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Self and Economy  
*Self-Interest as Contributing to the Common Good?*

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### **Introduction**

The initial motivation for writing this paper was my fascination with Adam Smith's notion of self-interest and the alleged capacity of unrestrained self-interest to create prosperity for all. With students of market economies I share the fascination about "the connection between private motives and public outcomes."<sup>1</sup> Can the accumulation of wealth out of *egoistic* motives really "eventuate in a useful social outcome?"<sup>2</sup> My Methodist upbringing and my conviction that mutual solidarity is crucial for just social conditions make me suspicious to such an understanding of economy. But in order not to be guided entirely by my inclinations I want to investigate some possibilities to affirm self-interest as a viable motivation for the work toward the common good. To be sure, the kind of self-interest I will affirm is certainly not in accordance with the self-interest Adam Smith wrote about, which is informed by an enlightened understanding of the self as independent. In this paper I will be guided largely by a process concept of the self as *creative self-expression*, according to which "absolute egoism is ontologically ruled out. No actuality is concerned solely with itself."<sup>3</sup> Self-interest thus can be a useful motivation even in the realm of economy, if the self is understood as an organic and

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1 Heilbroner, Robert L. *The Essential Adam Smith*. 62

2 Ibid. 61

3 Cobb/Griffin. *Process Theology*. 27

dynamic part of its wider environment.

The paper is divided into three parts, functioning fairly independently. The first, inspired by an article of Harvey Cox, is a quite general comparison between process thought and market economy, showing similarities and profound differences. The second part consists of a more specific comparison of Adam Smith and Alfred North Whitehead in terms of their diverging understanding of the self. The third part reflects on three contemporary thinkers - Catherine Keller, Sally McFague, and Danah Zohar - and their considerations regarding the self. They share different degrees of indebtedness to Alfred North Whitehead's process thought and together provide a good foundation of the kind of self-interest which I finally want to affirm as viable and even resonating with my Methodist heritage.

My contribution seems to me relevant to the first focus, which Theodore Runyon mentioned in his description of this working group, namely "the impact of global capitalism on the Christian mission today."<sup>4</sup> While I do not address the issue of mission directly, I believe that considerations of various kinds of self-interest have direct implications for missionary endeavors.

## **Are Free Market Economy and Process Thought Compatible?**

In his article *The Market as God* Harvey Cox points out parallels between the ideology of the free market and process theology. "(T)he econologists' (*theologians of the free market*) rhetoric resembles what is sometimes called 'process theology', a relatively contemporary trend influenced by the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead ... Process theology ... seems to offer

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore Runyon in an e-mail May 19, 2002.

considerable comfort to the theologians of The Market.”<sup>5</sup> My immediate reaction was one of intense disagreement and astonishment, since I read this article at a point at which I had come to understand process thought and free market ideology almost as mutually exclusive.

Now I use the above quotation of Harvey Cox as an introduction to this article, because after some consideration I have to admit that there indeed seem to be - at least at the surface - striking resemblances between process thought and the ideology of the free market.

The first parallel I think of is the emphasis upon *interrelatedness*. On the basis of its critique of an atomistic view of reality, according to which the smallest articles can exist beside and independent of each other without any interference, process thought stresses the intimate interrelatedness of all reality. “Whiteheadian process thought gives primacy to interdependence as an ideal over independence. Of course, it portrays interdependence not simply as an ideal but as an ontologically given characteristic.”<sup>6</sup> This ontology of interdependence is affirmed in a radical way when Whitehead writes that “an actual entity *is* present in other actual entities” and that “if we allow for degrees of relevance . . . we must say that every actual entity is present in every other actual entity.”<sup>7</sup> Whitehead’s philosophy of organism thus opens up for truly global interrelatedness. Globalization, global interrelation between markets, has become a common term in our daily conversations and is a clear goal of market economy. James D. Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, in his speech to the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle repeatedly emphasized the significance of global interconnection. “We must recognize the interconnections of national and international policy initiatives, including trade initiatives ... We live in an increasingly interconnected global economic and geopolitical environment. In such

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5 Cox, Harvey. The Market as God. In: The Atlantic Monthly, March 1999. 20

6 Cobb/Griffin, Process Theology. 21

an environment, the welfare - or lack of it - of the poorest can destabilize the prospects of the wealthier.”<sup>8</sup>

A second parallel can be found in the conviction that human beings (and societies) have *freedom* of choice. Process thought affirms that all actual occasions are dependent on efficient causation<sup>9</sup>. Whitehead, however, was convinced that beyond all determinative factors “there always remains the final reaction of self-creative unity of the universe.”<sup>10</sup> However much human beings (or societies) are influenced and circumscribed by different factors, self-creative freedom never is eradicated altogether. There seems to be an equally strong conviction regarding human freedom in free market ideology. Milton Friedman is one of the best-known advocates of freedom in the context of the free market. According to him economic freedom (trade without coercion or central direction) is an essential requisite for political freedom.<sup>11</sup> And there seems to be an unshaken confidence in the self-creation and self-organization of human beings (and societies) toward the common good, once freedom is granted.

Finally I detect some kind of parallel in an aspect, which is at the heart of process thought. It is the idea that *everything changes*, that everything is in process and that “(a)nything which is not a process is an abstraction from process, not a full-fledged actuality.”<sup>12</sup> According to this view all attempts to pin down reality or to establish barriers between different realities are in vain. Besides that this notion of process entails that there always is a form of *growth* in the respect that every actual occasion, once its concrescence is completed, is added to actual

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7 Whitehead, Process and Reality. 50

8 Wolfensohn, James D. Speech at the WTO Meeting in Seattle, November 30, 1999. (Quoted from ‘www.welt.de’, Dec 1, 1999)

9 Cobb/Griffin, Process Theology. 24

10 Whitehead, Process and Reality. 47

11 Holland, Stuart. The Market Economy. 33

immortality. Similarly one can see the free market as a process, which is totally dependent upon constant change. More accurately that change must take the form of growth in order for the market to function. One of the major goals for free market ideology is to remove all perceivable obstacles to continuous growth. Thus it is not surprising that James D. Wolfensohn suggests expansion of competitive exports and elimination of trade barriers as primary area of action for the World Trade Organization.<sup>13</sup>

In this comparison I have followed Harvey Cox' suggestion that free market economy and process theology resemble each other. I am surprised that I could find so many parallels. It should, however, have become evident how shaky these parallels are. As to the aspect of global interconnection, process theology emphasizes it as a given reality which can be analyzed on an abstract level but which needs to be practically embraced in a life style geared toward conscious creaturely interconnection. Free market economy seems to go almost in the opposite direction by seeing interconnection not as a given reality but rather as a goal. Interconnection is not a presupposition but rather a vision which is to be reached by the imposition of the rules of *the market*. The concrete completion of this interrelatedness is expected from an abstraction, namely *the market* and its more or less automatic dynamics. But probably the most decisive difference is that what is interconnected is not global life in general, as in the view of process theology, but only those societies and organizations which function in accordance with the rules of the market. If these rules are not obeyed, the interconnection cannot continue.

Something similar can be said about the notion of freedom and self-organization. In process theology freedom is ascribed to all processes of becoming on a very basic level. Every

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12 Cobb/Griffin, Process Theology. 14

13 Wolfensohn, James D. Speech at the WTO Meeting in Seattle, November 30, 1999. (Quoted from

actual occasion and every society of actual occasions has in spite of the influences of causal efficacy a more or less limited amount of freedom to integrate other actual occasions into its concrescence. This basic ability of free self-creation allows for a wide variety of new and unpredictable possibilities. The scope of freedom in the ideology of market economy seems to be significantly more narrow. It is a freedom which is limited to those persons and organizations which are able to act according to the rules of the market and who have the necessary resources. It is basically a freedom regarding competition and trade within the market.<sup>14</sup> This freedom is virtually nonexistent for persons or societies without resources.

Even when it comes to the notion of *process* and *growth*, the difference between process theology and free market ideology is significant. Process theology understands process as basic and universal. All “units of process are characterized by enjoyment” and thus “every such unit has intrinsic value.”<sup>15</sup> Enjoyment here is a neutral term, signifying that every concrescence is experienced. All units of process, all experiences are integrated in actual immortality and thus in God. In this sense God grows. Ideally this growth is a growth towards richer and more integrative enjoyment of all actual occasions. Free market ideology has a much more circumscribed understanding of process and growth. Processes are seen as relevant only in so far as they influence the machinery of the market, in so far as they enhance or hinder the free flow of capital and labor. This concept of process seems not to be derived from an understanding of reality as a complex interrelation of countless processes, but rather from an understanding of one

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‘www.welt.de’, Dec 1, 1999)

14 Holland provides an insightful summary of the limitations of economic freedom (Holland, Stuart. *The Market Economy*. 33-58) and states rather ironically that “(f)or instance, while an unemployed worker in Mrs. Thatcher’s Britain may perhaps feel free from government ‘interference’, he or she is less free to take job ...” (Holland, Stuart. *The market Economy*. 36)

15 Cobb/Griffin, *Process Theology*. 16

particular economic process as opposed to processes in other realms. In addition to that, growth seems to be seen in purely quantitative terms, focused on the increase of production of goods and services and the increase of highly abstract figures such as corporations' surplus and indexes in the stock market.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, there is a growing awareness of the limits to pure quantitative growth. An example for this growing awareness is the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, which distinguishes between quantitative expansion and development in the form of "qualitative change of a physically nongrowing economic system in dynamic equilibrium with the environment."<sup>17</sup> That kind of thinking obviously has not been adopted by the World Bank as one of the most established institutions in defense of the free market. In James D. Wolfensohn's speech for example there seems to be no will to any kind of distribution of *existing* wealth in order to soften the surge for permanent economic growth with all the known problematic consequences. His vision is firmly built on unlimited economic growth. He welcomes poor countries not to share existing wealth but to become "full partners in the *potential* gains from world trade" and among his *wider aims* he mentions broader opportunities "for all people to share in the *potential* for global prosperity."<sup>18</sup> This is in clear contrast to growth as viewed by process theology which sees an ever increasing richness of experience as the sign of growth, a growth which cannot be measured quantitatively and which even can be threatened by a concentration on pure quantitative growth.

In this rough comparison between process theology and free market ideology I hope to have given an example for how different thought models superficially can resemble each other,

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16 The excesses of the compulsory increase of surplus could be seen lately in the disastrous tampering with and manipulations of corporate profits in large multinational businesses such as Enron and WorldCom.

17 Cobb/Daly. For the Common Good. 71

18 Wolfensohn, James D. Speech at the WTO Meeting in Seattle, November 30, 1999. (Quoted from

while at the same time their terminology (in our case the notions of interrelatedness, freedom, process, and growth) after a closer look prove to refer to different realities. This comparison seems to fit into the discussion of the classical Whiteheadian “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”, which is about erroneous concrete applications of abstractions. My understanding of process theology is that the notion of an actual occasion as the basic unity of reality is seen as an abstraction which can inform our understanding, but which cannot serve as a practical guideline for concrete action. It is an abstract model the significance of which constantly needs to be translated anew into concrete situations. Academic economy on the other hand, mainly influenced by free market ideology, does not always seem to make that distinction between abstraction and concreteness.<sup>19</sup> Instead the abstract model of *the free market* often is applied to concrete situations, providing rules of conduct which tend to neglect a wide range of (social, ecological, religious, cultural, ...) realities. The abstraction of economic theory may describe an aspect of society, but not the whole range of different aspects in their interplay.<sup>20</sup>

Harvey Cox gives a brilliant and very compelling account of the free market in its function as a new religion.<sup>21</sup> A weak point in his argument, however, is that he identifies some superficial parallels between free market ideology and process theology and thereby fails to realize that process theology is one of the traditions well fit to seriously challenge the

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‘www.welt.de’, Dec 1, 1999)

19 Cobb/Daly. For the Common Good. 25

20 Cobb, John B. The Earthist Challenge to Economism. 5

21 Behind descriptions of market reforms he detects pieces of a grand narrative, which proclaims salvation through the advent of free markets. (19) In the theology of the market the doctrine of God, according to Cox, is occupied by The Market. It is ascribed the capacity to define what is real, and it has a tendency to convert creation into commodities, which leads to a radical desacralization. (20) Further on he notes that current thinking assigns comprehensive wisdom to The Market, and even anthropomorphic attributes. (21) Even spiritual dimensions of life are becoming commodities available on The Market. And one of his conclusions is that The Market has become religion’s most formidable rival, the more so because it is rarely recognized as a religion. (22) - Cox, Harvey. The Market as God. In: The Atlantic Monthly, March 1999.

omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent position of the market. In fact his witty analysis of the market is not at all far from John B. Cobb's identification of *economism* which according to him "functions today as our shared religion."<sup>22</sup>

M. Douglas Meeks' theological interpretation of market economy is similar to but more compelling and accurate than the understanding mirrored in Harvey Cox' article. In his book *God the Economist* Meeks criticizes market economy for its view of the human being as basically acquisitive and driven to amass wealth, and he provides an alternative view of the human being derived from a Trinitarian understanding of God. He identifies God concepts in free market ideology: "The market may be considered free of God and thus of authoritarian influences. But the working of the market depends on coercive conceptions once applied to God but now given as presuppositions of the market human being."<sup>23</sup> It is the underlying and implied theology of market economy which leads to a distorted anthropology. The classical divine attributes (*almost all of which process theology radically criticizes*) of "infinity, immutability, immortality, aseity, and impassibility in their extremity describe the emperor, the ultimate property owner, whose divinity is his expansive power to dispose property."<sup>24</sup> It is this kind of theological concepts which leads to the conviction of the fundamentally acquisitive human being. Meeks instead suggests an understanding of God as triune community which makes it impossible to theologically legitimate "the process of accumulation as a totalizing process."<sup>25</sup> And, I would add, least of all process theology lends itself for legitimizing such a totalizing 'process,' albeit not from a Trinitarian perspective.

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22 Cobb, John B. The Earthist Challenge to Economism. 1

23 Meeks, M. Douglas. God the Economist. 65

24 Ibid. 67

25 Ibid. 72

But if the human being is not to be understood as fundamentally acquisitive, how then can human self-interest be framed alternatively? Hopefully the following comparison will let such an alternative emerge. I will deal with Adam Smith on the one hand, whose understanding of the self seems still to inform economic theory, and with Alfred North Whitehead on the other hand. My intention is not to oppose self-interest but rather to suggest an economically more constructive understanding of self-interest than the (misconceived) Smithian one.

### **Adam Smith's Enlightenment Self<sup>26</sup>**

Nowadays Adam Smith quite unjustly sometimes is portrayed as the man who justified greed or pure self-interest as a legitimate motivation for economic enterprises. That is an assumption which needs quite some qualification. His two main writings *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) by himself were seen as at least equally valuable.<sup>27</sup> Stuart Holland holds that Smith saw his first and almost forgotten writing as even more important.<sup>28</sup> Adam Smith himself overviewed the edition of six revised editions until 1790, shortly before his death.<sup>29</sup> One cannot argue, therefore, that the findings in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* were overcome in *The Wealth of Nations*. The earlier writing seems not to have been consulted in the development of modern economic theory. It is here that Adam Smith establishes sympathy as a cornerstone for constructive human relations. He is far from legitimizing selfish as a positive inclination, but rather states “that to restrain selfish ... constitutes the perfection of human nature; and can alone produce among mankind that harmony of sentiments and passions

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26 Quotations from the works of Adam Smith are from Robert L. Heilbroner's selection.

27 Heilbroner, Robert L. *The Essential Adam Smith*. 57

28 Holland, Stuart. *The Market Economy*. 28

29 Heilbroner, Robert L. *The Essential Adam Smith*. 57

in which consists their whole grace and propriety.”<sup>30</sup> To be sure, he saw selfish as an original passion in human nature, but not as a passion to guide us. “It is only by consulting this judge within (conscience), that we can ever see what relates to ourselves in its proper shape and dimensions; or that we can ever make any proper comparison between our own interests and those of other people.”<sup>31</sup> He valued sensitivity for others as a key quality: “The man of the most perfect virtue ... is he who joins, to the most perfect command of his own original and selfish feelings, the most exquisite sensibility both to the original and sympathetic feelings of others.”<sup>32</sup>

Adam Smith, however, had no illusions as to how self-interest *in fact* guided the behavior of human beings. Although he never lost his conviction that there are “some principles in his (*the human being’s*) nature, which interest him in the fortune of others”<sup>33</sup>, he believed that the love of the neighbor is weaker in human beings than this “stronger love” which is “the love of what is honorable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters.”<sup>34</sup> In order for these self loving individuals to be organized in a generally beneficial way, Adam Smith believed in the necessity of a supernatural power. Critical toward Christianity, he still was convinced that a Deity through an *Invisible Hand* guides humanity, so that “without intending it the pursuit of our immediate desires brings us to follow divinely willed courses.”<sup>35</sup> So powerful is the *Invisible Hand* according to Smith that even “the rich are led (*by it*) to make nearly the same distribution of the necessities of life, which would have been made, had the earth been

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30 Ibid. 77

31 Ibid. 105

32 Ibid. 108

33 Ibid. 65

34 Ibid. 107

35 Ibid. 60

divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants.”<sup>36</sup> This, it seems, is another way of saying that the combined power of human self-interests eventually leads to a social outcome that is beneficial to all, an assumption which by neoclassic economists is referred to as the *trickle-down-effect* of the accumulation of wealth. In another famous quote Adam Smith explains this paradoxically beneficial function of self-interest in our every day life in the following way: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”<sup>37</sup>

What specifically interests me for the scope of this paper is the nature of the Smithian self that is so intensely interested in itself. Given the fact that Adam Smith lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is not surprising that his world view was very much influenced by Enlightenment ideas. As has been pointed out, he was the first who envisioned economics as a universe that could function on its own, very much in accordance to the Newtonian celestial mechanics.<sup>38</sup> I understand his anthropology as heavily influenced by this mechanistic understanding of reality. Human beings are viewed as rather isolated parts in the machinery of a global mechanistic system, which functions after certain constant laws. The self seems to be self-contained and without any intimate relations to any other selves or entities which so ever. That becomes quite clear in Smith’s very peculiar description of how compassion can come about. While asserting that there is in every human being some principle “which interests him in the fortune of others”, which he calls compassion, he, however, thinks that “we have no immediate experience of what other men feel ... (I)t is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his

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36 Ibid. 61

37 Ibid. 169

38 Meeks, M. Douglas. God the Economist. 48

sensations.”<sup>39</sup> What happens *outside* the self can in no way be grasped directly. Anything beyond the borders of the circumscribed self can only be understood indirectly. Smith uses a Platonic model to explain how such an understanding of individuality can be reconciled with the notion of compassion. It is via general ideas that we can imaginatively understand how another person feels. “If the very appearances of grief and joy inspire us with some degree of the like emotions, it is because they suggest to us the general idea of some good or bad fortune that has befallen the person in whom we observe them ... The general idea of good or bad fortune ... creates some concern for the person who has met with it.”<sup>40</sup> When Smith writes that “the compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the *consideration* of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation”, it seems to be the Cartesian self-sustaining reason which is the bridge to fellow human beings. Consequently it is the loss of reason which to Smith is “the most dreadful calamity to which the condition of mortality exposes mankind.”<sup>41</sup> Feeling is not a direct link to life outside the individual, but a reaction caused by reasoning about extra-individual circumstances. Individual reasoning creates the connections. That’s why Smith can imagine situations in which “our interests are altogether separated and detached from (the interests of others), so that there is neither connection nor competition between them.”<sup>42</sup>

This understanding of the self seems to put the individual into a radically isolated situation which only allows for an indirect communication with the surroundings. Anything outside the self has in a way to be *conquered* by the mind’s imaginative and reasoning power.

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39 Heilbroner, Robert L. *The Essential Adam Smith*. 65

40 Ibid. 67

41 Ibid. 68

42 Ibid. 108

Not even intuition or feeling can provide a direct contact with the self's environment. Based on such an anthropology it seems reasonable to see self-interest as the fundamental driving force in the human being, since the self is the only directly accessible reality. Within the framework of Smith's "profoundly individualistic understanding of the human being" isolated self-interest becomes a possibility, since "individuals ... are not constituted by ... relationships. They exist in fundamental separation from one another."<sup>43</sup>

Adam Smith's understanding of self-interest is built on an anthropology which reminds of the two-substance-anthropology of René Descartes, according to whom human beings are constituted of two separable kinds of substances, the corporeal and the mental. Smith's notion of radical individualism reflects Descartes' view of the *thinking substance* which requires nothing but itself in order to exist.

### **Alfred North Whitehead's Self as Society**

Alfred North Whitehead wrote his magnum opus *Process and Reality* in the 1920s. Already in the first chapter of this work he makes it clear that his speculative philosophy is in radical disagreement with the Cartesian understanding of reality as consisting of two substances, an understanding which he calls incoherent and which is caused by an "arbitrary disconnection of first principles."<sup>44</sup> Whitehead's philosophy of organism tries to give a more coherent view of reality by describing it as consisting of processes or concrescences, whereby "any one actual entity involves the other actual entities among its components."<sup>45</sup> Since reality is built up by concrescences of actual entities, virtually nothing can happen *in isolation*. This means regarding

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43 Cobb/Daly. For the Common Good. 160

44 Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*. 6

the human self,<sup>46</sup> which can be seen as a society of actual entities, that no individual can be thought of as existing, let alone developing apart from her or his environment. Accordingly the notion of self-interest which refers to a self in isolation becomes either an oxymoron or an illusion, because “absolute egoism is ontologically ruled out. No actuality is concerned solely with itself.”<sup>47</sup> The classical polarization between egoism and compassion becomes philosophically problematic. The boundaries between the two are blurred. A consequence of this view of individuality is that “the antithesis between the general good and the individual interest can be abolished only when the individual is such that its interest is the general good, thus exemplifying the loss of the minor intensities in order to find them again with finer composition in a wider sweep of interest.”<sup>48</sup> To be sure, Whitehead here formulates an ideal, namely that the interest of an individual becomes an equivalent with the general good. But to my mind this ideal becomes almost a necessity the more an individual lives according to his or her *internal* interconnection with virtually all reality.

As already indicated, the reason for the impossibility of an isolated self according to the philosophy of organism is that it of necessity includes other selves in its very identity. This is the consequence of Whitehead’s already quoted statement that “if we allow for degrees of relevance ... we must say that every actual entity is present in every other actual entity.”<sup>49</sup> Such a view of course is threatening to any understanding of a circumscribed self. Does this infinitely complex net of interrelations across all perceived borders mean that the notion of a distinct self

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45 Ibid. 7

46 Whitehead himself actually does not develop an anthropology, or a theory of the human self. As Catherine Keller has pointed out, Whitehead refers “to the microscopic event of the actual entity” when he uses the term self as a freestanding noun. - Keller, Catherine. From a Broken Web. 195

47 Cobb/Griffin. Process Theology. 27

48 Whitehead, Alfred North. Process and Reality. 15

according to process thought must be abandoned altogether? Even if it has become impossible to think of a human self in isolation, a self can be distinguished from its surroundings in spite of its permeability. But it is far from being conceived as a monolithic entity as opposed to its surroundings. Whitehead uses the term *society* or *nexus with social order* to describe a human person. An ‘enduring creature’ according to him “is a society whose social order has taken the special form of ‘personal order’.”<sup>50</sup> This personal order is not to be understood as constant and always identifiable because of its duration through time. Its identity rather consists in a serial order partly caused by genetic relatedness. What we perceive as an enduring personality Whitehead describes as “the historic route of living occasions which are severally dominant in the body at successive instants.”<sup>51</sup> In this formulation it becomes evident that there clearly is such a thing as personal identity, but that this identity is in permanent process and in no way a stable phenomenon. The individualistic ideal of a person as being characterized by *unified control* and *central direction* is acknowledged by Whitehead. But it is fragile and has clear limits, “which indicate dissociation of personality, multiple personalities in successive alternations, and even multiple personalities in joint possession.”<sup>52</sup> The Enlightenment notion of the human self as guided and controlled by reason and as externally relating to a reality *outside* seems very alien to this description of a highly intertwined and unstable self, internally relating to the whole cosmos.

Implied but not explicitly stated in the above is the abandonment of enlightened anthropocentrism in the philosophy of organism. “By speaking of actual entities rather than

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49 Ibid. 50

50 Ibid. 34

51 Ibid. 119

52 Ibid. 107

human beings, Whitehead” is “countervailing the anthropocentrism (which has always meant androcentrism) of Western thought.”<sup>53</sup> In a similar way as self-interest becomes problematic if reality consists of infinitely intertwined actual entities, anthropocentrism in a strict sense becomes almost inconceivable. Human beings have no principally elevated position in relation to the rest of the world. To Whitehead “the animal body”<sup>54</sup> does not differ in principle from the rest of the past actual world.”<sup>55</sup> It is one specific kind of society of concrescences among countless other societies of concrescences. The general phenomenon of experience is the common ground for all actual occasions and societies of actual occasions. The difference between *animal bodies* and the rest of the world is one of degree: “What is vague for the rest of the world has obtained some additional measure of distinctness for the bodily organs.”<sup>56</sup> Human beings, therefore, can not any longer be seen as isolated unities over against their surroundings. They are unities in a sense, but never closed unities, always open. Put in a more tragic language, their unity is always broken and therefore not only in need of but consisting of interrelatedness with other entities/unities.

In the following I will deal with three thinkers who in different ways elaborate on the broken unity of the self. And this broken unity of the self seems to me to be a useful tool to rethink economic theory which to a high degree is derived from anthropology.<sup>57</sup> The red thread to the reflections on Whitehead is that these three thinkers all are influenced by process thought to a certain degree. Roughly speaking Catherine Keller reformulates the understanding of the self

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53 Keller, Catherine. From a Broken Web. 194

54 In the category ‘animal body’ Whitehead includes human bodies, which also is an indication of his opposition to anthropocentrism.

55 Whitehead, Alfred North. Process and Reality. 76

56 Ibid.

57 According to Douglas M. Meeks “everything falls back to the Procrustean bed of the whole (economic) theory:

from a feminist perspective, Sally McFague from an ecological perspective, and Danah Zohar from a perspective informed by quantum physics.

### **The Broken Unity of Our Selves**

Catherine Keller starts of her reflections about the self by asserting that “(f)or our culture it is separation that prepares the way for selfhood.”<sup>58</sup> The theory of the separate self she traces back to “Aristotle’s reflection on the nature of any individual being as a substance.”<sup>59</sup> A main consequence of this concept of a separate self she sees in the traditional patriarchal dyad of male separative self and female soluble self. The deficiency of the Western male hero-ego is that he “fashions human personality in his own image, projecting an ego armored against the outer world and the inner depth”.<sup>60</sup> There is a profound unawareness of the necessary interrelatedness of every self. The self image of the male ego to be single and apart thus “may represent not truth but denial. It is less precise to call this ego separate than *separative*.”<sup>61</sup> Keller’s ideal, however, is not one of androgyny in order to overcome the male separative bias. Building on Alfred North Whitehead, her feminist vision rather “drives beyond the sphere of the interpersonal . . . It is not just a matter of person-to -person relations but of a panrelational whole.”<sup>62</sup> In order to be relevant for self-knowledge this panrelational whole must be known from within. We must “understand our *selves* to be loci of unlimited relation.”<sup>63</sup> A self of unlimited relation is inconceivable for the classical view which ascribes substantiality to the self. A groundbreaking

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human nature. Everything in market arrangements is based on human nature ... Human nature contains the hidden forces that drive the market.” - Meeks, Douglas M. God the Economist. 64

58 Keller, Catherine. From a Broken Web. 1

59 Ibid. 163

60 Ibid. 8

61 Ibid. 9

move from this substantial view of the self was William James' assertion that "the self cannot retain any static unity." Consequently "(a) person is more like a series of momentary experiences connected by . . . 'conjunctive relations'."<sup>64</sup> James' ideas about the stream of consciousness were crucial for Whitehead. But in his formulations about the self he went beyond psychology and anthropology. He viewed the self as Keller puts it as "an event in which the universe composes itself."<sup>65</sup>

But Keller to my mind suggests something less harmonious than the *unbroken unity of the self*, which James W. Felt is proposing.<sup>66</sup> In any single moment the self certainly accomplishes a breathtaking unification in which "the world is gathered into a unique composition. The self feels itself into existence."<sup>67</sup> But this momentary composition is hardly more than an abstraction. It is not meaningful to focus on it in order to state an *unbroken unity* of the self, since the self in a moment "parts with its own selfness. Its immediacy perishes into the subsequent world."<sup>68</sup> It is rather the constant breaking up of self-unity which constitutes process. "The friction of the many as they become one resists merging into simple unity. . . . (t)he project of self-identity through time preserves a fantasy of solid subjective unity amidst the Others out there."<sup>69</sup> There is no hope in this *fantasy of solid subjective unity*. The hope lies in the breaking up of the unity of the self. "'(F)alling apart' . . . can spur the recognition of our own plural

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62 Ibid. 158

63 Ibid. 161

64 Ibid. 178

65 Ibid. 186

66 Felt, James W. Intuition, Event-Atomism, and the Self. In: Process in Context. Essays in Post-Whiteheadian Perspectives. Edited by Ernest Wolf-Gazo. Bern, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Paris: Peter Lang, 1988. 138 - 150

67 Keller. From a Broken Web. 195

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid. 204

selfhood: the shattering of the shells of objectified selves.”<sup>70</sup> It is in the constant breaking up and vanishing of our selves that our profound interrelatedness with the world is realized. Thanks to this continually broken unity the individual can take in more diversity, connect more feelingly and become a roomier character.<sup>71</sup>

The taking in more diversity can also be called “owning the world”. This understanding profoundly undermines the anthropology of market economy. Keller explains it as follows: “Owning the world, making it my own, originates my *self* because in claiming a world as *mine*, I actively create my experience. And for this ownership, the resources are inexhaustible - capitalist competition becomes meaningless: why buy what I already own?”<sup>72</sup>

Sally McFague breaks up the dominating position and the isolation of the human self in a similar way in her anthropology. Arguing that Western thought has focused on history to the detriment of nature she suggests that “space should become the primary category of thinking about ourselves and other life-forms.”<sup>73</sup> Human beings should be on a par with all other life-forms and the historical perspective needs to change and become a natural perspective instead, one that is in accordance with the *common creation story* (the evolution of the universe as described in contemporary science). That leads to both a decentering and a recentering of the human being. “We are decentered as the only subjects of the king and recentered as those responsible for both knowing the common creation story and helping it to flourish.”<sup>74</sup> McFague’s new paradigm with regards to anthropology leads to a “complex, highly nuanced relationship with other animals, one that refuses either a sentimental fusion or an absolute

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70 Ibid. 207

71 Ibid. 186

72 Ibid. 194

73 McFague, Sally. *The Body of God*. 100

separation.”<sup>75</sup> Separation is the fallacy of Western traditional thought, fusion according to McFague is the fallacy of deep ecology which wants to convert human beings from “*egocentricity* to *ecocentricity*.” The problem here is that this model “is not distinguished by diversity but rather by the fusion of its many parts.”<sup>76</sup> McFague however ascribes a lasting contribution to deep ecology, the contribution of “a cosmological self-identification.” Because “(o)nly as we are able both to think and to feel this enlarged definition of self will we be able to begin to respond appropriately and responsibly to the crises of our planet.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, McFague affirms the unity of the self with the cosmos, but as ecofeminist she is at the same time “concerned to deny fusion and insist(s) that the ‘loving eye’ pays attention to the independence and difference of the other.”<sup>78</sup>

I perceive in this emphasis upon difference an awareness of a broken unity of the self. At the same time as the (human) self genuinely participates in the cosmos and even integrates cosmos into its identity, there is also a break, a fissure between the self and otherness. And it seems to be this break which is necessary for the self to develop toward greater sensibility. Paradoxically it is in a way the awareness of the broken unity of the self which can give momentum to the reconciliation between humankind and the earth.

Danah Zohar is guided by quantum physics in her attempt to broaden the notion of the self. She does this by establishing an analogy between the self and elementary particles, which “(b)ecause of the wave/particle duality . . . carry at all times the properties of both waves and particles. In their particle aspect they have the capacity to be something in particular . . . In their

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74 Ibid. 108

75 Ibid. 119

76 Ibid. 125

77 Ibid.

wave aspect they have the capacity to relate to other ‘individuals’.”<sup>79</sup> Here way of describing basic interrelatedness echoes Whitehead: “At its furthest extreme every particle in the universe can to some degree be related to every other particle.” Accordingly even in this model a human being cannot be conceived as isolated from the surrounding world. A constant exchange goes on. This exchange is mirrored also in the inner reality of the *quantum person*. There is no single self, but as a *quantum person* “‘I’ am an ever-present witness to the dialogues between my selves, the highest unity of all my many subunities.”<sup>80</sup> Inner coherence in this model has a very physical meaning. “Because quantum systems are always undulating, their boundaries shifting and changing, the extent to which the self is integrated at any one time may change from moment to moment.”<sup>81</sup> Being like a wave a particular self constantly stretches its limits and integrates other selves into its being. “(O)n a quantum view, the self I was a moment ago is also woven into the next ‘now’, into my future self, by the overlapping of *its* own wave function with all the new wave functions just appearing as the result of new experience. . . . Thus each self that I was, moment by moment, is taken up into the next moment and wedded to all that is to come.”<sup>82</sup> In this sense according to Zohar the self weaves itself moment by moment. *Weaving* is the term she uses to describe the physical reality of interacting and overlapping waves, and this self-weaving she sees as the explanation for the ability of psychotherapists to “get their patients to relive past experiences in the ‘now’.” Because “the wave function of a relived past moment overlaps with the wave function of now.”<sup>83</sup> It is quantum physics which also serves Zohar to explain real

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78 Ibid. 127

79 Zohar, Danah. *The Quantum Self*. 113

80 Ibid. 114

81 Ibid. 116

82 Ibid. 120

83 Ibid. 123

intimacy between selves, which according to the Newtonian billiard ball model strictly speaking would not be conceivable. To her mind the “quantum wave phenomena both illustrate and explain the dynamics of close interpersonal relationships, mirroring exactly the dynamics of the composite individual self, and it is tempting to declare boldly that there is no real difference. . . . There is no clear way to say where ‘I’ end and ‘you’ begin.”<sup>84</sup>

While Zohar to my mind puts way too much emphasis on the brain (as opposed to the body) as constituting personality, her quantum mechanical description of the self as being particle and wave simultaneously serves well to illustrate the *broken unity of the self*. The particle character of the quantum self I understand as a similar concept as the Whiteheadian *satisfaction* of an actual occasion. It is an abstraction which is only accurate at specific moments. The constant undulating of the quantum self as wave makes it meaningless to state an unbroken unity, since the continuous breaking up of the current self in favor of a new evolving self is part of the nature of the self. Thus the constant breaking up of the unity of the self is the fertile ground for the emergence of ever new selves.

### **A Self-Interest for the Common Good**

Now I have elaborated on a number of understandings of the self which are contemporary alternatives to Adam Smith’s Enlightenment interpretation of the self. These contemporary understandings share at least two basic convictions. First, the self cannot be understood as isolated entity. Second, the self is composite and internally related to its surrounding. These new insights about the self build on physical, psychological, and sociological knowledge which was

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84 Ibid. 139

not available to Adam Smith.<sup>85</sup> They convincingly challenge the Smithian understanding of the self and his notion of self-interest. The constant change of selves in a human person calls an economic theory which builds on the inherently acquisitive self into question. As has been pointed out, Smithian economic is even more radical in its emphasis on the profoundly individualistic human person than Smith himself. He viewed capitalists' self-interest as softened by "internal relations to culture, language, traditions, and other connections with the country of their birth."<sup>86</sup> Thus the most pure free market ideologists today seem to embrace an anthropology which is even more steeped in anthropocentric and individualistic Enlightenment thinking than Adam Smith's anthropology.

So what alternative can be envisioned to an economic order that grounds its ideology on the acquisitive character of individual and isolated selves? What could be suggested as remedy to this kind of self-interest? One popular solution of course is to abandon self-interest altogether and to emphasize the social and interrelated character of the human being as a cornerstone for a new economic order. One of the risks with that approach to my mind is that a destructive and unrealistic polarization often is the consequence, namely the division of people and ideologies into two groups, those who perceive the human being as purely egoistic and those who have the ideal of creating exclusively altruistic human beings. The one extreme is cynical and has a very reductive view of the human self. The other extreme is utopian and neglects the need of the human self for self-identity and integrity.

In other words, I think it is as unrealistic to build a sustainable economic order on the

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85 Consequently, it was not available to his contemporary John Wesley either. Whether or not, therefore, his understanding of neighborly love and selflessness needs to be rethought in similar terms as the Smithian self-interest could be an interesting question to explore.

86 Cobb/Daly. For the Common Good. 160

conviction that human beings are purely compassionate as it is to build it on the conviction that humans are guided by pure individualistic self-interest. My suggestion instead would be to keep the notion of self-interest as a valuable formative aspect of a new economic order. Based on the above reflections on the self this self-interest of course needs to be understood as radically different from the acquisitive drive of the individualistic and isolated self. Self-interest can only be constructive for economy in the sense of *Oikonomia*,<sup>87</sup> if it understands the self in a much wider and interrelated sense. Human self-interest to my mind can be wholeheartedly embraced as a constructive motivation for a good economic order if the following conditions are applied to this self.

First, the human self is embedded in a *history that is as long as the cosmos is old*. In a time when the health of our whole planet is seriously threatened by human civilization it is of crucial importance that human beings increasingly understand themselves as partaking not only in the history of human civilization, but in the history of the Earth and the whole cosmos. There needs to be a shift of focus from the narrow concentration on the last six thousand years which is the period of human ‘history’ to “the current cosmological story told by astronomy . . . The implications of a forty-billion-year period from beginning to end are quite different from those of a six-thousand-year period.”<sup>88</sup> One of the implications of such a long perspective for the human self is that it is no longer possible to understand itself as a mere product of human civilization. Rather the human self is seen as an integral part of a cosmic history which extends far beyond the short period of human civilization and culture. It is important for human beings increasingly

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<sup>87</sup> Building on Aristotle’s distinction between Chresmatics and Oikonomia, Cobb/Daly define Oikonomia as “the management of the household so as to increase its use value to all members of the household over the long run. - Cobb/Daly. For the Common Good. 138

<sup>88</sup> Cobb, John B. The Earthist Challenge to Economism. 173

to choose *Earthist* stories, histories of the world, as their master narrative, since “every master narrative expresses the interest of the person who tells it.”<sup>89</sup> In that way they can be helpful in dealing with the past. In the case of the *Earthist* story it is the past of the earth and the whole cosmos.

Second, the human self needs to be seen as an *integrated part of nature* and the whole cosmos. Especially in Western civilization since early antiquity human beings need to struggle against the deeply ingrained conviction that there is a fundamental difference between body and mind, nature and spirit. The human self cannot any longer be understood as an isolated mind in an alienated body. And it cannot any longer be understood as ruling over its surroundings as mind over materia. Of course as human beings we have self-consciousness which heightens our responsibility toward our surroundings, but at the same time “we are also one in bone and flesh with nature.”<sup>90</sup> If we want to understand ourselves properly we need to stop identifying ourselves over against nature. “Only as we are able both to think and feel this enlarged definition of self will we be able to begin to respond appropriately and responsibly to the crises facing our planet.”<sup>91</sup>

Third, the human self needs to be seen *in relation to surrounding human selves*. The anthropology envisioning human beings as pure individuals and only externally related to each other needs to be abandoned. A human self as purely individual is a useless abstraction. “People are constituted by their relationships. We come into being in and through relationships and have

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89 Cobb, John B. The Greening of Christianity. Notes from lectures given at Drew University in September/October 1999. 2

90 McFague, Sally. The Body of God. 124

91 Ibid. 126

no identity apart from them.”<sup>92</sup> Consequently a self-interest which doesn’t take the social context of the self into consideration inevitably turns into self-destruction. In this context it can be useful to remember Martin Buber’s insight that the *Thou* is essential for the emergence of the *I*. The basic aspects of his dialogical principle are an exemplification of why real self-interest needs to integrate the interest of fellow-selves. Since “human beings are fundamentally social”, self-interest needs to be understood wide enough to integrate that aspect of the self and “economics should be refounded on the recognition of this reality.”<sup>93</sup>

Fourth, the human self in itself is *constituted by a multiplicity*. There is no simple entity which could be called and isolated as the human self. The human self is characterized by an amazing complexity and fluency. It is not only intimately related with its surroundings but even in itself related to a flow of selves. Basically there are “two intertwining dimensions of multiplicity: my many selves as the fabric of other persons, plants, places - all the actual entities that have become part of me - and my many selves as the necklace of experiences that make up my personal history from birth to now.”<sup>94</sup> A *comprehensive* self-interest thus needs to take into account that there can never be any predescribed or static measures which always serve the interest of the self/the selves. Rather self-interest needs to constantly adjust to the inherent multiplicity and fluency of the self. Thus it becomes increasingly clear that the sought for self-interest has very little to do with narrow-mindedness or exclusive interest for an isolated entity. An economic order which really wants to provide good living conditions for its many selves needs to be a very flexible and wide ranging one. And perhaps it is even unrealistic to talk about an economic *order*. Maybe one should rather talk about several economic *orders* or economic

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92 Cobb/Daly. For the Common Good. 161

93 Ibid. 164

*thought patterns*, since any kind of single and stable global economic system seems to be inappropriate.

Fifth, as a consequence of what has been listed so far the future of any self is intimately related to the future of its surroundings and the whole cosmos. The self is as unfinished and open as the cosmos. The brokenness of the self corresponds to the brokenness of the cosmos. Accordingly any concept of the future of the self needs to envision this future as tightly interwoven with the future of our whole planet.

Finally a decisive question must be asked of course: After all these widening definitions of the self, is there still a self left to speak about? Is there still a way to circumscribe the human self? My conclusion is that if one attempts to *pin down* the self in order to analyze it, the attempt is in vain and there is no such individualized self which could be analyzed. And if one attempts to clearly describe the limits of the self, even that attempt is bound to fail since the above mentioned understandings of the self do not allow such a clear limitation. It is however still meaningful to speak of a self with integrity. But it is a multiple integrity. “This multiple integrity, while always unfinished, is no less whole or coherent than that of a closed substance, an exclusive individual.”<sup>95</sup>

It is however not in the integrity of the self but in its broken unity where the hope for the future is to be found. The self shares the brokenness with its surroundings, and it is exactly this brokenness which drives the self to include new aspects into its ever new integrity. Broken and open as it is, it has a sheer unlimited capacity to realize its self-interest ‘beyond itself.’ And this can be reflected in the economy as well, in the care for the common *oikos*.

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94 Keller, Catherine. From a Broken Web. 227

95 Ibid. 228

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