

Response to Tom Greggs

Keywords: consummated, creatureliness, flourishing, reconciled, sin, theological anthropology.

A colleague commented that it is difficult to give a clear brief summary of *Eccentric Existence* because it has so many moving parts. That's fair, and for that reason Tom Greggs offers not a précis but, as he says, a 'tour' of *EE*. I am grateful to him for this perceptive, perspicuous and generous tour of the book's premises and conclusions. I want to address as best I can here Greggs's several 'unsystematic probes'. The probes seem to me to fall into two broad groups, one raising formal or methodological concerns and the other substantive concerns. I shall begin with the first group, taking them up in more or less the order in which they were made.

On the methodological side *EE* proposes that 'secondary' theology (in this case anthropology) should be 'systematically unsystematic'. Early in his article Greggs's probe asks whether *EE* really isn't just as systematic as any other theology. As he points out, it has a complex overall formal structure marked by patterns of thought that are repeated in variations in a certain rhythm. Does that not make it a 'single systematic structure'? (Incidentally, Greggs is accurate in suspecting me of a visual imagination. More particularly, I tend to imagine structures of thought as buildings and I am particularly interested in their 'architectonics'.) Yes, it does make *EE* systematic in a certain way. However, in regard to theology, 'systematic' may be said in several senses. Attention to as much conceptual clarity as the subject matter permits, concern for the strength of arguments offered in support of the major moves it makes, concern for the internal coherence of the parts of the project, and a definite pattern which organizes the whole all help make it 'systematic' in the sense exhibited in *EE*. But it does not make it 'systematic' in the sense that it tries to develop all its parts and claims out of one or a few first principles identified by rigorous and systematic analysis either of the metaphysical structure of the cosmos or the conditions of the possibility of human consciousness, analyses developed independent of any theological commitments. To be 'systematically unsystematic' is to work systematically at avoiding intellectual allegiance to any such systematically extra-theological analyses. Nor does *EE* claim to develop all its theological proposals by analysis of the implications of some one Christian theological claim about how God relates to all that is not God (say, that in becoming incarnate God reconciles the estranged to God). Systematically avoiding that is another way of being 'unsystematic'.

A second methodological probe raises two questions about unintended theological consequences of distinguishing among these types of scriptural narrative in a way that is 'sharper than is perhaps necessary'. To begin, Greggs suggests that *EE*'s account of three ways in which God relates may unintentionally reintroduce the traditional binary structure of Christian theologies (creation and reconciliation/eschatological consummation; nature and grace; law and gospel) that *EE* urges generates unresolvable and unnecessary theological disputes.

Greggs has given an accurate account of *EE*'s claim that God relates to all else in three ways of relating which are irreducibly distinct and may not be conflated into a single narrative of 'the acts of God' or 'salvation history'. *EE*'s claim that canonical scriptural narratives witness to this threefold way in which God relates to all else rests on an intersection of exegesis (especially by Claus Westermann), a canonical hermeneutic, and the specific kind of 'theology' *EE* claims to be ('secondary theology'). *EE* urges that the rhetoric and pattern of movement of each of three kinds of canonical narrative witnesses, not simply to the fact that God relates in a threefold way to all else (to create, to draw creatures to eschatological consummation and to reconcile estranged creatures to God), but to the peculiar way in which God does that in each case. *EE* strongly insists on the irreducibility of these three types of canonical narrative to some one narrative which incorporates them all (e.g. a 'salvation history'). However, there is too an equally strong emphasis in *EE* that it is one and the same triune God, and not simply one or another of the persons, who relates to all that is not God in each of these three ways. All three persons are involved in each way of relating.

Now about one unintended consequence: Greggs notes the distinction between two ways in which God relates. On one side, two of them (God relating to initiate eschatological consummation and God relating to reconcile) are narrated in stories about the life of Jesus. On the other side, one (God relating creatively) is narrated in stories which are not explicitly stories about the life of Jesus. He wonders whether that doesn't unintentionally reintroduce the traditional binary structures of Christian theologies which *EE* urges generate unresolvable and unnecessary theological disputes.

However, if one accepts (a) that canonical narratives of three kinds of ways in which God relates do have different narrative 'logics' such that were they amalgamated in a single narrative its plot would be incoherent; (b) that it is the one triune God who relates in each of the three ways; and (c) that the three are asymmetrically related to one another, it is difficult to see how accounts of the Triune God relating in Jesus to draw to eschatological consummation and to reconcile could be conflated into one reconciliation/consummation narrative distinct from and asymmetrically related to accounts of God relating

to create. So it is hard to see why the distinctions among the three ways in which God relates are 'too' sharply differentiated. Of course, if (a), (b) and (c) are rejected then much else in *EE* would have to be radically revised or rejected.

EE's insistence that God's relating to create does not necessarily entail God's relating to reconcile creatures should they be estranged from God gives rise to Gregg's second suggestion of an unintended consequence of *EE*'s 'overly sharp' distinction among three ways in which the triune God relates. The question is whether that doesn't lead to thinking God's 'engagement with the world is somewhat arbitrary'. But what counts as 'arbitrary' in regard to God? Human acts are called 'arbitrary' when no reason can be given for doing them. Non-arbitrary human acts are intentional acts. They have an intention, a reason for being done. They are teleological in the sense that they have a telos, whether that is a good independent of the action (you fish in order to have food on the table) or simply the act itself, done for its own sake (you play the violin because the very doing of it is deemed a good in itself). If someone characterised God's ways of engaging all else as arbitrary it would mean that, however analogically 'arbitrary' is used, God's ways of relating, lacking a reason, are non-teleological.

However, according to *EE*, God relates reconciling the estranged to God to an end, namely, that the estranged – once reconciled – may be drawn to God's promised eschatological consummation. So God engaging the world by relating to human creatures to reconcile does have a 'reason' and is not random or non-teleological. It is not 'arbitrary'.

What about *EE*'s insistence that God relating to draw creatures to eschatological consummation and God relating to create are irreducibly different in part because neither is the 'reason' for the other (although God relating to create is the ontological and logical precondition of God relating to consummate)? However unintentionally, doesn't that imply that they are both arbitrary? Not necessarily. *EE* proposes that in each of them God engages the world to a different end. In both of them God is self-involved in that God is self-committed to 'the good' of human creatures. However, they are different goods and neither is a sub-set, as it were, of the other. In relating to create God is self-committed to nurturing and sustaining the well-being of finite creatures in their finite kinds as long as they last. It does not entail that they should last forever. In relating to draw creatures to eschatological consummation God is self-committed to nurture and sustain the eschatological flourishing of human creatures in their participation in the eternal life of God. In that sense, each has an intended end. Each has a 'reason'. They are equi-primordial. Neither is arbitrary. Why can't God engage the world to more than one end?

So each of the three ways in which God relates to all else has an intentional object, a 'reason'. None of them is 'arbitrary'. EE's insistence on the irreducible difference between any two of the three ways in which God relates cannot, it seems to me, be judged 'too sharp' on the grounds that it leads to a non-teleological description of God's ways of relating, i.e. 'as arbitrary'.

A third methodological probe wonders 'why certain decisions were made positively to include some interlocutors and negatively to exclude others'. The answer is: for prudential reasons. There are a lot of perfectly legitimate ways to do theology. A very common one is to develop a theological proposal through an explicit discussion of a few other theologians' writings on the same topic, identifying 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' in each, and constructing a fresh proposal which seeks to build on some of the strengths found in the interlocutors, especially if they serve to correct one another's weaknesses. I have no investment in challenging that way of doing theology. It does have the side effect, however, of generating a diversionary discussion, not about the theological proposal being made, but about the correctness of the author's interpretation of her interlocutors. Debate about the correctness of interpretations of interlocutors tends to displace discussion of the merits of the theological proposal in question. I elected explicitly to name only thinkers whose work I was borrowing and building on. That is only courteous. I elected not to discuss explicitly thinkers who shape EE primarily because I find them problematic, sometimes for complex reasons. I didn't want my proposals in EE to be sidelined by debate about the adequacy of my interpretations of my interlocutors. EE is plenty long as it is!

Greggs's fourth methodological probe concerns EE's 'voice and mood': EE 'is always hypothetical and somewhat in the subjunctive. But is there a place for the more imperative as well within a work as long as Kelsey's? . . . I desired to know how I could become more fully human in time'. I take it that 'imperative' connotes normative proposals in addition to EE's theological descriptions of what, who and how we ought to be. In my view, anthropology is the locus which most immediately grounds normative judgements in Christian theological ethics, in Christian practices which serve to form the identity of Christian assemblies and the identities of individual persons of faith, and how the two are properly related to each other. Those two sets of interrelated normative judgements are the point at which Christian doctrine impacts concrete everyday life. Each of them is in itself an important theological locus. As I see it, responsibly constructing normative theological proposals in each of those theological loci involves bringing together theological anthropology and other disciplines such as the social and psychological sciences. They are crucially important loci. They are

other books. *EE*'s scope is pretty broad, but its ambition is limited to inviting its readers to think with it in a certain *theological fashion* about questions in anthropology, and then to go on to think for themselves in the same fashion, perhaps as a thought experiment, about other types of questions to see what difference thinking this way (about anthropology) might make, positively and negatively, for the way we frame and express what we say and what we do to 'become more fully human in time'. Written out, those are other books.

On the theologically substantive side Greggs probes two major theological topics which are either insufficiently developed in *EE* or left out entirely. The first is a probe into fragments of a doctrine of God in *EE*. He is entirely right that much more needs to be said. To that end I am working on a manuscript addressing some questions concerning a trinitarian doctrine of God. It is not inferred from *EE* but it does seek to propose doctrine of God which is compatible with *EE*. Despite my scepticism of some major moves Karl Barth makes in the *Dogmatics* (which just will not go away) I am convinced by his contention that, when moving from one locus to another, one must begin all over again from the beginning. The 'beginning' in this case is the proposal that the 'economy' comprises three distinct ways in which God relates to all else. I suspect that a good deal of the theological perplexity readers of *EE* feel grows out of the way in which it fragments into three the traditional theological reading of those narratives as a single teleological movement from a beginning of all that is not God, through a middle consisting of God's saving covenant-making acts, to an end in which what was begun at creation is finally fully actualised in the eschaton. The project will try to address only some questions regarding the implications of that fragmenting of the traditional picture of a single teleological divine act moving from *exitus* to *reditus* or from nature to grace or from law to gospel. It will not aspire to discuss the entire agenda of traditional doctrines of God (no more multi-volume projects!).

The second of Greggs's substantive probes concerns the absence in *EE* of sustained reflection on race, gender, physical and psychological 'normalcy', and we should add class. They are important topics. Their omission was deliberate. The issue at stake is whether the answers *EE* proposes to the 'What?' and 'Who?' questions have a normative edge in addition to being descriptive. Theological answers, including *EE*, hold that answers to the 'What?' question include a normative judgement: God calls human creatures good for their own sakes as creatures. That is sufficient basis for the normative claim that each human creature has unqualified value in and for itself, a dignity which must be respected by being treated as an end and not as a means only. This is a normative judgement which applies equally to every human creature simply as human creature. It does not admit of degrees.

However, as has been argued especially by liberationist theologies, traditional and modern formulations of theological answers to the 'What?' question have been formulated as though that sense of 'good' did admit of degrees. And they build into their answers to this question criteria by which to assess the relative 'goodness' of human creatures which are culturally relative values, for example, males as more complete and therewith more valuable instances of 'humanum' than females, whites than people of colour, 'straights' than 'gays', 'normally' abled than 'other' abled, etc. In consequence, culturally relative and pernicious value judgements are absolutised. *EE* assumes the correctness of this analysis and does not try to defend it.

One important proposal of a way to avoid absolutising such culturally relative norms is that the 'What?' question as such be set aside in theology as an invalid question. To answer it is to improperly 'essentialise' humans by declaring that they are all equal in the abstract, suppressing the fact that in concrete reality each of them has a distinct and different personal identity. But Christian theology is supposed to illuminate the difference it makes that God relates equally to human persons in the full concreteness of their personal identities, not as interchangeable instances of abstract 'human essence'.

EE argues that this strategy will not work because it is finally both impossible and unnecessary to avoid the 'What?' question. It is impossible because the proposal that anthropology focus primarily on the 'Who?' question, on the entire range of diverse concrete personal identities in all their physical, social, cultural, psychological concreteness unavoidably raises the question: 'What is that "range"?' 'Personal identities of what kind of being?'

It is an unnecessary theological move, *EE* urges, because the problem with traditional and modern theological answers to the 'What?' question can be avoided in a different way: by firmly distinguishing the 'Who?' question and its theological answers from the 'What?' question and its theological answers. The answer to the 'What?' question promoted in *EE* does not imply any normative judgements about any personal identity. Normative judgements about personal identities of a sort are implied by its answer to the 'Who?' question.

Where *EE* claims that human beings' goodness as creatures of a certain 'kind' does not admit of degree, its answer to the 'Who?' question claims that each human being's 'good' as a creature, as one drawn 'in Christ' into eschatological consummation and, if estranged from God, as one reconciled does admit of degree. It does this by distinguishing between two aspects of unsubstitutable personal identities in their concrete particularities: the quotidian and the basic.

Each human creature's 'quotidian identity' is constructed through time by the interplay among its human body's biological and somewhat malleable givens, the system of roles and status which structure its particular proximate contexts and are projected onto it, its history of interactions with others, and how it interprets this interplay. Quotidian personal identity is not fate. It can undergo deep changes over time. Neither is it something one constructs ex nihilo, as though 'who' one is were autonomously self-created.

Human creatures' 'basic identities', on the other hand, have three aspects which are a function of the three ways in which God relates to them: as creatures they are those called to be wise for the well-being of their creaturely proximate contexts; as those drawn towards an eschatological consummation they are those whose election to such consummation and whose undergoing catastrophic final judgement has already happened; as those who, in their estrangement from God, are nonetheless structurally reconciled to God. Each of these aspects of their 'basic personal identities' brings with it normative ways in which humans respond appropriately to God's ways of relating to them. *EE* outlines those appropriate responses in its answer to the 'How?' question. That constitutes human creatures' 'good' in respect to their flourishing or not. It also outlines 'inappropriate' responses in its chapters on 'sin in the singular'.

Our unsubstitutable concrete quotidian personal identities are constructed in the context of these three aspects of our shared 'basic personal identities'. It is not the particulars of the construction of any one quotidian personal identity (body type – including biological sex; range of abilities or the absence of any; gender roles; sexual orientation; race; class; etc.) which are assessed by these norms, but whether a given quotidian personal identity is lived in its proximate context in ways which are appropriate responses to the ways God relates to us. That is a sense of 'good' that admits of degrees.

Greggs is correct, in my view, that as factors of quotidian personal identities, gender, race, class, other-abledness, etc. ought to be theologically discussed at great depth. That is for another time. *EE*'s primary aim in regard to these questions is to make a case for the theological fruitfulness of separating out from one another discussion, respectively, of the 'What?' and 'Who' questions.

David Kelsey

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511, USA

david.kelsey@yale.edu