions thereby exercise efficient causality in co-generating a common element of form for their interaction here and now, but the society exercises at the same time a type of formal causality in reflecting that changed pattern of interrelation to the next set of constituent actual occasions in their processes of concrescence.

One final reason for thinking of Whiteheadian societies as structured fields of activity for their constituent actual occasions, which will also have a bearing on our analysis of the notions of personhood and community within the context of contemporary bio-ethical issues in the next part of this essay, is that one thereby solves a somewhat embarrassing conceptual problem within Whitehead's philosophy, namely, the problem of intersubjectivity. If the final real things of which this world is made up are all actual occasions or momentary self-constituting subjects of experience, intersubjectivity would seem to be a natural consequence. But such is not the case. Because each of these momentary subjects of experience cannot be aware of its own self-constitution or of the ongoing self-constitution of its contemporaries,[30] intersubjectivity in the strict sense is not possible between actual occasions except insofar as they are the latest members of "societies," aggregates of actual occasions which last over time and thus have a possibility of mutual influence on one another. But even here intersubjectivity seems to elude Whiteheadian explanation since Whiteheadian societies as such do not exercise agency, a necessary requirement for intersubjectivity. Only their constituent actual occasions exercise agency;[31] but these actual occasions, as already noted, do not last long enough to exercise agency on one another. The way out of this dilemma, in my view, is to rethink the notion of a Whiteheadian society as an ongoing field of activity structured by the interplay of its constituent actual occasions. The structure of the field is set up by an initial set of interrelated actual occasions, but the field with its struc-

[30]Ibid., 61.
[31]Ibid., 31.

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ture remains as a new set of interrelated actual occasions comes into existence. In this way, the field as an objective reality and its constituent actual occasions mutually condition one another's existence.

Intersubjectivity is achieved when two Whiteheadian societies with their individual fields of activity overlap to create a common field of activity for their respective actual occasions. In thus sharing a common field of activity with a conjoint structure or pattern of existence, two contemporary actual occasions belonging to different Whiteheadian societies are intersubjectively engaged with one another. Put in a more common-sense context, communities come into being when subjects of experience dynamically interact and co-create a common space which is gradually shaped and structured by their ongoing interaction. In this way they co-create a common field of activity for their ongoing exchange of information and affective response to one another. What you say and do affects me and what I say and do affects you. Together we bring into existence what Martin Buber in *I and Thou* called the "Between," an intangible but very real link between us which exists as long as we remain in contact with one another on an interpersonal basis.[32] Sometimes we can sense that common intentional space between us while in communication with others. But, sensed or not, it is always there as the implicit basis for our ongoing relationship.

Given this revised understanding of the notion of "society" in Whitehead's metaphysics, one can readily transpose Colin Gunton's theological approach to the problem of the One and the Many in terms of *perichoresis*, the unity-in-diversity of the divine persons within the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, onto a more purely philosophical level of reflection. That is, like specifically social realities in the world of creation (e.g., human communities or various non-human environments with a large variety of co-existing plant and animal species), the three divine persons are ontologically one God in virtue of a dynamic unity of interrelated parts or members. Their unity as one God is the unity of a community which is not derivative from their dynamic interrelation as antecedently existing divine persons but instead is co-existent with them as the necessary historical and empirical context of their ongoing interaction. The three divine persons, in other words, have a past, a present and a future proper to themselves in their divine duration (eternity). But there is presumably no one-to-one correspondence between time and eternity, if only because even in the world of creation no two societies of actual occasions have exactly the same space-time parameters. Each society creates its own space-time frame

[32]Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970), 89–92, 111–17.

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of reference with its continuous succession of actual occasions or momentary self-constituting subjects of experience. The world of creation originated out of and continues in existence within the divine "matrix" or field of activity proper to the three divine persons in their ongoing interrelation. What the space-time parameters of that divine field of activity may be is evidently beyond our comprehension or even imagination: "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day" (2 Peter 3:8).

The key point here, however, is that my strategy for dealing with the problem of the One and the Many is the reverse of that of Gunton. Whereas Gunton appeals to belief in the doctrine of the Trinity as a community of divine persons as the basis for the trinitarian "transcendentals" (*perichoresis*, particularity/substantiality, and relationality/sociality), as applied to the world of creation, I argue from the explanation of human communities and natural environments in terms of a neo-Whiteheadian understanding of the concept of "society" to belief in God as triune, one God in three persons. Both Gunton and I are agreed that reality is intrinsically social, namely, that at every level of existence and activity there are ontological totalities made up of interrelated parts or members and that what is a totality at one level is more often than not a part or member at another level. But, where he grounds his argument in what he believes to be divine revelation, I ground mine in philosophical reflection on a wide range of human experience. In any event, at this point it is time to apply this new paradigm for the relationship between the One and the Many to the understanding of personhood and community in contemporary life, above all, in the context of the bio-ethical issues mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

III. Personhood, Community and Contemporary Bioethical Issues

In the United States, at present, intense rivalry, even animosity, exists between advocates of pro-life and pro-choice positions on the issue of abortion and, to a lesser extent, on the related issues of euthanasia and stem-cell research. Both sides seem intent on defeating the other through legislation or court decisions favorable to their own cause. Little or no effort as a result is being expended to engage in mutual dialogue and thereby to come to a compromise on legal grounds which would be acceptable to both sides as at least a partial vindication of their position. What is legal or illegal, after all, is what pragmatically works or does not work to keep good order and relative harmony among fellow citizens in the public domain. Hence, while what is legal or illegal is ultimately grounded in a commonly-accepted sense of what is

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right and wrong, it leaves to individuals the necessary further specifications as to the morality or immorality of a given decision or behavior for themselves. This is not to reduce morality to a matter of personal choice but only to recognize that legality and morality are not always co-terminous. Something may be legal but immoral, at least in the minds of some people. Hence, as far as possible, they should not be obliged by law to do what they consider to be immoral on the grounds of personal conscience. But by the same token what some consider to be immoral may enjoy the protection of the law if only because there is no effective consensus within the general population on the morality of the action in question.[33]

All this makes good sense in relatively non-controversial areas of public life. But it quickly becomes controversial when cherished moral convictions seem to be at stake, whether it be the principle of free choice for one's own decision/behavior or the principle of protecting the life and well-being of those who for various reasons are unable to protect themselves. On such issues, personal convictions seem to outweigh the desire for a suitable compromise in the area of legality. It becomes an all-or-nothing fight for victory over the other side in the courts and legislature. Can this unhappy situation ever be peacefully resolved without serious threat to the well-being and possibly even the survival of the democratic process in this country? Presumably it could happen if people of good will on both sides re-examine their responsibilities to one another as members of the same community. For, if personhood, as Gunton and other contemporary theologians have argued, is a strictly relational reality and thus only intelligible within the context of life in community, does this not require that the long-term good of the community likewise be a factor in settling disputes about the rights of individuals within the community? Do not the concerned parties also have to ask themselves about the long-term consequences for the community if their own position on a given issue is adopted without further qualification? Admittedly, there will always be further discussion and perhaps even heated argument about what constitutes

[33]See on this point Mary Doak, "Resisting the Eclipse of *Dignitatis Humanae,*" *Horizons* 33 (2006): 33–54, esp. 45–8. Doak summarizes the argument of John Courtney Murray, one of the architects of *Dignitatis Humanae*, on the issue of the state's guardianship of public morality as follows: "the public morality to be enforced by law is that minimal moral behavior necessary for a decently functioning society" (47). But she also concedes that there are strong tendencies within Roman Catholicism and other Christian denominations at present to try to legislate morality in terms of a specifically Christian code of ethics and thus to restrict the freedom of conscience of non-Christians and perhaps even some Christians who for various reasons think otherwise. *Dignitatis Humanae*, of course, was one of the more influential documents issued at Vatican II in the 1960's (cf. *The Documents of Vatican II,* ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. [New York: America Press, 1966], 675–96).

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the long-term good of the community. But at least the contending groups will thereby be made aware of their commitment to a common good beyond their own individual and collective self-interest. They all have a commitment to sustaining the sometimes fragile reality of life in community with its inevitable restraints on personal wishes and ways of thinking.

Here one might object that what I am proposing represents a dangerous watering-down of the classical understanding of personhood. Personhood no longer has absolute value but only strictly relative value. The meaning and value of personhood is then heavily dependent upon the mind-set of whatever group within the community is currently in power and able to enforce its collective will upon other community members not belonging to the in-group. In this way, one of the pillars of a democratically organized society, to say nothing of the tenets of traditional Christian morality, has been seriously jeopardized. But, granted the reality of this danger, there are equally grave dangers both to life in a democracy and to the foundations of Christian morality in the affirmation of absolute rights for the individual, no matter what the eventual price may be in terms of social harmony. To illustrate this point, I return to my field-oriented reinterpretation of Whiteheadian societies sketched above.

As noted earlier, within Whitehead's metaphysical scheme intersubjectivity is impossible between simultaneously concrescing actual occasions. Yet, if the societies to which the currently concrescing actual occasions belong are understood to be overlapping fields of activity for those same occasions, then intersubjectivity between the actual occasions does exist in that they share, at least in part, a common "space," a common field of activity, to the ongoing structure of which they each here and now contribute. Put in more common sense terms, community is generated and preserved when community members provide space for one another in talking through controversial issues and setting policy for their common well-being as a functioning community. When, on the contrary, community members refuse to give one another space for the exchange of views, then they are effectively separating into rival communities and treating one another as enemies. The effort at rational persuasion yields to various forms of force in dealing with the other. As human history has shown many times over, however, the use of force first by one side and then in retaliation by the other side rarely results in a settlement of the contested issue in a manner agreeable to both sides. What actually results is not genuine peace but a temporary truce until the struggle for supremacy can be taken up again with a better chance for success on the part of the

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current losers. Hence, it really is in the best interests of all parties in a dispute to continue to make space for one another at the dialogue table.

Yet, you may object, if my personhood is somehow contingent upon your acceptance of me as a person like yourself, do I not run the risk of being unfairly treated by you as equivalently a non-person? If so, am I not then a helpless victim of unjust discrimination on your part?[34] Furthermore, is not human history full of instances where some human beings were killed or brutalized by other human beings with no apparent sense of shame or guilt on the part of the oppressors because they failed to acknowledge (or refused to accept) the personhood of the victims? The answer to all these questions, of course, is yes. So the danger of victimization of some by others within community life is ever present. But in the end this may not be the greatest danger to life in a democratic society and to the ideals of Christian morality. There is an even deeper question, a further issue to be considered.

What do we do to ourselves when we treat one another as enemies and effectively ignore our common personhood? Martin Buber in his celebrated book *I and Thou* noted the difference between "egos" and "persons" in human life.[35] Egos are human beings who are largely governed in their thinking and behavior by I-It relations; they tend to reduce other human beings to instruments for the achievement of their own individual goals and values. Persons, on the contrary, are for the most part governed in their thinking and behavior by I-Thou relations. They respect the integrity of the Other as Other and seek union with the Other through various forms of community. Even more importantly, however, human beings are affected in their own self-awareness and self-identity, depending upon how they deal with others. When I fail to treat you as a person, I lose a sense of my own personhood. Only when I address you as Thou, do I know what it means to be truly an I.[36] The

[34]This, of course, is especially true of the unborn and the comatose in beginning-of-life and end-of-life situations. They are unquestionably more vulnerable to attacks on their personal rights than a normal adult able to speak up for himself/herself. But, if the exercise of personhood is intrinsically related to life in community with others as I have argued in this essay, there may be at times circumstances where the needs of other persons in the community or the common good of the community as a whole would urge that the rights of a single individual in the community even to life itself be reevaluated and possibly revoked. Life sometimes demands very hard choices. But the thrust of this essay has been that, if such choices seemingly must be made, they should not be made by individuals acting on their own behalf but only in virtue of an explicit community policy that has been carefully worked out with full awareness of the dangers to victimization of others, above all, those who for whatever reason are unable to defend themselves.

[35]Buber, *I and Thou*, 112–15.

[36]Ibid., 62: "I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You." In his own way, therefore, Buber is much more alert to the reality of intersubjectivity than Whitehead, perhaps because he was thinking as a humanist rather than as a scientist preoccupied with cosmological issues. At the same time, if one allows for my reinterpretation of

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German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel seemed to be making the same point in his analysis of the master-slave relationship in *The Phenomenology of Mind*. The master in the beginning forces the slave to do his will. But the slave through his labor will grow in self-confidence, eventually get the upper-hand and reduce the erstwhile master to the status of a slave.[37] Yet, says Hegel, this uneasy dialectical relation between masters and slaves will only be transcended (*aufgehoben*) when both sides see their common interests and form a community, become a "We" as opposed to two "I's" in ongoing conflict.[38]

One can still object, of course, that it is not other human beings but the triune God who in creating us and thereby giving us a share in the divine communitarian life confers personhood on each of us from the moment of conception.[39] From a Christian perspective, this is presumably true (although some Christian ethicists have openly questioned whether a human fetus is personal or pre-personal in the earliest stages of pregnancy).[40] But in our contemporary Western pluralistic society appeals to God as the guarantor of human personhood will not be universally accepted. Accordingly, it seems more prudent and potentially more productive of fruitful communication among the parties to the dialogue to propose a strictly philosophical understanding of both "person" and "community" which could be understood and accepted by non-Christians as well as Christians. Furthermore, even from a

"societies" as structured fields of activity for their constituent actual occasions, then Whitehead's scheme provides a better explanation of what is meant by intersubjectivity than Buber's. For the notion of the "Between" in Buber's *I and Thou* is quite elusive. It only lasts as long as two human beings address one another as I and Thou. It evaporates as soon as the moment of existential encounter is ended and the two individuals begin treating one another again as He, She or even It, part of the "furniture" of their separate mental worlds (ibid., 68). Thinking of Whiteheadian "societies" as overlapping fields of activity for their constituent actual occasions, however, allows one to claim that the "Between" is a standard feature of all forms of intersubjectivity, not only at the human or divine level of existence and activity, but likewise at all levels of existence and activity within Nature, from the atomic to the intergalactic.

[37]See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper, 1967), 229–40.

[38]Ibid., 227: "Ego that is 'we,' a plurality of Egos, and 'we' that is a single Ego." Hegel, of course, in the *Phenomenology of Mind* is working toward an understanding of Absolute Spirit which is in the end an individual, not a collective reality. But his insight into the dynamics of the master-slave relation is valid quite apart from the details of his own system.

[39]See here Terence L. Nichols, *The Sacred Cosmos: Christian Faith and the Challenge of Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003), 175. Nichols believes that the developing fetus at conception or sometime thereafter enters into a relationship with God which elevates him/her into an awareness of God as transcendent Other and thus establishes the possibility of eternal life for the soul after the death of the body. In this way God unilaterally confers personhood on the developing fetus, quite apart from any response to the gift of personhood on the part of the fetus (at least for the moment).

[40]See Thomas A. Shannon and Allan B. Wolter, O.F.M., "Reflections on the moral status of the Pre-Embryo," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 603–26, esp. 622–26.

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Christian perspective, what is most important, after all, is that despite our very real differences with others on key issues we continue to treat one another as the persons we all claim to be. There are certainly risks involved in such behavior. But was this not, after all, the behavior of Jesus in dealing with his "enemies"? Did he not advocate non-violence even when confronted by those who sought to kill him (Matt. 26:52)? One may understandably quibble on the ethical consequences to be drawn from a single citation from Sacred Scripture. But, in any case, when we find ourselves strongly tempted to impose our will on others by any means available to us, the example of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane should be a salutary reminder that certain tactics in dealing with others are clearly counter-productive and in the end non-Christian.[41]

[41]See here Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 115–40, 173–201. The authors, both in the Quaker tradition, make a strong case that self-renunciation for the sake of the other is both the dynamic principle of cosmic evolution and the core of the Gospel message.

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