

4-1-2002

## God And The Socially Located Subject: A Process Framework For Poststructural Feminism

Sarah Lancaster

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Lancaster, Sarah (2002) "God And The Socially Located Subject: A Process Framework For Poststructural Feminism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol19/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# GOD AND THE SOCIALLY LOCATED SUBJECT: A PROCESS FRAMEWORK FOR POSTSTRUCTURAL FEMINISM

Sarah Heaner Lancaster

Feminist theology has found poststructural postmodernism to be a helpful tool for criticizing false universals and for understanding the unique perspectives of different groups of women. This philosophical framework, though, is not by itself able to support the claims for justice that feminist theology needs to make. This paper explores the possibility of using process philosophy as an alternative framework because it preserves many of the insights of poststructural postmodernism while at the same time providing an ontology that can ground justice claims.

Theology frequently mines the resources of philosophy for its insights into human nature, and one of the most fruitful philosophical discussions at the current time, especially for feminism, involves theories of the socially located self in poststructuralism. Feminist and other theologies which claim to speak from some specific perspective have found in the idea of social location a way of explaining why their perspectives are different from those of dominant theology and a way of challenging the perspective of dominant theology. While it has led to important insights, this appropriation of poststructuralism in feminist theology has not been without criticism. In some crucial ways, poststructuralist theory falls short of accomplishing what feminists need to accomplish because it is difficult to ground claims about justice in a theory that tends toward relativism. Feminist theologians have increasingly recognized the need for norms in making justice claims, and poststructuralism is not by itself adequately equipped to provide them. In fact, poststructuralism even makes talk about God problematic by its radical severing of language and reality. Despite its stark skepticism about ontology, poststructural feminist theology needs a metaphysical framework. The question of which metaphysics to use, though, is crucial in order to preserve the insights of poststructuralism. In this article, I will explore both the promise and the problems that arise when feminist theology makes use of poststructuralism. Toward this end, I will look especially at Mary McClintock Fulkerson's book *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* in order to explore the implications of poststructural theory for her own convictions as a feminist. Then I will suggest that process philosophy may be able to provide what poststructuralism by itself lacks, namely, a description of reality in which those convictions may indeed have force.



*I. Feminist Theology and Poststructuralism*

Because I will be defending the use of metaphysics in theology, I need to address briefly how metaphysics has fallen into disfavor in recent years. It is typical of postmodernism in general, and poststructuralism in particular, to reject modernity's claims to universal truth. That which is held to be universal turns out over and over again to be a historically and socially conditioned idea masquerading as a timeless truth. According to this criticism, modern thinking tends to universalize its particular experiences; it takes particularly situated characteristics of people and things and builds general theories around them. These theories are typically "essentialist," in that they take socially conditioned qualities to be "natural," and project them onto all people.<sup>1</sup> Following Lyotard's criticism of "grand narratives," any attempt to speak of general theories, especially metaphysical theories about the whole of reality, is suspect.<sup>2</sup> These general theories yield "false universals." They claim to be speaking of truths that hold in all times and places, but that claim cannot be supported. It is revealed to be false as previously suppressed voices indicate that their experiences are quite different from the ones that have been universalized.

Poststructuralism pushes this insight in the direction of language and power, even to the extent of denying any necessary connection to extra-linguistic reality. It takes seriously Derrida's criticism of metaphysics as an attempt to find "substance" that is truly "present" and which consequently can supply us with security.<sup>3</sup> Instead, it shows how our own language actually constructs reality, including our very selves, and how this language is invested with power interests.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the "reality" constructed by language is not inherently stable but is always in some kind of flux. "General theories," then, are not simply false universals. They are constructions that take place in a specific "social location," built in a particular language that reflects particular power interests. Any attempt to speak generally about the world is criticized for being ahistorical, that is, for denying its place in and dependence upon history, and atemporal, that is, for attempting to speak of timeless truths that are unchanging and can somehow be known objectively.<sup>5</sup> Such an enterprise is inevitably a failure because the humans who create the theories are timebound, historical, and socially located creatures.

Precisely this criticism of universalizing tendencies has made poststructuralism such a useful tool for feminist theologians, although it took some time to discover this possibility. Feminist theology had initially taken aim at dominant theology produced by males, with the stinging criticism that it did not include "women's experience." Male theologians had taken male experience and generalized it to the entire human race, and feminist theologians stated clearly and definitively that the assumptions and claims of male theologians were misapplied to women. While not entirely left behind, this tactic has had to be refined. As more and more women found their own voices to speak about their own experiences, it became clear that "women's experience" itself was a generalization that could not be maintained. Women of color have pointed out that feminist theology written by white, middle class women does not in fact reflect the experiences of

women who are not white and middle class. At about the same time that women of color were criticizing the parochialism of feminist theology, postmodern theory, which challenged the possibility of universal theories, became a force in theology. Feminist scholars began to realize that feminist theology had unwittingly adopted the theoretical framework of male theology even as it criticized the substance. Feminist theology began to "turn to the French," or to make use of the postmodern ideas promoted by French philosophers, in order to continue its criticism of dominant theology more adequately, while at the same time honoring the experiences of all women.<sup>6</sup> By calling attention to the social locatedness of all theology, feminist theologians could continue to question the generalizations made by dominant male theology and yet also seek to avoid making similarly inappropriate generalizations themselves.

As useful as this tool could be for feminist theologians, though, poststructuralism was not without its problems. Even as feminists began to explore the promise of poststructuralism for advancing women's concerns, some were hesitant to embrace the postmodern project wholeheartedly.<sup>7</sup> In 1990, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, which urged feminist use of postmodern thought, contained also several essays that pointed out possible pitfalls, particularly the problem of relativism.<sup>8</sup> Since that time, the use of poststructuralism in feminist theology is still being debated. While some feminist theologians initially embraced relativism, arguing that truth is a matter of power, others have been reluctant to follow poststructuralism or other forms of postmodernism to the point of giving up norms.<sup>9</sup> Where the need for norms has been recognized, though, feminist theologians have largely avoided a return to general theories, and in particular metaphysics.<sup>10</sup> Frequently, they seek pragmatic or historicist standards rather than ontological ones.<sup>11</sup> While I agree that our historical and social conditionedness must be recognized fully, I want to suggest that even historicized norms have to be grounded to some extent in "the way things are" if they are themselves to provide adequate grounding for justice issues. Questions about ontology, then, cannot simply be left to the side. To show why this is so, I will explore briefly the way that Mary McClintock Fulkerson utilizes poststructuralism in her approach to theology. She is a good candidate for this exploration because she is aware of and wants to avoid the problems of total relativism without returning to essentialist theories. Her work is typical, then, of much feminist theology at the present time.

## II. Fulkerson: *Changing the Subject*

The title of Fulkerson's book, *Changing the Subject*, refers to her attempt to wrestle with the problem of feminist theology's appeal to "women's experience." In recognition of the diversity of experiences actual women have, Fulkerson wants to change the "subject" of feminist theology from a general idea of "woman" to the real multiplicity of concrete women. Feminist theology has appealed to "women's experience" to expose and undermine the use of male experience as universal, but the "experience" to which it appeals is a prelinguistic intuition of God that does not take into account the different social locations in which women's concrete experiences take

shape.<sup>12</sup> To accomplish this change, Fulkerson proposes the use of post-structuralist theory, which can thus allow feminism to focus on the way in which multiple identities are produced in multiple social locations.

Poststructuralism, according to Fulkerson, builds on the insights of structuralism, a theory of language that points out that signs derive their meaning from their place in a language system. She notes that the relation between signifier and signified, and even the relation between signs themselves, has a certain arbitrariness about it.<sup>13</sup> Signs are what they are by convention, not by nature. Poststructuralism pushes this insight further, beyond language to all forms of meaning. It sees language as but one of many sign systems; others could include fashion or advertising, where objects or actions rather than words take on meanings. None of these sign systems have any "natural" connection to reality. They are conventional constructions of our world, and we cannot get behind them to some further "reality." Because our reality is "constructed" rather than "natural," it can be "deconstructed" and then "reconstructed," and indeed poststructuralism claims that sign systems are always in some sort of flux. One signifying pattern will come into contact with another signifying pattern, so that as Fulkerson says, "there are always openings, fissures, and intersections" such that no system is completely closed.<sup>14</sup> Even though there may be a dominant signifying pattern, it coexists with other, subordinate signifying patterns. These other patterns are capable of destabilizing the dominant one, and it is this possibility for destabilizing meaning systems that holds promise for feminism to dismantle the dominant patriarchal one.

One of the implications of poststructural theory is that the "self" is a "constructed" reality. Just as we have no access to our world apart from our constructions of reality, we have no access to some "I" that lies beyond language (construed broadly to include multiple kinds of sign systems). There is no all-seeing, unified entity that somehow escapes the influence of signification, no "self" that exists prior to its engagement with the social codes of the community. For this reason, a prelinguistic intuition of God is impossible. Rather, discourse constructs subjects. All objects in our world, including human selves, are constituted as real for us in the way that we define them, and we define them according to their relation to other socially significant things. Fulkerson does not believe that affirming the constructed character of the subject leads to denying agency or individuality; she simply wants to say that we are who we are because of our relations in a system (or systems) of meaning. Any "subject" is "coded," or constructed linguistically by all the discourses in which it participates. The interests of the subject are shaped by the interests that are already represented by the discourses in which the subject becomes a subject. That is, what the subject "knows" or cares about, what produces conflict, what is desired—all these interests become the interests of the subject through participation in a discourse that highlights the relevance of these things. Even though an individual may have a certain interest or knowledge, that interest or knowledge is grounded in social conditions—including economic, political, civic, and cultural conditions—so that the knowledge or interest that the individual has is socially produced.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the subject is produced by its social location; it becomes what it is because it is located in this particular network of meanings.

If the subject is produced by its social location, then feminism serves women well not when it looks to some universal experience but when it examines the discourses in which women are produced. To show how important this move is for feminism, Fulkerson uses poststructural analysis to show how women read the Bible to resist patriarchy. Fulkerson understands the Bible to be an unstable text with no fixed meaning. The "text" comes into being as it is interpreted within the discourse of a community. A Christian community that reads the Bible as scripture stabilizes the text through practices of reading that both emerge from and serve the interests of that community. A community, however, can have a number of discourses within it. There is a dominant discourse, which aims at an "ideal" reading to serve the interests that are present in the dominant discourse, but there are also other, nonofficial discourses which may resist the ideal reading and which may engender alternative readings that serve the interests of the subordinate discourse. Women are constructed as subjects by both kinds of discourse. They are constructed by the dominant discourse to accept their place in the social system, even though it is oppressive; and they are constructed by the subordinate discourse to resist that very oppression. The ways that they resist are shaped by both the boundaries and the openings in the dominant discourse.

This shift from experience to discourse enables Fulkerson to acknowledge how texts that white academic feminists reject as patriarchal can be a source of strength for women of very different backgrounds. Fulkerson explores in her book three resisting regimes among Presbyterian Women, Pentecostal women, and academic feminists. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on her description of Pentecostal women because her examination of this group highlights the important points of her work for my argument. She describes the use of scripture by Pentecostal women in marginalized economic communities, a group that is constituted quite differently than the middle class Presbyterian women of whom she herself is a part. Although her own reading of certain scripture passages would diverge from the readings these Pentecostal women perform, she accepts that they find these passages to be joyful and exhilarating. Her task is to discover why it is that these women can find joy and strength in passages that would be considered oppressive by other women. Pentecostal women share certain rules for reading scripture that come from the dominant discourse of their community, such as that the Bible is inerrant, that it is the inspired word of God, and that academic methods of interpretation are to be deliberately avoided. These rules provide restraints that keep Pentecostal women from being able to interpret the Bible in the way that Protestant academic feminists would. On the other hand, the rules of the dominant discourse in their community also allow for diverse interpretations that are led by the Holy Spirit. This rule creates an openness for subordinate discourses to supply alternative interpretations to the ones offered by the dominant discourse. Fulkerson demonstrates several ways in which women have been able to resist restrictions that are placed on them in their communities by their gender because they have been able to defend their actions and interpretations of scripture as having been led by the Holy Spirit. For instance, when their call to preach has been challenged by the explicit Biblical charge that they should be sub-

missive to men, they have been able to argue, using the dominant discourse, that their fundamental requirement is to submit to God.<sup>16</sup> They have found ways to resist certain restrictions that have been placed on them by their community's understanding of gender roles. Feminists can recognize the kind of meaning that this resistance has when they become attentive to the different discourses that have constructed the subject and the conditions in which the resistance takes place.

The promise of Fulkerson's work for enabling feminist theology to speak more accurately about concrete women in vastly different social locations is great, but the theory she has used does not fully support all her concerns. At several points throughout her book, Fulkerson is aware of the problems of relativism that are associated with poststructuralist theory. To claim that language is constitutive of reality is to raise a host of questions about the nature of reality and our access to it. Fulkerson clearly states that she does not want to give up on the "givenness" of things. She is not calling into question the "thatness," or the existence, of things; but she wants to explore instead the "whatness," or what she calls the "being," of things.<sup>17</sup> That is, she wants to examine how some "givenness" becomes meaningful when it is construed in a certain way. A body, for instance, can be construed in scientific, discursive totality as cells, blood vessels, muscles, etc., or it can be construed very differently in the discursive totality of a loving, personal relationship. In another example, Fulkerson describes different ways in which the physical act of "forced penile-vaginal intercourse performed by a male on his female spouse" may be construed.<sup>18</sup> The givenness of the physical act may be construed as rape or as legal marital sexual relations, depending on various discursive factors, such as when and where the judgment takes place or who makes the judgment. Prior to the 20th century and the emergence of a feminist community, she says, the construal of the act as rape was not possible. The "reality" of marital rape did not exist. The meaning that is read onto such an act, or onto bodies or anything else that is given, is entirely a function of the discourse in which the act happens. It is the meaning that is read onto givenness, not the givenness itself, that Fulkerson wants to show is unstable.

But even on the level of meaning, Fulkerson is unwilling to follow language theory to the point of saying that meaning is entirely arbitrary. Just as she wants to avoid closed systems of meaning that cannot allow for reconstruction, she also wants to avoid completely undifferentiated fields of discourse that belongs to deconstructionism. Instead, she wants a position "somewhere between" the two. Though she does not say what those respects are, Fulkerson does say "for a feminist theological analysis, meaning is in some crucial respects not arbitrary at all."<sup>19</sup> It seems that Fulkerson has an awareness that feminism is not served by complete relativism. Her point is not to do away with the foundation of all reality or all ideas, but rather to find a way to criticize and destabilize a dominant pattern of meaning. Poststructural theory gives her a way of accounting for openings, for cracks, for breaks in the dominant network that allow entry to the alternatives that subordinate discourse can supply.

The question, then, is whether Fulkerson succeeds in finding her way between closed systems and complete relativism. Repeatedly, Fulkerson

denies that we can talk about reality, knowledge, or truth in any way that escapes from the systems of meaning in which we are already engaged. There is no pure, direct access to reality, knowledge, or truth. She makes statements that press this insight to its fullest extent; for instance, she says, "Knowledge is not *tainted* by interest: it *is* interest." She also argues against being able to test truth claims against reality itself.<sup>20</sup> Fulkerson does not deny that truth exists any more than she denies that reality exists. Her point is that we have no access to truth outside of communal discourses, which are laden with power and interest to the extent that she can even say, "in any dominant discourse the terms of truth (that is, what counts as true) are defined by the discourse."<sup>21</sup> The dominant, or certifying, discourse does not create the reality (the givenness) of things, but it establishes the boundaries of what is thinkable and meaningful. She does not deny all knowledge of truth but denies that we have a "God's-eye view" of the truth. Fulkerson borrows an image from David Toole to speak of truth "like the flash of a fish on your line."<sup>22</sup> We get glimpses of it as it surfaces and recedes. It is real and alluring, but we do not possess it. In keeping with her desire to avoid closure on the semiotic process, Fulkerson says that the test for truth is not coherence with other ideas or correspondence to reality. Instead, truth is recognized "in that by which we are persuaded."<sup>23</sup> The truth of the "reasons, rules, and values" of a community is tied to "the visions of the good (however temporary) that come from communities, their traditions, and the practices they produce."<sup>24</sup> There can be no certainty, but once persuaded of the truth of a vision, commitment to certain beliefs and actions is worth a wager.

Let us consider, though, where this reticence to move beyond semiotic processes leaves Fulkerson on several points. There are three problems that she faces as a feminist that poststructural theory is ill equipped to help her handle. First, consider her two examples of how the givenness of reality may be construed in different ways. In the first, the construal of a body as cells or as a loved one, the givenness is neutral and the construals are equally appropriate for their situations. The second, though—the givenness of forced coitus between husband and wife—is somewhat different. Fulkerson rightly points out that prior to this century, such an act could not be legally construed as rape. The question remains, though, whether the act is in fact rape regardless of its being construed in such a way or not. Her own description of the act includes the element of force. Does she mean to say that intercourse forced on a wife by her husband was not a violation of the wife prior to this century? It is one thing to say that it was not recognized as such; it is quite another to say that it was not such in fact. If she is committed to the neutrality of any givenness, then Fulkerson cannot say that the physical act she describes was indeed a violation of the woman, regardless of what the legal system said about it. One would think, though that her commitment to feminism would lead her to say that the act violates the woman prior to the consciousness-raising of this century. Indeed, she does say that such an act, even construed as legal marital relations, produces the woman as a "nonperson" or an "embarrassing disturber of the sanctity of the private realm."<sup>25</sup> She makes a negative judgment of some sort about the act even when she tries to work within the

construal that was appropriate for the time. It seems that the act is not altogether neutral givenness in the way that a body by itself might be. The poststructural theory that Fulkerson adopts, though, does not provide the kind of nuance necessary to distinguish between the two.

Second, consider where Fulkerson's theory leaves her regarding her own deepest commitments. She wants to say that we do not value apart from discourse, and that we do not know truth apart from communal practices. What is "good" and what is "evil," and consequently what is "true" and "false" or "right" and "wrong," are determined by communal discourse. Among the things that Fulkerson considers to be true are assertions for which she does not argue, such as that God exists, that God is a liberating God, that sexism is evil, and that the well-being of women is a good to be sought after. Those are precisely the kinds of assertions, however, which are thrown open to question by her theory. Fulkerson admits that she cannot say anything with certainty but can only wager on the truth of which she has been persuaded. Her theory can say no more than that beliefs are true because they are persuasive. The problem is that many things are persuasive to many people. What counts as persuasive depends on how people have been produced by the discourses in which they find themselves. She clearly believes that not all discourses are equal—a discourse that promotes women's well-being is preferable to a discourse that does not—but she has no recourse for deciding among them unless she appeals to something outside of discourse itself, an option that she just as clearly denies herself. Granted, she sometimes speaks of truth as independent of discourse when she says it is glimpsed from time to time. Still, one only knows that one has glimpsed truth by its persuasiveness, and the problem of what is persuasive is exactly what is at issue. She has no way of countering "truth" that is radically different from hers (for instance that God or sexism does not exist) but equally persuasive to those who believe it.

Third, consider the implications of Fulkerson's description of how the subject is produced for the way God works in the human life. Fulkerson criticizes any prelinguistic intuition of the divine. There can be no experience, not even experience of the divine, that stands apart from the language that produces us. Fulkerson does not, however, give an account of how God might work any other way. Her theory places the production of the self, with possibilities for oppression and resistance, entirely in social relations. Subjects are constructed by discourse, discourse is a humanly manufactured system of meaning, and the subject cannot reach beyond discourse to reality itself. How does God, then, participate in the production of the self? Simply to identify God with social processes amounts to severe reductionism. To distinguish God from those social processes, though, is to raise the question about our relationship to reality outside those processes. To see why this question is important, remember that Fulkerson argues that women are produced by social processes in such a way that they both accept and resist oppression. It is hard to imagine that she would want to say that God is working in both cases, but her theory does not allow her to make the kinds of distinctions necessary to involve God in one process but not the other.<sup>26</sup>

Fulkerson's work is important for showing how women resist oppression in very different ways, and she is right to remind feminists to acknowledge those unfamiliar forms of resistance and to refrain from saying that all women should think and act alike. Still, at least part of what is required for liberation is the recognition of sin by those who are not already persuaded by the feminist vision. To accomplish what she wants to accomplish, Fulkerson needs to be able to transcend the very social processes that have proved to be so illuminating, without voiding the insights that she has gained from poststructuralist theory. It is here that I believe process philosophy can be of some assistance.

### *III. Process and Postmodernism*

One of the major contributions that process philosophy made to Christian theology initially was to provide a metaphysical framework in which claims about the human self could be understood. In the early years of "process theology," existentialist philosophy had already made a great impact on the Christian understanding of the self in its relation to God. Existentialist philosophy, however, was highly subjective. It could speak of "decision" and "authentic life," but it had no way of pointing beyond human experience to an objective reality to which human life was responsible. Both Schubert M. Ogden and John B. Cobb, Jr. saw this problem and used the understanding of reality provided by process philosophy to support Christian appropriation of existentialist philosophy at its weakest point. In one piece, Cobb explored the ethical question of how there can be "oughtness" in human decisions.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Ogden supplemented Bultmann's existentialist analysis of humanity with Hartshorne's metaphysical analysis of God.<sup>28</sup> For both, process philosophy provided a crucial corrective to an insightful philosophical understanding that tended to one-sided understanding of the reality in which we live.

It seems to me that the current philosophical and theological climate is quite similar. Existentialist philosophy is no longer dominant, and instead postmodernism (in various forms) is the philosophy which provides the most incisive criticism of the status quo and the most promise for new ideas. Fulkerson has used one form of postmodern thought, namely poststructuralism, to illumine features of women's existence that have previously gone unnoticed. The value of such an enterprise cannot be denied, but the problems that remain are serious enough to warrant further attention. Like the existentialism of an earlier generation of theologians, postmodern thought tends toward examining how humans make meaning of some sort. It can offer profound insight into the processes by which we interact with each other and with our world, but it does not have the apparatus to ground its criticisms of the way we live in anything other than its own discourse, which by its own way of thinking can be neither better nor worse than any other discourse. Feminist theology needs an alternative philosophical framework, and my suggestion is that process philosophy is an option that should be explored. Just as Cobb and Ogden used process philosophy as a corrective to the one-sidedness of existentialism, feminist theology may be able to use process philosophy as a corrective to the one-sidedness of postmodernism.

Process philosophy, of course, is not the only way one can counter problems of relativism. Other philosophies explore ways of deciding among truth claims. I would not rule out feminist dialogue with these other theories, but process philosophy has some advantages that make it suited to the current challenge that lies before feminist theology itself to acknowledge different perspectives among different groups of women. Feminist theology will find it difficult to make use of any philosophical approach to truth that displays the "universalizing tendencies" about which feminists have learned to be suspicious. While feminist theology needs some kind of public agreement in order to make justice claims, it will be cautious toward and critical of any effort to get to agreement without a sufficient accounting of why we have differences in the first place. Discussions about perspective, for instance whether Venus should be called the morning star or the evening star, do not go to the heart of the differences feminists see and care about. Nor can disagreements be accounted for simply by acknowledging error that can be corrected by better reasoning. For it to be useful to feminists, any attempt to talk about truth will have to have a way of accounting for the deep investments we have in things other than truth, such as power, and the way those investments shape our understanding. It will also, though, have to provide a way to avoid being completely determined by those investments so that we are simply left with our disagreements, in the way that poststructuralism seems to do. Process philosophy has elements that enable us to speak about the complexity of our differences, but it also maintains a concern for testing truth claims against reality. Furthermore, it offers a way of valuing reality that becomes important for grounding justice claims, which are fundamental to feminist theology. In the remainder of this paper, I will try to show why process philosophy is an appropriate partner for feminist thinking that has been influenced by postmodernism, and I will suggest some specific ways in which I believe it can serve to undergird the weaknesses of Fulkerson's theory in particular.

In the introduction to *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, David Ray Griffin suggests that Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, among others, may be considered postmodern because they attempt to go beyond the modern, but their form of postmodernism differs from the common understanding.<sup>29</sup> "Postmodern" has become almost synonymous with "deconstruction" because the suspicion of modernity has so often extended to the most basic presuppositions of modern thinking, including rationality, truth as correspondence, and even empirical givenness itself. Postmodernism in this sense has taken aim not only at particular aspects of the modern worldview, but even at the very idea of constructing a worldview at all.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, the kind of philosophy that Griffin wants to highlight does not aim at doing away with the very idea of talking about reality in a reasonably accurate way, but works instead to construct a worldview that provides an interpretation superior to the modern worldview that it criticizes. For this reason, Griffin calls this philosophy "constructive" postmodernism instead of "deconstructive." Like other forms of postmodernism, it shares the insight that human knowledge is fallible and that no instance of human thinking has an all-inclusive perspective on reality; but it has resources that deconstructive postmodernism does not for

avoiding complete relativism. Furthermore, even though it speaks generally about the whole of reality, it can acknowledge the impact of social forces upon us. Unlike the metaphysics that Derrida criticized, process philosophy does not seek "substance" but explores relationality. Process philosophy, as an instance of constructive postmodernism, may be able to affirm Fulkerson's insights but also support her project ontologically.

As we have seen, although Fulkerson does not deny the "givenness" of reality, the theory she uses doesn't provide her a way of dealing with this givenness as anything other than a neutral "something" onto which we attach meaning. I have tried to show that this inability to talk about givenness in a more direct way leaves her in an awkward position as a feminist with regard to her own example of forced intercourse between husband and wife. She takes the act to be negative even though the theory she uses cannot by itself explain why she should do so. Furthermore, her theory does not provide grounding for her most fundamental convictions. We do not "know" things as they really are but as we want or need them to be, and even though we can glimpse truth, we cannot test it by correspondence or coherence to be certain that what we "know" is "true." Instead, we can only be persuaded of the truth of our convictions. She cannot, then, justify through her theory alone why her convictions about God, sexism, etc., are superior to convictions that hold just the opposite of her view. At least two things are needed to address these problems. First, one needs some way of connecting our ideas and judgments to reality so that we can speak truly about the ways things are; and second, one needs some framework that is adequate to the way things are in order to talk about moral values.

According to Griffin, Whitehead was also suspicious of axiomatic certainties that could be known independently of other knowledge and from which other propositions could be deduced in a straightforward way. Even though he held that assertions about reality required elaboration and testing against an accurate apprehension of the metaphysical background of the universe itself, Whitehead called language "elliptical, requiring a leap of the imagination to understand its meaning in its relevance to immediate experience."<sup>31</sup> Whitehead understands the limits, and one might even say the constructed nature, of language and knowledge; but he also maintains regard for at least some degree of accuracy in our comprehension. As he elaborates the implications of Whitehead's position, Griffin explains that it is important to distinguish between holding that truth means corresponding to reality and holding that any particular proposition actually does correspond to reality. One may endorse the idea that all truth claims are made from some perspective, and one may exercise appropriate suspicion with regard to perspectival truth claims, without giving up the conviction that the truth of any perspectival claim depends on the accuracy of its description. Griffin says:

But to believe that a certain assertion about something is true does not entail that it is the truth (in the sense of the whole truth), or even the most important truth, about it. The full truth about something would consist of all the true propositions that apply to it; this full

truth, even about something as simple as a molecule or an ant—let alone something as complex as a human being or a historical event—is only knowable to omniscience. Finite minds are capable of only an extremely remote approximation to this complete truth.<sup>32</sup>

One can agree with Fulkerson that we can only glimpse the truth. We see only some aspect of the truth at any given time. But from this humble acknowledgment that we can never know the “full truth,” it does not follow that knowing truth amounts to persuasion. Whatever truth we manage to see must correspond to the aspect of reality that it claims to describe.

One of the problems with maintaining a commitment to truth as correspondence is the givenness of reality itself. Philosophy has long wrestled with the difficulty of establishing that there is a real world which is perceived by our senses. The idea that what we think is given to us from outside ourselves is really constructed by the perceiver is at the heart of deconstructive postmodernism. Griffin shows how Whitehead and Hartshorne both approach the problem of givenness in a way that attempts to show how the reality of an external world may be supported. The problems with sense perception are well known, but Whitehead and Hartshorne suggest that our most basic mode of perception is nonsensory. Whitehead calls this form of perception “prehension,” which Griffin defines as “the ‘nonsensory sympathetic perception of antecedent experiences.’”<sup>33</sup> Whitehead takes the basic units of reality to be not substances but events, which he calls “actual occasions” or “occasions of experience.” An actual occasion prehends antecedent events, that is, it incorporates previous events into the event that it is now becoming. This prehension grounds direct apprehension of an external world in three ways. First, even antecedent events are external to the immediate experience of a particular occasion, so the act of prehension on even the most basic level involves a direct relation to some reality “outside” the event itself. Second, for complex societies of occasions, such as human beings, the dominant occasion prehends the occasions which make up the society. In other words, my “soul” or “self” prehends my body. Third, a complex society prehends things beyond its body insofar as occasions which comprise the body have prehended external data. As Griffin says, “Because all the events (photonic and neuronc) connecting the tree I see and my brain are events of this type, aspects of the tree itself are present in my brain cells. In prehending my brain cells, accordingly, I prehend aspects of the external tree.”<sup>34</sup> So, even sense perception is built on this prehension. But an actual occasion does not merely receive events of the past; it also exercises some degree of freedom in the way in which those antecedent events are incorporated into its actuality. One may recognize, then, an element of “construction” without also denying that nothing is given to the occasion to begin with. At high levels of societies of occasions, such as human beings, the freedom is great and so the construction is quite significant. Human beings, however, do not construct meanings out of nothing. Whitehead and Hartshorne, then, work toward showing how the givenness of the world is more than simply neutral. While humans have a broad field in which different construals may have bearing, some construals will not conform enough to

what is given to be reasonably accurate. Correspondence does not mean one-to-one exactness. Rather it means some real connection to the way things are that must be taken into account in any adequate construction.

Among the "givens" that we perceive in a nonsensory way are certain features of experience itself which we apprehend in a preconceptual way, and which count as "knowledge" even before they have been brought to conscious expression. This knowledge constitutes a set of beliefs that we presuppose in everything we do and say. They are, as Griffin says, "deep truths" which are grounded in a deep layer of human experience. We may never affirm them through explicit propositions, or we may even deny them consciously; but our very existence affirms them even when our words and thoughts do not.<sup>35</sup> For example, we all "know" in this deep way that we have some freedom and that the future is partially open. To be sure, it is possible to develop a theory of complete determinism, but we give the lie to that theory every time we struggle with a decision. Among the beliefs we presuppose are beliefs in the reality of truth, the past, and an ultimate meaning to our lives. Furthermore, all these beliefs depend on some whole that exists beyond our individual perspectives or minds. For instance, we presuppose an all-inclusive perspective in which complete truths may be seen whenever we criticize some perspective as inadequate.<sup>36</sup> Even if none of us can have, as Fulkerson says, "a God's-eye view of the world," we presuppose that there is one.

These "deep truths" need to be distinguished from any propositions that would state them, and from any propositions that elaborate the meaning of those deep truths for us. For instance, process philosophy does build an understanding of the existence of God on these nonsensory perceptions, but that reflective understanding is not identical to the deep experience upon which it is built. Schubert Ogden, for instance, speaks of a "basic faith" that humans share, a "confidence in the abiding worth of our life" that can be lived out authentically or inauthentically. "God" refers to the objective ground in reality for that confidence, and process philosophy seeks to articulate an understanding of reality so that God may be conceived intelligibly as the ground of this confidence.<sup>37</sup> The concepts, definitions, and arguments that Ogden uses are not the "deep truths" themselves. They are explications of the meaning of our confidence, and as such, they are subject to criticism, interpretation, elaboration, and alternative explanations. It is possible to construe this "confidence" differently, perhaps as a survival instinct, something that has been selected for in nature through evolution. Such an interpretation would not be likely to seek for a ground of that confidence in reality itself, much less call it God. This alternative explanation, though, in its own way, would display a concern for understanding our confidence in light of the way things really are. Even this attempt, then, would depend on an experience of the whole in which our lives make sense, and to that extent it would display the "deep truths" of our existence even as it would articulate them quite differently. How one decides between articulations will depend at least partly on which does more justice to the experience itself. At least one can say that an explanation that acknowledges and accounts for our presuppositions is better than one that does not. None of this makes process philosophy right

in all or even any of its claims, but it does suggest that there is an approach in process philosophy that is more adequate to our situation than those that deny these “deep truths.” Process philosophy cannot claim to have the perspective that God has, but it can attempt to talk about the whole that we constantly presuppose in such a way that we are reminded to take it into account.

Process philosophy, then, affirms that our ideas have some connection to the givenness of reality (even if because of our freedom they are also partially constructed) and that our most basic experience of that given reality lets us know that not every construction is equal. Givenness is not altogether neutral. It is possible, for instance, to test by correspondence whether believing that humans have some degree of freedom is superior to believing in determinism. We begin to have a framework in which claims about values such as justice can have force, and I will turn now to the importance of acknowledging a “God perspective” in making those claims. Even before postmodern deconstruction became a major force in theology, John Cobb explored the way in which Whitehead’s thought could ground an idea of “oughtness” in ethics. Confidence in universally applicable standards of right and wrong had already been eroded, and even if such norms could be found, existentialism had suggested they would be unimportant. Only accepting responsibility for one’s own actions, not obedience to external norms, counted as authentic existence.<sup>38</sup> In this situation, “oughtness” had little meaning. Cobb turned to the idea of prehension to show how it could be possible to talk about obligation in such a philosophical and theological climate. As we have seen, each momentary occasion of experience incorporates previous occasions into its own existence, and it does so by selectively synthesizing what it prehends into a novel occasion. Both givenness and freedom are involved in this process. Cobb suggested that in the initial phase of this synthesis, God provides an aim that grounds obligation, namely “the aim at the best self-actualization allowed by the situation of the occasion—best in terms at once of that occasion’s own subjective enjoyment and in terms of what it will contribute to the relevant future beyond itself.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, it has an obligation to synthesize the occasions it prehends so that it contributes in the best possible way to its own enjoyment and to the enjoyment of future occasions. The obligation is to the “best possible,” and consideration of the “best possible” includes occasions beyond itself. Of course, occasions do not always synthesize the other occasions they prehend in the best possible way either for themselves or for those occasions to which they will contribute. Such a failure may be called “sin,” but the failure cannot even be recognized as a failure unless there is an obligation that has not been fulfilled. Furthermore, the “best possible” constitutes a principle; it does not provide a recipe or description for the details of any particular synthesis. Every occasion will be unique in what it prehends, in what counts as its own enjoyment, and in what counts as a good contribution to occasions beyond itself. Finally, because this occasion will be prehended by so many other occasions, the contribution it makes to others, even beyond its own enduring self, is vastly important.

We contribute not only to the successive occasions that will constitute our own enduring self, and not only to the other enduring occasions that

are immediately around us, but also to God. According to Hartshorne, God is the ultimate recipient of all our experiences. In numerous works, Hartshorne argues that God should be conceived as "surrelative," or supremely relative. God's absolute character never changes; God constantly loves us and knows us and acts for us in every way that God can and should. But in order to love us, know us, etc., adequately, God must be related to us. God is the one and only supreme individual who is related to everything that is, who is adequately aware of every occasion of experience, and who is the ultimate beneficiary of all actions. Human beings will always have limited knowledge of situations, so our response to others can never be fully adequate. Not only will we inevitably be ignorant of many things, but our "blind spots" may often be more or less willfully created. Our investments will shape the way that we use our freedom to interpret the situations around us. God, however, suffers from no such ignorance or bias. God knows intimately every situation, every action, every subject, so God may evaluate every situation, action, or subject in its full concreteness. "This ideal relativity," says Hartshorne, "absolute in its immutable adequacy, is the standard of all." Given this ideal, the primary good is "that the creatures should enjoy rich harmonies of living, and pour this richness into the one ultimate receptacle of all achievement, the life of God." The purpose of humanity, then, is "to serve and glorify God, that is, literally to contribute some value to the divine life which it otherwise would not have."<sup>40</sup>

Since in our finitude we are ignorant of the whole, knowing what will contribute the best to the whole, much less what will contribute the best to our future occasions or the other occasions around us, is problematic. Knowing how to live by this standard is not an easy task. Every statement of values, of norms, of rules to live by will suffer from our ignorance of all the things that should be considered and the investments that shape what we are willing to see. Thus, every humanly constructed value system or set of rules is subject to revision in light of fuller information. In process then, just as for Fulkerson, no human has or ever will have a "God's eye perspective" on anything. But, the commitment to the existence of a God's eye perspective to which we are accountable is important for relativizing our own finite perspectives. That commitment to the truth of the way things really are reminds us to look beyond ourselves, to be willing to open our limited perspectives (especially when those limits are willfully chosen) so that we may learn from the perspectives of others, to ask what we are contributing to a God whose desire is the best for all the creatures.

Process philosophy, then, attempts to establish a connection with givenness that poststructuralism typically avoids; and it also tries to explain how making moral claims is justified. Can it also talk about how God works in subjects that are produced by social processes? Fulkerson's theory is of enormous help in explaining how the experiences of concrete women are different from one another and in showing that women's resistance to oppression may take various forms. Women resist according to the possibilities that are open to them through the interplay of dominant discourse with subordinate discourse. Women are produced by both, and "cracks" or "fissures" in meaning that the tension between the two creates provide openings for novel performances of scripture. So far, process philosophy is

not in conflict with poststructuralism. Occasions prehend the occasions that have gone before them, and discourses count in what an arising occasion prehends. Whitehead's term "concrecence," or growing together, indicates how the antecedent occasions are carried into and become part of the makeup of the arising occasion. In this way, one may indeed say that the new occasion is "produced" or "constructed" by what it prehends. A subject, then, prehends discourse so that the meanings of this discourse become quite literally a part of who she is. Subjects prehend the occasions that are relevant to their past, so each subject will prehend different relevant data. Pentecostal women will take into themselves antecedent occasions that are quite different from the occasions prehend by academic women. Because of their different social locations, they will concrecence in different ways. So far, process philosophy supports Fulkerson's insights.

Process diverges from Fulkerson, though, in two ways. First, an occasion (in this case a subject) is not merely the product of the discourses or anything else that it prehends. Each occasion has some element of freedom to synthesize past occasions in a novel way. Of course, tension between dominant and subordinate discourse will figure into the possibilities for the shape that synthesis will take. One may affirm that the cracks and fissures that lie "between" discourses are significant for novelty; but each occasion also has some degree of freedom to determine just how those cracks and fissures are to be used. Second, social processes are not the only things that subjects prehend. God provides an initial aim for each occasion. Although this aim is not the product of discourse, and so is perhaps "nonlinguistic" in the same way that it is nonsensuous, it is not given to a self that is independent of social processes. There is no "Cartesian self" that lies behind social processes and somehow knows God independently of them. Rather, the "self" is an event, not a substance, which endures through time as a succession of occasions, each of which come into being as a concrecence of all that has gone before plus freely enacted synthesis. This "self" has a nonsensuous awareness of the whole in which it lives and to which it contributes. This awareness, although preconceptual, is not given to the "self" independently of social processes. Rather, this awareness belongs to every moment of the self's existence, to every experience that it may have. God, then, provides an initial aim along with the social processes that the subject experiences. The aim serves as a principle by which those processes should be synthesized in the subject, namely to make the best possible contribution for the enjoyment of the arising occasion and all the other occasions that will prehend this one. God's influence, then, is distinct from social processes, but is not independent of them. God does not work in us independently of the discourses that produce us, but God works in us to influence how we use our freedom so that neither God's action nor our own selves may be reduced to nothing but social processes.

#### *IV. Conclusion*

Process philosophy shares with poststructuralism a criticism of modernity, a recognition that no human perspective can capture the whole truth, and an awareness that social location determines much of who we become.

Process philosophy adds to poststructuralism, though, an attempt to ground truth claims and justice claims ontologically. By taking the insights of poststructuralism and process together, feminists can affirm Fulkerson's insight, namely, the very different ways in which concrete women who have been produced in various social locations resist oppression in their contexts. Theyprehend meanings from the various discourses in which they participate and freely use the openings made by the interplay of these discourses to synthesize all that is given to them from the past in the best possible way. But in addition to affirming varieties of resistance, feminists can also make justice claims on the basis of what we all contribute to each other and to God. It is not enough to make the best possible use of the status quo. We may also call all people to enhance the richness that is possible for all by living in ways that make better contributions to those around us. What we give to others to prehend, whether that may be the meanings by which we construct them as nonpersons or concrete resources for living, matters for what the "best possible" for them will be.

Constructive postmodernism recognizes that it is constructing a worldview that is itself provisional. Process philosophy and theology can no more claim to speak the whole truth than can any other philosophy or theology. Its claims about correspondence, about nonsensory perception, and about the existence of God are questions that remain open; but it provides a direction for asking certain questions that is quite different from that of other postmodern discussions. Process philosophy is itself discourse and should never forget its own limits, nor does it do all that needs to be done in order to confront the actual problems of concrete women and men. What it can claim, though, is to offer a worldview that is superior both to that of modernity and to that of any view that leads to relativism. It can provide a crucial ontological framework for the work that remains. Process attempts to show that there is a whole to which we are accountable and that it matters what kind of contribution we make to that whole and to the parts (human and nonhuman) which make it up, but the question of what actual contributions we ought to make must be worked through. To do so adequately, according to the insights of process philosophy itself, all voices must be heard and taken into account. The God of process thought, who knows us in our concreteness and who wants each of us to live richly, requires that we make use of all resources that can bring those voices to expression, including feminist use of poststructural theory. Only when we hear the needs of those around us will we know how to contribute wisely and appropriately to others and thus how to make our best possible contribution to God.

*Methodist Theological School in Ohio*

#### NOTES

1. Linda J. Nicholson, ed., "Introduction," in *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

2. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

3. See Stephen Moore's assessment of Derrida's work in *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: Theoretical Challenges* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 132-33.

4. See especially Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 109-33.

5. See, for instance, Serene Jones' criticism of the use of process philosophy by Rita Brock and Catherine Keller. "Women's Experience Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist, and *Mujerista* Theologies in North America," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 39-42.

6. See the introduction to *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists*, eds. C.W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St.Ville, and Susan M. Simonaitis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1-4.

7. Feminists in disciplines other than theology also raised questions about the use of postmodern thinking. See, for instance, feminist criticism of the use of postmodernism in anthropology by Frances E. Mascia-Lees, Patricia Sharpe, and Colleen Ballerino Cohen, "The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions From a Feminist Perspective," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 15 (1989), 7-33.

8. See especially essays by Sandra Harding and Seyla Benhabib in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. and with introduction by Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 83-130.

9. See again the introduction to *Transfigurations*.

10. An exception to this trend is Catherine Keller, who argues for a social ontology and global rather than merely local claims. See "Seeking and Sucking: On Relation and Essence in Feminist Theology," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, 54-78.

11. For example, Sheila Davaney argues that pragmatic norms are the only kind appropriate for historically produced human beings. "Continuing the Story, but Departing the Text: A Historicist Interpretation of Feminist Norms in Theology," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, 198-214.

12. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 54-55.

13. *Ibid.*, 71.

14. *Ibid.*, 75.

15. *Ibid.*, 25.

16. *Ibid.*, 247ff.

17. *Ibid.*, 89.

18. *Ibid.*, 88.

19. *Ibid.*, 78, 76.

20. *Ibid.*, 25, 304-15.

21. *Ibid.*, 102.

22. *Ibid.*, 375.

23. *Ibid.*, 377.

24. *Ibid.*, 374.

25. *Ibid.*, 89.

26. At a colloquy for the Graduate Program in Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University, Fulkerson was asked the question of where God is in all of this. She asked in reply why we should think God isn't in what she described. The question itself, she believes, is based on dualistic thinking. Distinction, however, is not dualism. One need not fall into the mistaken

notion of separate, and even incompatible realism in order to distinguish God from the world. Not to distinguish God from "whatever is" is at best reductionistic and in this case, it leads to the problems noted above. We cannot identify what it is in "whatever is" that God might oppose.

27. John B. Cobb, "Whitehead's Philosophy and a Christian Doctrine of Man," in *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32 (1964): 209-20.

28. Schubert M. Ogden, "Bultmann's Demythologizing and Hartshorne's Dipolar Theism," in *Process and Divinity: The Hartshorne Festschrift*, eds. William L. Reese and Eugene Freeman (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1964), 493-513.

29. David Ray Griffin, *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Peirce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), viii.

30. *Ibid.*, 4.

31. *Ibid.*, 24.

32. *Ibid.*, 26.

33. *Ibid.*, 209.

34. *Ibid.*, 22.

35. *Ibid.*, 27, 219.

36. *Ibid.*, 220.

37. Ogden, "The Reality of God," in *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), 1-70.

38. Cobb, 213.

39. *Ibid.*, 214.

40. Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 129, 128, 133.