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## Response to J. Steven Brown

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It is a pleasure to read and respond to Steve's essay challenging his colleagues—and by extension, challenging everyone working in Catholic higher education—to remember the hermeneutical starting point for all that we do in our desire to both produce new knowledge and to pass it on to future generations. In my discipline of theology—and more surreptitiously in my work in the English department—I would name this foundational stance that Steve is promoting as an anthropology derived from the term “Christian humanism,” however fraught that word might be in the academy at large. Christian humanism is the foundation of the Catholic intellectual tradition, for it grapples with the metaphysical and ontological categories of experience in order to promote a more textured and humble understanding of humanity and its agency in the world.

Though I am no engineer, I know enough to be in awe of what the scientific community has made known about the physical world and the many inventions that have helped make my life more pleasant. As I was reading Steve's paper, the 2016 Nobel prizes in science were announced and I was awestruck by how scientific breakthroughs continue to shape inventions, procedures, and innovations for human flourishing. I use the word “awe” purposefully here, because I think Steve's paper is suggesting that most of us don't know what to do with our sense of awe, wonder, or reverence in the academy, much less know what to do with it in engineering, social policy, or political culture. Indeed, as Steve rightly points out, we are nurtured in a late capitalist culture that understands human life as *homo technicus*—one who works, who lives with, or lives inside of a technological vision of life. It is utilitarian at its base, and often precludes any experience of awe and wonder, for what does that have to do with the scientific method

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or deductive reasoning? What can wonder *do* for us? As a theologian and literary critic, I want to comment on some of the threads of Steve's paper and then offer some thoughts that hopefully broaden and deepen his own argument.

While reading Steve's paper and his challenge to bring a human anthropology of gift to the fore in our disciplines, I was immediately reminded of the famous quote by General Omar Bradley on Armistice Day, 1948:

Man is stumbling blindly through a spiritual darkness while toying with the precarious secrets of life and death. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.<sup>1</sup>

It is a prophetic warning, and the lines "brilliance without wisdom....a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants" is frighteningly true. We teach and do research in a world that has heedlessly severed reason from faith, religion from ethics. Though we could say much about these false dichotomies, especially in light of the complementarity of the Catholic intellectual heritage, I'd rather comment on something positive from Steve's focus on energy and water: how the academic turn toward environmental sustainability in the last 10-15 years has begun to transform the conversation between faith and reason at many of our colleges and universities. Attention to what we are doing to the environment—global warming, pollution, degradation, energy consumption—is becoming more an academic effort where the science of sustainability and the faith dimension that helps to ground sustainability are coming together in classrooms, conferences, and curricula. In my limited experience at Loyola University Chicago, many of the science faculty, who have been prophetic about the dire condition of the planet, have slowly begun to realize that their message gets nowhere if it stays merely as part of a scientific debate. Rather, religious traditions—and the leaders of these traditions—bring to the fore the spiritual and ethical dimensions of this concern, deepening and widening it into a narrative for those hungry for a sustained vision, for something that is transformative for themselves and for the world. To educate others about the planet as gift and not something merely to be subdued or dominated means having the spiritual resources and ethical clarity to galvanize many disciplines to own this challenge. I think environmental sustainability is the principal issue for the millennials that I teach, a crisis that is at once social, political, scientific, and theological.

Steve explores how recent popes have articulated for a global audience the need to take care of the planet as a matter of faith and as a matter of justice. Benedict XVI was early on named the "Environmental Pope," while Pope Francis has raised this concern to a new level with his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. And using St. Francis's great hymn to creation as the encyclical's starting point brings us back to that human anthropology of wonder, part and parcel of Steve's notion of an anthropology of gift. But the question

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1 Omar N. Bradley, "No Armistice," speech of November 10, 1948, published in the *New York Times*, November 11, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/11/11/opinion/no-armistice.html>.

arises, how—and where—do we learn an anthropology of gift, of wonder? And the answer, it seems, is in our religious traditions, and specifically our Catholic tradition. I am reminded of something that Nicholas Lash, the great Cambridge theologian, once remarked at a lecture when asked for a good definition of Catholicism. He said simply, “Catholicism is a pedagogy for personhood.” I like this definition, for Catholicism trains the mind and the heart to understand what is at stake in our humanity. At the core of the human person is an imagination geared for reverence, mystery, and awe. In fact, the human person is so geared for this that if one is not trained in it or given a pedagogical *telos*, then it is quite easy to live in the superficiality of our technological comfort. And so what Steve suggests is that a philosophy of science must make an ethical claim for a conscious anthropology of gift. The physical and social sciences have, it seems to me, a methodology that has had a difficult time moving a person to wonder, of offering this critical moment of reflection in the production of knowledge.

The medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum, in her collection of essays entitled *Metamorphosis and Identity* (2005), notes that the discourse on wonder (*admiratio* in medieval texts) was always understood and discussed as “cognitive, perspectival, and non-appropriative.” She claims that the medieval Christianity of the monastery and university saw *admiratio* as the way to understand our place in the world, the perspective of all inquiry. Authentic religious faith, then, makes room for perspective, gives us the long view, the cosmic sense of place, the mystical insight of the givenness of reality. Rather than a *homo technicus* of mastery, our Catholic heritage offers us the *homo symbolicus* of mystery. Mystery vs. Mastery: you might say this is the crux of a pedagogy of personhood. I think this is exactly what a human anthropology of gift inspires, and it is good to remember this not only within the questions of science, energy, and engineering but in the humanities, too. I fear that in my own field of English critical theory—and some of the other disciplines of the humanities—we have relegated this Christian humanism to a mere relic.

Let me end with something that the historian John O’Malley often says about Jesuit education, and something true about all the many Catholic educational enterprises that are cousins to it: that if the medieval university was only interested in *veritas*, truth, the Jesuit college added what the Renaissance humanists of the time would call *pietas*. *Pietas*, the development, the formation of the virtuous person, must be part of the pedagogy of *veritas*. Put together, education is both about truth and the development of the person around that truth. What Steve suggests in his paper, through the medium of the technologies of energy, is a way to keep *veritas* and *pietas* united, and a very Catholic pedagogy of personhood.

