

Transforming the self: on the baptismal rite

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Abstract: Philosophers have paid almost no attention to the baptismal rite. This is puzzling not only because the rite is central to the Christian life but also because the rite itself is very puzzling, making audacious claims about what its performance accomplishes. According to one of these audacious claims, by the performance of the rite the one baptized is transformed, enjoying states such as purification, sanctification, regeneration, and illumination – what I call the *regenerate states*. But how could this be so? And isn't there good empirical evidence that the imposition of the regenerate states on the one baptized is not accomplished in the vast majority of cases? In this article, I consider an ancient and audacious version of the baptismal rite, namely, that used by Eastern Orthodox Christians. I propose a model for understanding this rite – what I call the *process-interpretation* – which I believe comes close to being satisfactory, since it implies that the imposition of the regenerate states is not nearly as perplexing as it might seem at first glance.

It is easy to see why philosophers find the eucharistic rite of such great interest. Not only is the rite (for many) central to the Christian life, it also generates exactly the sort of puzzle into which philosophers can sink their teeth. For, by all accounts, there is a time such that the bread and the wine placed on the altar during the eucharistic rite are ordinary bread and wine. And yet the ancient Christian tradition has unanimously affirmed that there is some other time during the rite in which this bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ. Hence the puzzle: How could that be so?

In contrast to the eucharistic rite, philosophers have paid almost no attention to the baptismal rite. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to identify a single article written on the topic by a philosopher in the last fifty years.¹ Why this is so, I am not sure. The answer cannot be that the baptismal rite has fallen into disuse or is peripheral to the Christian life. For the rite has not fallen into disuse; to the

contrary, many Christians consider baptism a sacrament, the rite by which one is received into the church. Nor can the answer be that the rite is not complex or puzzling enough to be of philosophical interest. For the rite, especially in its ancient forms, is extraordinarily rich, complex, and puzzling.

Consider, for example, the rite as it is practised by Eastern Orthodox Christians. To those unfamiliar with it, the text and actions of this rite can seem baffling. I say this not simply because the rite incorporates activities such as exorcisms, which strike many as the vestiges of a primitive world-view. Nor is the rite puzzling simply because it seems to skirt close to magic, appearing to express the conviction that words can endow material things such as oil and water with supernatural powers. The rite is especially puzzling because it seems to make audacious claims about what its performance accomplishes.

What I am calling the audacity of the Orthodox baptismal rite manifests itself in various passages, such as the following prayer of thanksgiving offered towards the end of the rite:

Blessed are You, O Lord God Almighty, Source of all good things . . . who has given to us, unworthy though we be, blessed purification through hallowed water, and divine sanctification, through life-giving Chrismation; who now, also, has been pleased to regenerate your servant that has newly received illumination by water and the Spirit, and granted unto him/her remission of sins, whether voluntary or involuntary.² (159)

In the space of a sentence, the text ascribes to the one baptized an impressive array of states: purification, sanctification, regeneration, illumination, and remission of sins – what I’ll call, for ease of reference, the *regenerate states*. These states, this passage makes evident, are acquired upon and by the performance of the baptismal rite – ‘by water and the Spirit’. But how could that be? How could a person be illumined or enlightened as a result of being baptized? And isn’t there good empirical evidence that the imposition of the regenerate states is not in fact accomplished in the vast majority of cases? After all, more often than not, those who are baptized tend not to behave much differently from those who are not baptized; those belonging to the former group seem no more illumined or enlightened than those belonging to the latter. Moreover, when one considers the further fact that the regenerate states are typically predicated of infants and young children who are baptized, the predications are paradoxical, even unintelligible. In what sense could an infant be sanctified, illumined, or enjoy remission of her sins? On a straightforward reading, the text appears to make a series of serious category mistakes.

Call this cluster of concerns regarding the baptismal rite the *Intelligibility Puzzle*. My main project in this essay is to propose a way of understanding the baptismal rite that helps to dissolve this puzzle. As will already have been evident, my focus will be on the Eastern Orthodox baptismal rite, not simply because it is the most ancient of the baptismal rites presently used by Christians, but also because it is the most lush and audacious baptismal rite of which I am aware. If we could make

sense of this rite, then we will have taken important steps toward understanding the baptismal rite in what is perhaps its most provocative and puzzling form.

The twofold transformation

The structure of the Orthodox baptismal rite can hardly be considered common knowledge, so let me start by saying something about it. As it is presently practised, the rite is actually composed of three separate sub-rites: the reception of the catechumens, the baptism itself, and the chrismation (the confirmation by anointing with oil) of the one(s) baptized. For ease of reference, I will refer to this constellation of rites as the *baptismal rite*.³ Given that the components of the baptismal rite were historically performed at different times and on different occasions, one has to be cautious about simply assuming that there is some way to characterize the point of the rite in a general and illuminating way. We have to look and see if the rite itself provides us with any such characterization.

Thankfully, the text of the rite provides such a characterization. In a passage that echoes the one quoted earlier, the celebrant addresses God with the following words:

But do, Master of all, show this water to be the water of redemption, the water of sanctification, the purification of flesh and spirit, the loosing of bonds, the remission of sins, the illumination of the soul, the laver of regeneration, the renewal of the spirit, the gift of adoption to sonship, the garment of incorruption, the fountain of life. For you have said, O Lord: Wash and be clean; and put away evil things from your souls. You have bestowed upon us from on high a new birth through water and the spirit. Therefore, O Lord, manifest yourself in this water, and grant that he/she who is baptized therein may be transformed. (155)

It is the last line to which I want to draw attention: the point of the baptismal rite is to *transform* the person who is baptized. In the eucharistic rite, the emphasis falls on the transformation of the bread and wine – the imposition on them of a new function. In the baptismal rite, by contrast, the emphasis falls on the transformation of the one baptized. The task that faces the one who wants to understand this rite is to get a better picture of the nature of the transformation that is supposed to occur.

To that end, let's start at the beginning of the rite and work our way forward. During the reception of the catechumens, the liturgical script instructs the celebrant to pray as follows: 'And make' the one to be baptized 'a reason-endowed sheep in the holy flock of your Christ, an honorable member of your Church, a child of the light, and an heir of your Kingdom' (148). During the litanies, in the middle of the rite, the priest asks that the one to be baptized 'may prove him/herself a child of the Light, and an heir of eternal good things' (153). Finally, during the last section of the rite, just prior to marking the newly baptized with chrismation oil, the priest addresses God, asking that the newly baptized would

'please you in every deed and word, and may be a child and heir of your heavenly kingdom' (159).

The progression of the text seems to be this: there are three separate requests that, through baptism and chrismation, the one baptized be made a member of the church, a child of the light, and an heir of the kingdom. Then, at some point – presumably by the very acts of baptizing and anointing – the complex status of being a member of the church, a child of the light, and an heir to the kingdom is conferred on the one baptized.

The text of the baptismal rite is not a theological treatise. Phrases such as 'child of the light' and 'heir to the kingdom' do not have some specific technical sense that the text communicates. Rather, they are phrases that have multiple connotations which, in the context of the baptismal rite, express the idea that the one to be baptized will undergo a specific and significant type of normative alteration. Although the alteration to which the text draws our attention is remarkable in its own way, there is nothing deeply mysterious about it, as we are familiar with dozens of analogues. Imagine, for example, that an early age, you had been orphaned and that I, through the standard legal processes, adopted you as my child and heir. When you became my child and heir, a profound normative transformation occurred. Prior to being adopted, you had no rights against me that I care and provide for you on a day-to-day basis and that all my worldly belongings would pass into your hands at the appointed time. But with the adoption – effected, in this case, by the act of signing legal documents – you acquired all these rights against me and a good many more besides. Correlatively, with the signing of these papers, my normative standing was altered as well. Prior to signing these papers, I did not have an obligation to provide and care for you on a day-to-day basis and to give you all that is mine at the appointed time. But with the signing of these papers, I acquired these obligations and a good many more besides. A consequence of this alteration is that if I were to fail to care and provide for you out of negligence, then I would wrong you and you would have a right against me to seek reparation.

Many would balk at the idea that we have any rights against God, let alone rights conferred at baptism. It seems impious! And it should be admitted that many contemporary Orthodox writers seem set against using 'juridical' concepts to understand our relation to God.⁴ But I think the language of the baptismal rite gives us powerful reason to believe that the early church was comfortable with the idea that the normative transformation that occurs during baptism consists in the acquisition of a series of new rights *vis-à-vis* God, some of these being privileges of various sorts, such as the right to address God in certain ways and to act on behalf of God by speaking and acting in God's name.⁵

Of course the normative alteration that occurs does not simply consist in the acquisition of rights; it also consists in the acquisition of new responsibilities and obligations to God, including responsibilities and obligations to care for the

well-being of the subjects of God's concerns, such as the poor. And, given some plausible assumptions, it may be that some of these normative features are acquired gradually with maturation and time. When baptized, an infant may, for example, acquire only conditional obligations – obligations of such a kind that when she is of the age of maturity, she has various actual obligations and responsibilities to the church. To which it is worth adding that the rights, responsibilities, and obligations acquired do not have only God as their direct object; in baptism, the one baptized also acquires rights, responsibilities, and obligations *vis-à-vis* the church and vice versa. Indeed, the Orthodox are alone in their insistence that anyone baptized has a right to all the ministrations of the church, including partaking of eucharist.⁶ This is why if you were to go to an Orthodox baptismal liturgy, you would see not only infants and young children being baptized but also taking eucharist, for they are deemed full members of the church in virtue of being baptized. Were the church to refuse to commune these members on account of their age, it would (by its own lights) wrong them.

I have said that we should understand the baptismal rite as one in which the one baptized is understood to undergo a transformation. We have identified the first element of that transformation, which is an alteration in the normative standing of the one baptized (and, correlatively, of those who baptize). But as intimated earlier, there is a second element of the transformation that is more difficult to puzzle through.

In several places, I have quoted passages from the text of the baptismal rite in which seemingly audacious things are said about the baptized. Given our purposes, it is instructive to pay close attention to the language used in these passages. Consider, first, the text of the litany that immediately precedes the instruction to perform the baptismal event. In this text, a series of requests have as their object the water and oil used in the baptismal rite, such as the request that the water be 'sanctified with the power (*energeia*) of the Holy Spirit'. The text then turns its attention to the one to be baptized, saying:

For him/her who is now come unto holy Baptism, and for his/her salvation, let us pray to the Lord.

That he/she may prove himself/herself a child of the Light, and an heir of eternal good things, let us pray to the Lord.

That he/she may be a member and partaker of the death and resurrection of Christ our God, let us pray to the Lord.

It is difficult simply to read off the illocutionary force of the speech acts performed by the utterance of these sentences in the context of the performance of the baptismal rite. In principle, in this context, these sentences could be used to perform multiple speech act types. Under the most obvious interpretation, by the utterance of these sentences, the assembled perform a series of petitions directed towards God: 'Grant the one to be baptized salvation. Grant that he or she may be a child of the light. Grant that he or she may be made worthy of the kingdom'.

(In the Greek, the grammatical mood of these sentences is, interestingly enough, that of a hortatory or a polite command.) Under a somewhat less obvious interpretation, by the utterance of these sentences, the assembled also perform blessings directed towards the one to be baptized: 'May you [who are to be baptized] have salvation. May you [who are to be baptized] be a child of the light. May you [who are to be baptized] be worthy of the kingdom'. Under yet another interpretation, the speech acts performed by the utterance of these sentences are so-called exercitives akin to nominating or adjourning whereby those who perform them confer a status on someone or other: 'Let it be that you (who are to be baptized) be saved. Let it be that you (who are to be baptized) are a child of the light. Let it be that you [who are to be baptized] are worthy of the kingdom'.

This last reading of the text might strike some as far-fetched. How could the assembled impose what I earlier referred to as the *regenerate states* on the baptized? Drawing upon Nicholas Wolterstorff's work, I've suggested elsewhere that we have models to help us to make sense of how they might do this.⁷ For it may be that by the performance of these (and other) speech acts, God confers the regenerate states on the baptized. This would be a case of what Wolterstorff calls *double-agency action* – action in which one agent acts by the actions of another. If this were correct, the church would be intimately implicated in God's creative activity, as it would be the agent whereby God imposes the regenerate states on the one baptized. I would add that this reading gains some plausibility – and this is the second point I wish to make – from a passage later in the text that I've already quoted.

The passage I have in mind is this:

Blessed are You, O Lord God Almighty, Source of all good things . . . who has given to us, unworthy though we be, blessed purification through hallowed water, and divine sanctification, through life-giving Chrismation; who now, also, has been pleased to regenerate your servant that has newly received illumination by water and the Spirit, and grants unto him/her remission of sins, whether voluntary or involuntary. (159)

When I quoted this passage earlier, I did not draw attention to the verb tenses of the sentences that compose it. But now take another look at the tenses used. Whereas earlier in the rite, the text uses a combination of the subjunctive and infinitive moods when speaking of the regenerate states, in this passage, it uses the (present) perfect tense. Addressing God, it says *you have given* the one baptized purification, sanctification, regeneration, and the like, presumably through the actions of the assembled. A straightforward explanation of this confident affirmation that the one baptized has been transformed is that the activity of transforming *consists* (at least in part) in the activity of baptizing, much in the way that acquiring the status of being legally adopted consists in the activity of signing the relevant legal documents.

The text of the baptismal rite does not itself answer the question whether the one baptized acquires the regenerate states simply as an answer to the

assembled's request that God confer these states or as the result of the performance of a divine/human exercitive speech act in which these states are imposed on the baptized. Nonetheless, while the answer to this question would, I believe, have important implications for how we understand the nature of the baptismal rite, the more important point for present purposes is that we have identified a second element of the transformation that is supposed to occur by the performance of the baptismal rite, which is the imposition on the baptized of the regenerate states.

Two alterations, then, appear to lie at the heart of the baptismal rite. One alteration consists in the imposition of a normative standing, the other in the imposition of the regenerate states. If the first alteration is familiar and intelligible in its basic structure, the second – as I noted earlier – is baffling. It generates what I earlier called the *Intelligibility Puzzle*, this puzzle consisting not simply in the concern that it is difficult to see how the regenerate states could be conferred on someone, as opposed to being acquired over time with effort. It also has an empirical dimension, since the behaviour of those who are baptized rather often strongly indicates that they have not had these states conferred on them. The problem only gets worse, moreover, when we consider the fact that it is often infants and small children who are baptized. In this case, it just doesn't seem to make any sense to predicate the regenerate states of infants and small children, as the language of the rite licenses.

In what follows, I am going to develop an interpretation of the baptismal rite that addresses the Intelligibility Puzzle in a way that is, I believe, close to satisfactory. I say that this strategy is 'close to satisfactory' because it is incomplete and raises questions of its own – questions that will have to be tackled on another day. Let me add that I am aware that there are strategies for addressing this puzzle that fall short of anything like a solution to it. For example, one might point out that the baptismal rites were originally composed for inducting adult converts into the church. The church, it might be said, has seen fit not to alter the rite or compose an alternative rite when infants and children are baptized. But, it might be continued, this may simply be because it has assumed that there is no harm done when, in the baptismal rite, we operate with an analogue to a legal fiction. That is, it might be that the church has assumed that there is no harm done when it says of infants and children things that are false in the context of the baptismal rite for the purpose of expediency, or of edifying the faithful, or of expressing hopeful expectation.

In my judgement, the appeal to harmless fictions deserves to be taken seriously when interpreting parts of the baptismal rite. For example, at the very outset of the rite, when the celebrant prays that Christ 'remove from him/her his/her former delusion and fill him/her with the faith, hope and love which are in you' (146), it is clear that these words could not truly apply to an infant. Yet the church has chosen not to omit the utterance of these sentences when baptizing infants.

One explanation of this practice is that the utterance of these sentences functions as a harmless fiction.⁸ Still, even if this were correct, the appeal to such a fiction would only be a partial solution to the Intelligibility Puzzle, for it offers no answers to how we could truthfully say of adults that they enjoy the regenerate states by way of the performance of the baptismal rite.

Addressing intelligibility

In his book *Of Water and the Spirit*, the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann contends that there are important differences between the way that Patristic theology conceived of the baptismal rite, on the one hand, and the way that post-Patristic thought has construed it, on the other. In virtually every manual of post-Patristic systematic theology, Schmemmann writes,

the two essential references in explaining Baptism are *original sin* and *grace*. Baptism, we are told, removes from man and liberates him from the original sin, and it also bestows upon him the grace necessary for his Christian life. As all other sacraments, Baptism thus is defined as a 'means of grace,' as a 'visible sign of an invisible grace.' It is absolutely essential, to be sure, for our salvation; but in these definitions and explanations, it is no longer presented as being truly – in essence and not only in external symbolism – *death* and *resurrection*.⁹

By contrast, says Schmemmann, when explicating the baptismal Mystery, the Patristics tended to employ as their central categories not original sin and grace but death and resurrection. And indeed the text of the baptismal rite seems to confirm Schmemmann's point: there are no allusions – let alone references – to original sin in the text.¹⁰ And while references to grace abound, it is clear that when the concept of grace is employed, the dominant theme of the text is that of the passage from the old to the new via baptism:

You have bestowed on us from on high a new birth through water and the spirit. For this reason, O Lord, manifest yourself in this water, and grant that he/she who is baptized therein may be transformed; that he/she may put away from him/herself the old man/woman . . . and may be clothed upon with the new man/woman, and renewed after the image of Him who created him/her; that being buried, after the pattern of your death, in baptism, he/she may, in like manner, be a partaker of your Resurrection and having preserved the gift of your Holy Spirit, and increased the measure of grace committed to him/her, he/she may receive the prize of his/her high calling. (155–156)

Passages such as this present the themes of newness, regeneration, and resurrection as being at the heart of the Baptismal Mystery. But they also raise puzzles of their own – ones similar to those that constitute the Intelligibility Puzzle. For clearly, the one baptized does not, in virtue of the performance of the baptismal rite, die a physical or (what the tradition terms) a spiritual death, entering into a state of deep alienation from God. Nor is the one baptized, in virtue of the performance of the baptismal rite, resurrected in any identifiable sense. But if not,

just what is the text trying to communicate with this imagery of death and resurrection?

Strictly speaking, the text that I have just quoted says not that the one baptized dies and is resurrected. Rather, it says that, in baptism, the one baptized is buried and resurrected *after the pattern* of Christ's death and resurrection. What does this mean? For his part, Schmemmann wants nothing to do with a deflationary approach according to which, when the one baptized is lowered into and emerges from the water, this merely symbolically represents Christ's death and resurrection. Schmemmann's suggestion is, instead, that the pattern of Christ's death consists in this: Christ went voluntarily to his death in obedience to God the Father. Christ, says Schmemmann, *desired* to die out of love, 'to destroy the solitude, the separation from life, the darkness and the despair of death', by which Schmemmann means not the death of the body but spiritual death.¹¹ The way in which baptism is a pattern of Christ's death, then, is that the action of baptizing (or, perhaps, the state of undergoing baptism) expresses the same type of desire as Christ's: the action (or state) expresses a desire to obey, love, and overcome alienation from God.¹²

I have pursued Schmemmann's discussion of this issue not simply to highlight important ways in which the Orthodox understanding of the baptismal rite is different from other understandings of the rite prominent in western Christendom. I have pursued it also because Schmemmann employs a strategy for handling attributions made in the context of the baptismal rite that are deeply puzzling, such as the claim that, in baptism, the one baptized is 'a partaker of the death' of Christ (153). The strategy is roughly this: when faced with an attribution concerning the one baptized that looks literally false, look for an interpretation of that attribution which comes out true because there is an agent active in the baptismal event and a state of that agent such that that agent's being in that state accounts for the truth of that attribution under that interpretation.

In his discussion of the issue of the imagery of death and resurrection, it is true that there are passages in which Schmemmann seems to say that the one baptized must desire to die to self. But this is not Schmemmann's considered view. For Schmemmann is keenly aware that, in the case of infant baptism, there is no sense in which the infant has the relevant desire. And, though Schmemmann doesn't mention the point, something similar holds true of those performing the baptismal rite itself. Aside from intending to follow the script of the baptismal rite, they needn't be in any particular mental state when performing the baptismal rite; they could be simply going through the motions. (One could, of course, maintain that baptisms of this sort are 'invalid'. Schmemmann, however, has no interest in trying to distinguish 'valid' from 'invalid' baptismal rites.¹³) Instead, in a move that prefigures some of N. T. Wright's work on the topic of justification, Schmemmann proposes a different answer: the agent in question is Christ and the relevant state of Christ is Christ's *faith*. It is Christ's faith, says Schmemmann, on which baptism

'totally and exclusively' depends – by which Schmemmann means Christ's *faithfulness* as it is expressed in the life of the church.¹⁴

It is difficult to see, however, how this proposal makes any headway on the issue before us. The issue before us, recall, is in what sense the one baptized could 'partake' in the death of Christ or her baptism be 'after the pattern' of Christ's death. Telling us that Christ's faithfulness is manifested in the actions of the church during the baptismal rite does not shed any light on how, in the baptismal rite, the one baptized partakes in the death of Christ. Presumably, it is something about Christ's faith and the relationship that the one baptized bears to it that renders the activity of baptism 'after the pattern' of Christ's death and resurrection. To make progress on the issue before us, however, we need to have a better sense of what that something is and what relation the one baptized bears to it.¹⁵ I would add that an appeal to Christ's faith also fails to illuminate the more general issue of how, in the baptismal rite, the regenerate states are imposed on the one baptized.

We need to strike out in a different direction.

A different approach

We are looking for a way to understand the predications of the regenerate states of the one baptized that does not imply that these predications are clearly false and captures the church's conviction that in baptism the one baptized undergoes a fundamental transformation. The way forward on this matter, I believe, is to attend to an ambiguity in the language of the baptismal rite. To that end, return to the passage I quoted at the outset of our discussion in which, I said, the baptismal liturgy seems at its most audacious:

Blessed are You, O Lord God Almighty, Source of all good things . . . who has given to us, unworthy though we be, blessed purification through hallowed water, and divine sanctification, through life-giving Chrismation; who now, also, has been pleased to regenerate your servant that has newly received illumination by water and the Spirit, and granted unto him/her remission of sins, whether voluntary or involuntary. (159)

This passage, and others like it, appears to predicate of the one baptized the regenerate states of being purified, being sanctified, being regenerated, being illumined, and having remission of sins. This, I have emphasized, is puzzling in multiple respects, not the least of which is that it is difficult to see how infants and small children could be in any of these states. Another look at the passage, however, reveals that each of these states admits of a process/product ambiguity, which the English translation masks to a certain degree. In the English translation, in fact, we are naturally drawn to the 'product' interpretation of these states: as a result of the performance of the baptismal rite, we read the text as affirming, the one baptized is now purified, sanctified, regenerated, illumined, and released from sin. But the text admits of a different 'process' reading: as a result of the

performance of the baptismal rite, the one baptized is now *being* purified, *being* sanctified, *being* regenerated, *being* illumined, and *being* released from sin. Under this reading, which receives qualified support from the writings of figures such as Mark the Monk and Gregory of Nyssa, the fundamental alteration that occurs in the baptismal rite is that the performance of the rite has *instigated* these processes in the one baptized.¹⁶

While I doubt that this reading can be vindicated on linguistic grounds alone, it might be worth emphasizing that the Greek text indicates that something like a process-interpretation is along the right lines. Take, for example, petitions that figure in the rite's text such as: 'That this water may be sanctified with the power, and effectual operation and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, let us pray to the Lord'. In the Greek, the object of the preposition 'with' is the so-called articular infinitive, 'verbal nouns' that communicate action or movement. So, literally rendered, the first words of the prayer quoted above ask 'that this holy-making water would ...' The idea, then, is that there is a process, namely, 'holy-making', that is underway in the context of the baptismal rite. When the text switches to the (present) perfect tense, using phrases such as 'Blessed are you, O Lord God ... who has given us ... blessed purification' (158–159), it is natural to read it as claiming not that the process of purifying has been completed but that it has been initiated.

Let's take a moment to sharpen this 'process' reading of the text. Suppose we say that a *state of an agent* is a non-episodic state that can be predicated of an agent in so far as that agent exemplifies – or is essentially disposed to exemplify – qualities of personal agency, such as being able to act under goals and entertain thoughts by employing concepts. Let's say, furthermore, that a *process-state* is a state of an agent that, when exemplified in an agent, consists in the unfolding of a process that is initiated at some point and is oriented towards the achievement of some end(s) or goal(s) at which that agent can intentionally aim. An example of such a state would be the process of forgiving. The process of forgiving is a state of an agent such that when it is exemplified it is, first, initiated in an agent, second, oriented towards a goal – in this case, achieving the state of *being such as to have forgiven* – and, third, this goal is one at whose achievement the agent can intentionally aim.

For our purposes here, it is worth stressing that a process-state could be initiated in multiple ways, such as by one's own volition, by being struck by a realization, or by another's agency. Indeed, in principle, the process-state of forgiving another could be instigated by something as 'external' as receiving a chemical injection. And it is also worth mentioning that a process-state can have multiple, complex goals. In the case of forgiving, it may be that the immediate aim of the process is to achieve the goal of *being such as to have forgiven*, while the mediate goal of the process is to achieve the goal of *being reconciled with the one forgiven*. When initiated, of course, a process-state can take a lifetime to reach fruition; sometimes this is true of forgiving, for example. And the process needn't

proceed inexorably; it can be interrupted, short-circuited, subverted, or the like by one's own agency, another's agency, or inhospitable circumstances.

Suppose, then, we think of the second alteration that is understood to occur by the performance of the baptismal rite as the initiation of a cluster of process-states in the one baptized. The processes in question are initiated by the activity of multiple agents. In some cases, they are initiated by the activity of the one baptized, such as when she enacts the decision to be baptized; in other cases, such as in the case of infant baptism, they are not. In all cases, these processes are initiated by both the activity of the ones baptizing and – as the baptismal rite makes evident – God.

What should we say about the character of these process-states? The text of the baptismal rite presents them not as quasi-mechanistic processes similar to the process of digesting food but as the exercise of personal agency, the *energeia* of the Holy Spirit. If this is right, the process-states in question are not simply initiated by divine activity but also consist in the exercise of divine agency. Admittedly, finding analogues to this sort of activity is not easy. We are familiar with cases in which one agent instigates a process-state in another, such as when my doctor injects me with antibiotics. But when my doctor instigates this state, the state itself does not consist in the exercise of my doctor's own personal agency. Rather, it consists in the antibiotics fighting off infection in my body. We are also familiar with cases in which an agent instigates a process-state in himself that consists in the exercise of his own personal agency. I might, for example, instigate the process of my reflecting on a philosophical issue, where the process of reflecting is very much an exercise of my own personal agency. What is much more difficult to identify is a case in which one agent instigates in another a process-state such that that process-state consists in the exercise of the first agent's personal agency. And yet, if I understand the text of the baptismal rite correctly, this is exactly how it presents the types of process-states instigated at baptism.

The best we can do to understand this, I think, is to imagine a case in which the normal barriers between persons break down, such as one in which by a neural wiring hook-up, some of my reactions, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes become operative in you, initiating a process-state. In this case, you might become aware of reactions or tendencies in yourself that are the exercise of my personal agency, although you do not recognize them as mine. With time, however, you could become aware that these feelings, thoughts, and attitudes are indeed mine, and, if all goes well, they would be available to you in much the way that they are ordinarily available to me. Indeed, if all goes especially well, you might even identify with them, taking them, for all intents and purposes, as your own. The neural wiring hook-up we are imagining, of course, might involve reciprocity. In that case, your reactions, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes would become available to me in much the way they are normally available to you. This would eventuate in

a fusion of personal agency, which, I think, approximates to the fusion between divine and human agency that is supposed to be instigated at baptism.¹⁷

When trying to capture the character of the transformation that this divine activity effects, the text of the Orthodox baptismal rite uses a remarkably wide array of phrases and images – a range that is a good deal wider than I have thus far indicated. Bring to mind, for example, a passage quoted earlier, in which the celebrant prays:

But do, Master of all, show this water to be the water of redemption, the water of sanctification, the purification of flesh and spirit, the loosing of bonds, the remission of sins, the illumination of the soul, the laver of regeneration, the renewal of the spirit, the gift of adoption to sonship, the garment of incorruption, the fountain of life. (155)

While these images are evocative, I do not read the text of the baptismal rite in such a way that, in the case of each image, there is some highly specific way to understand it and the state of the baptized that would correspond to it. Nor do I detect any attempt in the text of the baptismal rite to illustrate how the various regenerate states are related to one another. We are in the presence of something closer to poetry than systematic theology! Still, the text does provide clues about how to understand some of the process-states initiated by the baptismal rite.

Some of these states are epistemic. Take the state of being illumined, for example, which is predicated numerous times of the one baptized.¹⁸ That this is an epistemic state is indicated by the text of the baptismal rite in various places: ‘Open the eyes of his/her understanding, that the light of your Gospel may shine brightly in him/her . . . that we may be illumined by the light of understanding by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit’ (148, 152). This petition, in turn, echoes the prayer recited in the Divine Liturgy immediately before the reading of the Gospel: ‘Illumine our hearts, O Master who loves humankind with the pure light of your divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our minds to the understanding of your Gospel teachings . . . for you are the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God’ (Liturgy of St James). Understood as a process-state, being illumined seems to have as its immediate goal a trait-like state, a state of understanding and being disposed to understand the teachings of the Gospel. If this is right, baptism would have the function of instilling not character traits themselves but the processes that, when all goes well, eventuate in the formation of character traits.

By contrast, other images used in the text seem to stand for processes that produce not trait-like states but status-states, such as the status of being freed or loosed from the bonds of the sin-disorder. In some ways, we are now at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding the imagery used in some of the prayers of the baptismal rite, such as the prayer just quoted. For given the distance between ours and the ancient world, some of these images are not easily absorbed.

This is probably true of the image and theme that is, in many ways, central to the rite, which is that of being made pure or clean. The presuppositions about ritual purity and impurity that seem to lie behind the imagery and which themselves have an ambiguous status in the New Testament are, for many of us, dark, alien, puzzling. What can be said, however, is that the imagery clearly has aesthetic overtones and that we continue to recognize the aesthetic dimensions of personal character. We speak, for example, of the ugliness of evil and the beauty of goodness and their tendency both to evoke and to merit reactive states such as revulsion and awe in us. When viewed in this light, perhaps the thing to say about the images of purity is that they help us to understand the broadly aesthetic dimensions of the twofold transformation that is supposed to occur in baptism, a beauty that consists (in part) in the absence of a certain type of disorder.

While there is much more to say about the various regenerate states that are predicated of the one baptized, let me summarize the upshot of our discussion: the Intelligibility Puzzle raises pressing questions about the intelligibility of the baptismal rite, specifically concerning the attribution of the regenerate states to the one baptized. But the puzzle has bite only when the regenerate states are understood to be product- rather than process-states. When they are understood as process-states that are instigated by the performance of the baptismal rite, however, there is no deep puzzle, as there is nothing unintelligible about understanding these states as processes that are instigated in the one baptized by joint human and divine activity. Moreover, this understanding of what is accomplished at the baptismal rite is compatible with the empirical data, as the process-states instigated may fail to take root for various reasons. For the process-states to achieve – or even to approximate – their ends, a lot needs to fall into place, including hard effort on the part of the one baptized.

Finally, the interpretation under consideration offers a pleasingly unified account of what occurs at the performance of the baptismal rite in two respects. For one thing, if the process-interpretation is correct, the same dynamic is at work in the cases of both infant and adult baptism, namely, the instigation of an array of process-states. Since nothing depends on the one baptized being in one or another mental state for these process-states to be instigated, we have an explanation of why the church has seen fit to use the same baptismal rite when baptizing infants and adults. When interpreting the rite as it applies to infants, there is no need, then, to resort to the analogue of legal fictions, at least when it comes to the attribution of these states.

Moreover, the process-interpretation allows us to see better how the two alterations that are understood to occur by the performance of the baptismal rite are related. The regenerate states initiated by the baptismal rite are neither initiated nor develop on their own. To come to fruition, these process-states require a community that conforms to its responsibilities, providing the conditions

in which they can develop. Moreover, to the extent that these process-states do develop, it is through the one baptized and the community exercising their rights and conforming to their respective responsibilities. If the tradition is correct, it is (in part) by the one baptized exercising her privilege to partake fully in the eucharistic rite that the regenerate states conferred on her by baptism grow. And it is (in part) by the community conforming to its responsibility to enact this rite that this development occurs.

In a way, though, this is a misleading way of trying to capture the way in which the two alterations are related. It is not as if there were some process that, in the one baptized, develops more or less independently of the activity of the community in the sense that it is merely the community's job to help it develop, as a gardener helps a tomato plant to grow. The better way to view the matter, arguably, is that the process instigated by the baptismal rite consists, in part, in the community's conforming to its responsibilities. The process – which consists in the exercise of the *energeia* of the Holy Spirit – is extended in the sense of being 'in' both the person and the activity of the community. Suppose, for example, that the process of being illumined consists in being exposed to the church's understanding of the Gospels. If that understanding and its presentation were the product of the exercise of the *energeia* of the Holy Spirit, then we could begin to see how the process in question might be present in both the community and the one baptized, moving from the former to the latter.

There are, then, multiple reasons to sympathize with the process-interpretation of the baptismal rite. Towards the middle of our discussion, however, I mentioned that I find the process-interpretation close to but not entirely satisfactory. Let me close by indicating why.

First, the view leaves important questions unaddressed. For example, although I raised questions about how to understand claims that the one baptized 'partakes' in the death and resurrection of Christ, I offered no answer to them. It is not apparent to me that the process-interpretation itself sheds light on this issue, although this interpretation might put us in a better position to address it.

Second, the process-interpretation will strike some as overly modest and thus falling outside the arc of the church's understanding of the baptismal rite. Listen, for example, to what St John Chrysostomos says in a homily to the newly baptized:

You are not only free, but also holy; not only holy, but also just; not only just, but also sons; not only sons, but also heirs; not only heirs, but also brothers of Christ; not only brothers of Christ, but also joint heirs; not only joint heirs, but also members; not only members, but also the temple; not only the temple, but also instruments of the Spirit. Blessed be God, who alone does wonderful things!¹⁹

Some of these words could, I suppose, be interpreted as being hyperbolic. But if they are not so interpreted, then I can understand why someone might feel

dissatisfied with the process-interpretation of the baptismal rite, for it is compatible with the one baptized enjoying rather few of the states that Chrysostomos mentions. In reply, I can only say that those who feel this dissatisfaction face a challenge, which is to interpret what Chrysostomos says in such a way that it fits with the reality of what does and could occur at the performance of the baptismal rite.²⁰

Third, there are attributions of the regenerate states made in the context of the performance of the baptismal rite that do not easily admit of the process-interpretation. At the end of the rite, for example, the celebrant addresses the newly baptized one, proclaiming: 'You are justified. You are illumined. You are sanctified. You are washed in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit' (160-161).²¹ Unlike their western counterparts, eastern Christians have had very little to say about the topic of justification; it fails to figure prominently in their theological reflections. However that may be, given the major options for understanding the concept of justification – the best of which, I believe, is that although we have wronged God and each other, the charges against us have been dropped²² – I do not see a way to understand the concept of justification along process lines. It is a status-state, and it would take some work to explain how it might coherently apply to infants and small children. Similar observations hold regarding claims that infants are forgiven of their sin.

A final concern about the baptismal rite is that it involves the imposition of a variety of states by the performance of speech acts. But in the paradigmatic case, speech acts are intentional: you assert a proposition in virtue of intending to do so. You issue a command because you intend to do so, and so on. But it is perfectly possible for those performing the baptismal rite not to intend to request of God that God impose on the one baptized the regenerative states, or bless the one baptized, or anything of the sort. The celebrant and the people could, in principle, be simply following the script of the rite, going through the liturgical motions. And yet it would seem that the one baptized is indeed baptized, inducted into the community. This raises the issue of what to make of deviant performances of the baptismal rite.

There are several ways of trying to handle this issue. One would be to appeal to the 'ossification of intentions'. In this case, the suggestion would be that what matters is that the script in some way expresses the intentions of its composers (or those of the church, which appropriated the rite from its composers) to petition God, bless the one baptized, and the like, and that these intentions are actualized by the performance of the rite. Another approach would be to emphasize the centrality of God's intentions in the performance of the baptismal rite, holding that they are sufficient for the locutionary acts performed to count as petitioning, blessing, and so on. I am not sure that either of these approaches, when worked out, is wholly satisfactory. But at least we see better where more needs to be said about the nature of the baptismal rite.²³

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Notes

1. I have been surprised to discover that, even among theologians, the issue is under-theorized. See the opening remarks in Ware (1972).
2. I am using the English translation of the rite as it is found in *Service Book of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church according to the use of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America* (2002). I have modernized the language used. Page references to this text are inserted in the body of this essay.
3. For the history of the rite, see Schmemmann (1974), 158 and the essays in Shaughnessy (1976).
4. Schmemmann (1974), 43 is a notable exception in this regard.
5. 'As a friend talking with a friend', writes St Symeon the New Theologian, 'we speak with God, and with boldness we stand before the face of Him who dwells in light unapproachable' (quoted in Ware (2000), 59–60).
6. The Roman church, apparently, discontinued this practice in the Middle Ages, around the thirteenth century.
7. In Cuneo (n. d.). See Wolterstorff (1995), ch. 3.
8. This is not, however, the only available explanation. Another explanation is that, in these utterances, nothing is said of (or even taken to be said of) the infant baptized. An analogue: at a certain point in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy, the deacon utters the sentence 'Catechumens depart!' Were you to attend this service, however, you would see that any catechumens present do not in fact depart. Nor are they expected to. In the context of the liturgy, the utterance of the imperative sentence 'Catechumens depart!' no longer has (or is taken to have) the force of a command.
9. Schmemmann (1974), 54.
10. Schmemmann may overstate his point, however. Ware (1972) makes it plain that some Patristic commentators, such as St Mark the Monk, one of the few Patristics to write extensively on the baptismal rite, thought of it in terms of the dynamic between original sin and grace.
11. Schmemmann (1974), 64. 'In baptism, man wants to die as a sinful man and he is given that death, and in baptism man wants the newness of life as forgiveness, and he is given it' (Schmemmann (1973), 78).
12. Schmemmann (1974), 66.

13. *Ibid.*, 67. Consider, though, what Gregory of Nyssa writes:

If, when the washing of baptism is applied to the body, the soul does not cleanse itself from the stains of the passions, but our life after initiation continues to be the same as it was before – then, though it may be a bold thing to say, yet I will say it without shrinking: in such cases the water remains water, since the gift of the Holy Spirit is nowhere manifested in what has taken place. (quoted in Ware (1972), 448)

14. Schmemmann (1974), 67–69, 31.
15. I find what the Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky writes no more satisfactory. Florovsky (n. d.) writes that the one baptized ‘is transformed through following and imitating; and thus what was foreshown by the Lord is realized’. Without being told more, I fail to see in what sense imitating Christ’s death would be to partake in the death of Christ. Although I have reservations about his interpretations of the Church Fathers, Finn (1976) canvasses views of various Church Fathers on the matter.
16. While the interpretation I have offered builds upon the idea, expressed by some of the Church Fathers, that the ‘seed’ of virtue is planted in baptism, it is nonetheless considerably more modest than the views advanced by figures such as Mark the Monk, who maintain that, once baptized, there is no ‘residue’ from the ‘sin of Adam’. See Ware (1972).
17. I am here drawing upon Alston (1989), 246.
18. Gregory of Nazianzus and others sometimes use the term ‘illumination’ simply to mean ‘baptism’. See Gregory of Nazianzus (2008), 100.
19. Quoted in Kavanagh (1978), 143. Cf. Gregory of Nazianzus (2008).
20. There was, in fact, a controversy – the so-called Messalian Controversy – over this very issue in fourth-century Syria. See Ferguson (2010).
21. The proclamation lightly embellishes I Corinthians 6: 11.
22. For a defence of this understanding, see Wolterstorff (2011), pt IV.
23. For their feedback on an earlier version of this article, I thank an anonymous referee, the editor of this journal, David O’Hara, Luke Reinsma, Mark Usher, Nick Wolterstorff, and Phil Woodward. A grant from the John Templeton Foundation’s Character Project supported work on this article.