

Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Mary-Jane Rubenstein

2012

The Lure of Pan(en)theism: Difference and Desire in Divine Enticement

Mary-Jane V Rubenstein, *Wesleyan University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mary_jane_rubenstein/33/

The Lure of Pan(en)theism: Difference and Desire in *Divine Enticement*

MARY-JANE RUBENSTEIN

Wesleyan University, USA

This response to Karmen MacKendrick's work follows the thematic trail of desire through *Divine Enticement* (2012), seeking to clarify the relationship in MacKendrick's work between God and creation. While MacKendrick expresses an initial desire for an "immanent divine," especially in relation to the work of St. Augustine, she later feels more drawn to "a world that in its beauty calls out the name of its creator" than to a world "in which the creator is simply present." This brief engagement explores MacKendrick's logic of seduction in relation to the panentheist and pantheist theologies of Cusa and Bruno, ultimately suggesting that "immanence" only collapses the distance of desire if creation is understood to be finite and self-identical.

KEYWORDS Augustine, Bruno, Cusa, desire, panentheism, pantheism

I am thrilled to be part of this panel dedicated to the work of Karmen MacKendrick. I confess to being a bit overwhelmed by the whole affair — not only because Karmen has written so many good books, but because the work is so delicate and richly complex, it's a challenge to engage it out loud without sounding like a second-year piano student trying to plunk out Prokofiev. The texts string tightropes between philosophy and theology, poetry and prose, Oxbridgean orthodoxy and Francophone heresy. Both stylistically and conceptually, they are tense, carefully calibrated pieces of writing: "insofar as y is the case," MacKendrick tends to begin, "we can certainly say x. But let's not forget those moments of not-x that surface throughout the text, or that strange explosion of z in the middle of things." There is a thoroughgoing *honesty* to Karmen's work: a refusal not to read what's there to be read. Whereas many of us, I think, are inclined to disregard little details that might undermine the argument we're hoping to make, Karmen's response always seems to be, "oh well, it looks like I've got to complicate my argument. Again." This lends the work a remarkably anti-partisan quality: Karmen seems willing to think along with any scholar or school so long as its reading is honest and interesting, and her writing refrains at every turn from setting up opponents to knock down, even when it would be so easy to do so. But this is not easy work.

Thematically, I am most grateful for Karmen's tireless attunement to thinking's embodiment — to breath and touch, longing and seduction, and perhaps above all, *desire*. And so in this short piece, I'd like to follow the trail of a particular desire and see where it leads. It is a desire the author herself expresses at the beginning of her most recent work, *Divine Enticement*. This desire gets things going, undergoes a disciplined transformation early on, and then courses metamorphosized through the rest of the marvelous book. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the desire concerns Augustine's *Confessions* which, as is well known, mentions desire in the same breath that it first mentions humanity: "Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you [...] to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation."¹ From this nearly palindromic interrelation of humanity, God, and creation, the *Confessions* then goes on to chart the path of desire through the whole cosmos to the God in all things, in whom all things also are.

"For many years," MacKendrick writes, "I wanted Augustine's vividly described desire to draw his God all the way in; I wanted him to be less committed to maintaining the distinction of creator from creation, to be more of a properly neo-Platonist kind of panentheist."² This is, as it were, a perfectly *reasonable* desire, one that is stirred up by the very text that ultimately refuses to fulfill it. Its flames are immediately fanned in the first few paragraphs of the *Confessions*, when Augustine is asking how on earth he can call upon God at all, when unless God were already there, there would be no self to do the calling: "I would have no being," he confesses to the God he invokes, "unless you were in me. Or rather," he stammers, "I would not have any existence if I were not in you, 'of whom are all things, *through* whom are all things, *in* whom are all things'" (1·2·2, emphasis added). God is in the Augustine who is in God, and the same goes for all of creation: all things are filled with the God who fills all things.

For panentheists (and even pantheists) of any stripe, this is a seductive passage. But then, of course, Augustine won't quite give us what we want, taking God *out* of God's creation in those other passages like "My sin consisted in this, that I sought pleasure, sublimity, and truth not in God but in his creatures, in myself and other created beings" (1·20·31).

"I don't get it," a student asked me on the second day of class this fall. "If God is *in* God's creatures, then why is it a sin to turn to them? How is it even *possible* to turn from God to creation if God is in creation?" *Note to self*: I scribbled on my lesson plan, *they catch on quick. Make lectures smarter*. So I am drawn in by Karmen's having been drawn in by Augustine and then frustrated by him. As she puts it, "some of his remarks — for instance, 'God is present in the world he is fashioning' [...] seem to come so very close to putting the maker in the world, and yet they resist" (p. 4). Remarks that express, for example, God's presence in-creation-in-God, or God's constitutive exceeding of the "infinite profundity" of memory, or the goodness of being itself by virtue of its participation in God — all

¹ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Owen Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1·1·1; subsequent references will be cited internally.

² Karmen MacKendrick, *Divine Enticement: Theological Seductions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 4; subsequent references will be cited internally.

this, Karmen points out, “would seem so much easier with a fully immanent God” (p. 4). And not only easier, but more desirable: “I *wanted* this immanent divine,” she confesses (p. 4, emphasis added).

At the same time, she adds, “I simultaneously wanted to shift away from the language and the concepts of immanence and transcendence, as I still do” (p. 4). So the desirability of a fully immanent God is both announced and reigned in; I wanted the thing, she suggests, but not the language. But of course because this is Karmen MacKendrick, that division won’t hold for very long. It could be, in fact, that MacKendrick’s discomfort with these concepts signals a deeper problem with the fully immanent God itself. “I gradually came to realize,” she continues, “that a world that in its beauty calls out the name of its creator [...] is even more seductive than one in which the creator is simply present” (p. 5). And the reason stems from the structure of language itself: “signs,” MacKendrick explains, “are the very material of seduction, to which that tiny, frustrating, unsurpassable distance turns out to be essential” (p. 5). What this means, she concludes, is that “Augustine’s rejection of an easily intelligible immanentism is more interesting — and vastly more enticing — than I had previously suspected” (p. 7). In true Augustinian fashion, MacKendrick’s desire here is not shut down — either by refusal *or* satisfaction — but rather redirected, gently disciplined toward (perhaps even *by*) the God it truly desires into an endless, multi-local seduction, in which everything speaks of its not-quite-present but never-absent God.

My question, then, concerns the admittedly enormous problem of God’s relationship to the universe. I’m hoping to think through what I think Karmen thinks is wrong with transcendence and immanence, and then ask how to position an endlessly seductive God with respect to an already-endlessly seductive creation.

The undesirability of a God totally *beyond* the universe goes almost without saying: God thus construed becomes the anchor of other-worldliness, the transcendental signified, the *causa sui*, the *deus ex machina* flown in to stop the gap between this and that synapse in the eye, or between the big bang and the moment 10^{-34} seconds later when physics kicks in. In short, a God wholly outside creation is bloodless at best and eco-treacherous at worst: the wildly unpopular “God of the philosophers,” for whom many quills have fluttered across parchment, but before whom Heidegger tells us no one would think to dance or sing, except as a weird sort of joke.³

But this God isn’t nearly so much of a concern to MacKendrick — perhaps because it’s not nearly so much of a lure for her — as the fully immanent God of the pantheists and more radical panentheists. Locating God in the world, she worries, risks making God simply present to it — just *there* to be pinned like a butterfly on a board, or laid out under bright lights in some theological laboratory (52–54).

I certainly affirm this concern not to say that God is simply present in (or as) the cosmos. At the same time, however, I wonder how, on this score at least, God is different from anything else. Doesn’t the Derridean-inflected semiotic ontology

³ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 64–65.

coursing through *Divine Enticement* expose *nothing* as simply-present to anything else? Holding onto the thread of desire, couldn't one say that anything desirable is seductive by virtue of its not-quite-presence, of something that slips away from simple *thereness*, yet which refuses simply to go away? And doesn't all this already take place within the world itself?

In order for anything to be seductive — from a forest to a concerto to ice cream — something about it has to escape full immediacy. But here is where I find myself a bit stuck: that slippage doesn't take the desirable outside the world itself. One doesn't have to eject one's lover from the cosmos in order to be seduced by her; one simply has to be drawn by her subtle non-identity to everything else *in* the cosmos. The question, then: if this is the way presence and absence already work within the world, then what is wrong with thinking of God as within the world — perhaps even as withinness itself? Does MacKendrick's discomfort with immanence simply stem from a concern to maintain the ontological distinction? (If this is the issue, then that would be the the answer to my question, but I sense there is something more complicated going on.) Or is the concern, rather, to avoid reducing a purportedly infinite God to a purportedly finite world? That is a more complicated issue, and it leaves one asking to what extent the world is finite.

In the Christian world, at least, the problem of cosmic infinity is opened by Nicholas of Cusa, who surfaces from time to time throughout MacKendrick's work, and whose learned ignorance could be said to provide this most recent book a kind of ungrounding epistemological ground. For Nicholas, the universe is the concrete expression of the eternal divine enfolding, and as such, the universe must be spatially boundless (there goes Aristotle's tidy cosmology, a full century before Copernicus). But precisely because the universe is created, its boundlessness stops short of what Nicholas is willing to call "infinity" without qualification. God alone is what Nicholas calls "absolute" infinity, whereas the contingent universe, which God creates out of nothing, is "contracted" infinity.⁴

It is this difference between contracted and uncontracted infinity that the ill-fated Giordano Bruno dismantles in his more unabashedly Neoplatonic cosmology.⁵ For Bruno, the universe is the direct, necessary creation of a God who cannot not create, conferring upon creation everything God has in a dizzying gesture of auto-exhaustion. In the charges that led to his execution at the turn of the seventeenth century, Bruno was said to have denied the doctrine of the incarnation, which he sort of did, but more interestingly didn't. For Bruno, there is no gap between the eternity of God and the temporality of creation, or between God's "inner" expression in the persons of the Trinity and God's "outer" expression in creation — so there is no need for a Christological bridge between God and the universe. Contrary to the accusations against him, though, all this

⁴Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia*, ed. Ernest Hoffman and Raymond Klibansky, 22 vols., vol. 1, Nicolai de Cusa: Opera Omnia (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1932), 2:4:113.

⁵Giordano Bruno, "On the Infinite Universe and Worlds," in Dorothea Singer (ed.), *Giordano Bruno: His Life and Thought with Annotated Translation of his Work on the Infinite Universe and Worlds* (New York: Schuman, 1950). For a lengthier treatment of the relationship between Cusan and Brunian cosmologies, please see Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Worlds without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), ch. 3.

amounts less to a denial of the incarnation than a radicalization of it: for Bruno, the universe is the direct outpouring of God from the beginning. This is to say that the universe *is* the God from God and the light from light; creation, in other words, *is the incarnation*. The whole universe is God-in-the-universe, and conversely, God is wholly *in* the universe God creates.

So what is it about this high-octane immanence, I wonder, that doesn't quite suit the endlessness of divine seduction? What is lost when Cusan cosmology goes Brunian? And is it lost? Right in the middle of her most recent book, MacKendrick writes, "I want to suggest that what rightly astonishes us is the peculiar object of faith, the mystery — what is of the world and yet not exhausted by it, the *more* of what *is*" (p. 117, emphasis added). To be sure, if what is is finite, then an infinite God cannot be exhausted by it. If, however, the world itself is infinite, then one could argue that "what is" *is* "the more of what is." What, then, would be at stake in calling or not calling this intracosmic "more" by the name of God? To what extent does God need to be thought of as "beyond" or "other than" a universe that is already non-identical and self-exceeding? Could we call that non-identical self-exceeding *itself* by the name of God? And would such a call constitute panentheism, pantheism, or something else entirely?

Bibliography

- Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*. Trans. Owen Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Bruno, Giordano. "On the Infinite Universe and Worlds." In Dorothea Singer (ed.), *Giordano Bruno: His Life and Thought with Annotated Translation of His Work on the Infinite Universe and Worlds*. New York: Schuman, 1950.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Identity and Difference*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- MacKendrick, Karmen. *Divine Enticement: Theological Seductions*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.
- Nicholas of Cusa. *De Docta Ignorantia*. Ed. Ernest Hoffman and Raymond Klibansky. Nicolai De Cusa: Opera Omnia. 22 vols. Vol. 1. Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1932.
- Rubenstein, Mary-Jane. *Worlds without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

Notes on contributor

Mary-Jane Rubenstein is Associate Professor of Religion at Wesleyan University, where she teaches in the areas of philosophy of religion and modern Christian thought. She is the author of *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (Columbia, 2009) and *Worlds without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse* (Columbia, 2014). Correspondence to: Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Department of Religion, Wesleyan University, 171 Church Street, Middletown, CT 06459, USA. Email: mrubenstein@wesleyan.edu