

Response to the Respondents

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BEFORE I BEGIN MY RESPONSE, I WISH TO THANK MS. BAARD, MR. SEITZ, AND MR. Mejido for taking the time and effort to consider the points raised in my paper and for opening up for me new ways of looking at David Tracy's work and the relationship between language, experience, understanding, and theology. I also wish to express my gratitude to David Tracy himself, for his efforts to open up a space for genuine dialogue between Christian theologians and the wider, contemporary world, including other religious traditions. Our conversation tonight is, in a sense, a celebration of his contribution.

Let me begin my response by talking about what I do not intend to do: that is, to "defend" my paper. Discussions between scholars remind me all too often of trench warfare in World War I: each side digs in (as deeply as possible), and then lobbs mortar shells at the other's equally entrenched position. Out in the middle, in "no-man's land," the main casualty is the truth. This phenomenon is particularly distressing in Christian theologians, for Christ, in his elevation of love of God and neighbor, and in his elevation of the role of service to both, taught a radical openness to the Other, a teaching which seems to call for true dialogue, real conversation.

This is precisely the contribution of Tracy and of what I prefer to call his "conversational" approach to theology, which Ms. Baard summarizes so beautifully as including "self-respect (reverence for one's own tradition); a self-exposure to the other as other; and a willingness to risk all in the questioning and inquiry that constitutes the dialogue itself" (Baard, 12). As Baard

notes, for Tracy “Dialogue is...both rooted in the manifestations of Truth...and can in itself become the occasion for further manifestation” (10).

So, in that spirit, instead of attempting to defend my paper—which after all, is itself a work in progress and only a part of the larger work-in-progress which is my life—I’ll approach this response in two ways: first, what I’ve learned from my respondents; and second, my suggestions for continuing this conversation.

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED

I have learned much more from my partners in this conversation than can be treated in the short time allotted. So I will restrict myself to three main points.

1) Though we express it in different ways, all four of us agree that the relationship between reality, experience, understanding, and language is subtle and complex—frustratingly so. As Mejido’s paper makes clear, even “language” can be understood in at least two fundamentally different ways: as disclosure (the “hermeneutic” conception), or as lack, as alienation (a Lacanian or post-structuralist conception). Mejido argues quite persuasively that the tension between Tracy’s epistemology and that of Mahâyâna Buddhism stems from the fact that Tracy “labors under the hermeneutic conception of language” (Mejido, 1). This conception presupposes that since the logos as meta-language constituted the being of all beings, it can be mediated by language. Lacan, on the other hand, seeks to free the subject from language and to the Real—an approach which, as Mejido correctly observes, is more compatible with the Yogâcâra position as I understand it. I want to pursue Mejido’s insights further.

2) Both Baard and Seitz have alerted me to an apophatic turn in Tracy’s thought. This is an encouraging development. As Baard presents this turn in Tracy’s thought, it appears that Tracy has moved to address some of the difficulties I find in Tracy’s treatment of language and experience in his earlier work, particularly *Plurality and Ambiguity*. If, as Seitz puts it, Tracy has come to recognize the limits as well as the necessity of language—and Baard, I think, describes the same development, though in dialectical terms—then Tracy may have found a way to address the challenge of Mahâyâna Buddhism, the challenge of a claim to an experience of the Real beyond language. By the way, this emphasis on the limits of language is consistent with

at least two concepts in Tracy's earlier work: his stress on limit-experience in *Blessed Rage for Order*, and his depiction of the religious "classic" as resistant to "definitive" interpretation (as both Baard and I point out).

3) I appreciate Seitz's use of Jonathan Edwards to underscore my own emphasis both on "the radical disjuncture between language and... Ultimate Reality" and on "the value of language". (Edwards, of course, expresses this point much more eloquently than I do.) I hope to take a look at the works of Edwards which Seitz mentions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

1) As far as I can tell, Baard limits her response to my discussion of a possible problem in Tracy's approach; she does not explicitly engage the final section of my paper, which suggests "skillful means" as a way of reconciling Tracy's seemingly absolute statements with Yogâcâra's approach to reality, experience, and language. Consequently, Baard may have missed what I regard as a resonance between my own reconciliation attempt and her presentation of Tracy's emphasis on what she quite eloquently calls "the mystical, the language-breaking power of manifestation". I'm excited by her presentation of Tracy's "apophatic turn," as reflected in his 1999 lecture here at Princeton. I was not familiar with this work. I'm excited and intrigued by Tracy's recent view of "Ultimate Reality breaking through our linguistic categories, albeit in fragmentary form, and the task of the theologian [as] the gathering of the fragments". Seitz also mentions this apophatic turn in Tracy as a recognition of the limits of language. In further conversation, I would like to hear Baard's thoughts on whether a reading of Tracy's statements as "skillful means" fits with her understanding of Tracy's apophatic turn.

Also, I wonder if this apophatic turn, which Baard sees as in continuity with Tracy's earlier work—two sides of a dialectic—could equally be seen as a departure from his earlier stance, particularly the passages I highlight as problematic in *Plurality and Ambiguity*. If it is a departure, it is one I find healthy and constructive, and more amenable to dialogue with the Other.

2) The real debate here, it seems to me, is between Baard's defense of Tracy and Mejido's critique of Tracy's (and postmodernism's) conception of language. Baard and Mejido push my own assessment of Tracy's approach further, but in opposing directions. I would like to see Baard address Mejido's critique of the hermeneutic conception of language, and Mejido address

whether what Baard presents as Tracy's dialectic between the linguistic turn and the apophatic turn is a move in a Lacanian direction, or at least a move away from a hermeneutical conception of language.

3) Seitz quotes a passage from *Plurality and Ambiguity*: "To experience in any other than a purely passive sense (a sense less than human) is to interpret" (Tracy 1987: 9). Although my paper only dances around the edges of this issue, I agree with Tracy that experience and interpretation are bound up together, at least to a great extent—though not "through and through." However, has Tracy perhaps gone too far in depicting "passive" experience—meaning, I assume, uninterpreted experience—as "less than human?" Since Baard brings up Zen practice, it might be germane to consider whether the Zen use of *kôans*—paradoxical problems that resist solution—have the effect of so frustrating the practitioner's normal processes of interpretation, conceptualization, and analysis that she is opened to what might be called a "purely passive" experience of awakening. (Since I have not personally had such an experience, I have to depend on the accounts of those who claim to have had. And here, as Seitz notes, I depend on their interpretation and their language!) This experience may be understood only through language (using here what Mejido calls the hermeneutical conception) but the experience itself is neither linguistic nor interpreted. Indeed, it is more like the difference mentioned in Seitz's quotes from Edwards, or Lacan's view as described by Mejido. This might be a fruitful area for further conversation about the larger issue of the relationship of experience to language.