

# Divine Creation and Human Creativity

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Like the man who gathered from the vicar's sermon on sin that 'he were agin it', one gathers from reading the literature that 'creativity' is something to be approved of. Exactly what this creativity consists in, however, and how it relates to the concept of divine creation on the one hand, and the spheres of art and work on the other, is far from clear. It is the purpose of what follows to investigate these relationships.

The terms 'creation' and 'creativity', as opposed to more mundane alternatives such as 'making' and 'productivity', seem to be used in many contexts because of the positive feel they carry over from the idea of divine creation. It is much harder, for example, to disagree with an activity called 'wealth creation'<sup>1</sup> than to object to the same process labelled 'making money'. 'Creation' and 'creativity' are thus not merely neutral, descriptive terms; they alter our attitude to the activities that they designate. To designate an activity 'creative' is—for good or ill—to legitimate it, not just to describe it.

In some cases, however, the activity so legitimated is less obviously wholesome than is divine creation itself, and the designation then serves to conceal dubious aspects of human behaviour. In such a case, the use of language acquires ideological overtones.<sup>2</sup> In what follows I shall examine three examples of the use of the idea of creation, or the use of the terms 'creation' and 'creativity', in recent literature. In the first two I shall detect tendencies towards such a descent into ideology. The examples chosen are deliberately extreme in order to make my point. There is, of course, more to be said in defence of elements of the views that I examine.

## I

Firstly, in the thought of some writers, creation is equated with the production of novelty, and creativity with a degree of fecundity in this enterprise: creation as 'when something new which was not there before is produced'.<sup>3</sup> This understanding of creativity, although he studiously avoids the use of the term, is implicit in Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.<sup>4</sup> Here Rorty defines the role of the philosopher of the future, the 'edifying philosopher' (p. 370), as one of keeping our ideas in a state of permanent flux. The edifying philosopher is 'the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between

various discourses', in whose 'salon ... hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices'. His or her job is to 'keep the conversation (of western culture) going' (p. 377). Correspondingly, although overtly Rorty rejects the idea of a human essence (including the idea that the essence of the human person is to have no essence) (p. 378, implicitly he characterizes human nature as creative in the sense of generating novelty. Human beings are (normatively) 'generators of *new* descriptions' (p. 378), my stress). The 'freezing-over of culture' (p. 377) which would result from philosophy entering upon 'the secure path of a science'<sup>5</sup>, and ceasing to create *new* ideas (pp. 369f), would amount to 'the dehumanization of human beings' (p. 377). For the edifying philosopher, the authentic sense of 'wonder which poets can sometimes cause' comes from a 'wonder that there is something *new* under the sun' (p. 370, my stress).

Jürgen Moltmann (in another context) traces this cry for ceaseless movement and activity back to Hegel, for whom *Geist* was 'pure activity', 'absolute restlessness'. 'This god', he comments, 'who is understood as *actus purus* or pure activity, knows no Sabbath. In this respect, he is a heathen god'<sup>6</sup>. Yet Rorty's concept of the human spirit is even less satisfactory than Hegel's, because all idea of a *goal* for the creative process has been abandoned. Rorty's spirit, unlike that of Hegel, has no overall direction underlying its deconstructive activity. Under the stimulus of its philosophical activator it merely flails about, satisfying itself with movement and novelty, either for their own sakes, or just to prove to itself that it is still alive. Although the conversation of western culture is to be kept *going*, there seems to be no concern about where it is going *to*. The truths that edifying philosophy produces are not the point of the philosophical enterprise, but 'only accidental by-products' of it. (Rorty, pp. 378f)

The ideological possibilities of such a concept of creativity should be clear. If, paradoxically, ideas are good because they are new, rather than good because they are good, and when all possible descriptions of the human good are considered equally deceptive if taken seriously as 'true', then the basis for any fundamental change in society is cut away. Not only may some very unpleasant ideas and actions be legitimated in this way (was Hitler 'creative'?—he certainly 'created' a *new* form of society!), but the grounds for steadfast and persistent action in support of an ideal are impugned. Christian faith, indeed, is no longer new; but is that adequate reason to abandon it?

My second characterization of creativity is that embodied in the creation theology of the North American Catholic theologian Michael Novak. Here the notion of human creativity is assimilated fully to the economic sphere, and explicitly related to a notion of divine creation.<sup>7</sup>

For Novak, 'the human person is a creator and nowhere more so

than at his daily economic tasks'. Made in the image of God, each person has 'the vocation to work and to create' ('Creation', p. 36). This creativity essentially consists in a high and increasing rate of economic production, aided and abetted by scientific and technological innovation ('Creation', p. 37; 'Corporation', pp. 207f). In this, says Novak, the person is 'sharing in the creativity of the Creator' and 'fulfill(ing) his vocation' as *imago Dei*, the image of God the Creator ('Creation', p. 33). What is true for the individual is true also, Novak continues, for the modern business corporation, and for society as a whole. The modern business corporation is a 'much despised incarnation of God's presence in this world' that reflects the role of the suffering servant in Deutero-Isaiah ('Corporation', p. 203). 'Its creativity makes available to mass markets the riches long hidden in creation. Its creativity mirrors God's' ('Corporation', p. 208). Moreover, a society in which personal economic creativity is released, such that the entire economy becomes creative, is a society 'constructed ... in the image of the Blessed Trinity, the Creator of all things, Lord of history, Spirit brooding over dark creation' ('Creation', p. 37).

Besides rendering the mystery of God's internal nature almost blasphemously mundane—the joke about Yahweh & Son seems far too close for comfort—this account of creativity also operates ideologically. Carrying over the positive overtones attached to divine action into the economic sphere, it draws attention away from the unfortunate side-effects of the operation of the capitalist economic system—specifically the generation of the class system and the impoverishment of the third world—and the dehumanizing aspects of many forms of modern social labour.<sup>8</sup> To say that this economic productivity mirrors divine creation is to obscure, more than to illuminate, its true nature.

Creativity may also, thirdly, be regarded as a matter of self-expression; and this may be so both in the aesthetic and in the economic spheres. Expressivist aesthetics, for example, regards the notion of creativity as belonging to the sphere of art. Thus, to take Jürgen Habermas as an example here<sup>9</sup>, art may be characterized as a matter of the authentic expression of the subjectivity to which we have privileged access. The talented artist, Habermas writes, 'lend(s) authentic expression to those experiences he had in encountering his own decentred subjectivity, detached from the constraints of routinized cognition and everyday action'<sup>10</sup>; while aesthetic criticism has the function of 'bringing us to see a work or performance in such a way that it can be perceived as an authentic expression of an exemplary experience, in general as the embodiment of a claim to authenticity'<sup>11</sup>. For Marx, on the other hand, it is labour rather than art that is a matter of self-expression. As he says in *The German Ideology*: 'the way in which men produce their means of subsistence ... is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite

form of *expressing* their life'<sup>12</sup>. And it is this activity, according to Marx, by which the world as we experience it—the humanized world—has been created: 'For socialist man what is called world history is nothing but the creation of man by human labour'.<sup>13</sup> Man for Marx is self-created, and human creativity is a matter of self-expression through labour. In much Marxist aesthetics these two (aesthetic and economic) views are combined. Non-alienated labour and art coalesce into the free expression of human creativity with which we will create the world in the socialist utopia.

None of these views that equate creativity and self-expression seem to be particularly satisfactory, however. The last involves a confusion of categories: although labour may have an artistic/expressive element, and art may be functionally useful, it requires an unwarranted belief in a utopian harmony of man with nature to think that the two could ever coincide. But to reduce human creativity to the aesthetic dimension of human existence is also questionable—as questionable in its way as a reduction of it to the economic dimension. If God is not to be seen as the great Economist, neither is he adequately represented as the great Artist.

## II

In pursuit of an alternative concept of human creativity I have two suggestions to make. The first is that we re-examine the account of divine creation to be gathered from the texts of the Old Testament, and derive from this a correlative account of human creativity.

Discussion of divine creation has too often been dominated by the assumption that it is mainly to do with the making of 'nature', the physical world. In the beginning God created the world, the story goes, and subsequently there was the quite different matter of redemption. In part this story has been based upon an exegesis of the opening chapters of Genesis which stresses creation as *ex nihilo*, primeval, and autonomous from the process of redemption.

To accept this as the Old Testament concept of creation is, however, misleading. The creation theme is better approached in terms of its treatment in the Psalms and Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>14</sup> Here God is neither primarily the maker of 'stuff', nor the winder-upper of the celestial clock-spring. Nor yet, however, is he the being that would be projected by extrapolating the accounts of Rorty, Novak, or Habermas to infinity: the infinitely innovative, infinitely productive, or infinitely expressive being. Two themes are prominent in these texts that I want to highlight: the theme of *Chaoskampf*, of struggle against chaos, and the idea that the product of creation is not the natural order in and for itself, but the social order of the redeemed Israelite nation.

Generally in the Old Testament, creation is a matter of the ordering

of chaos, not a bare making of some material that was not previously existent. Yet it is more than just this. In these texts Chaos is personified as the Sea or the Night, and creation becomes a battle or struggle, a conflict of wills in which one party emerges victorious.<sup>15</sup> In this picture, God's creative activity consists in the forcing back of the personified chaos, and the holding of it at bay, to allow a space in which human society can emerge. Both the hostile elements, and human enemies, are subsumed under this category of personified chaos. Every night, for example, the forces of chaos press closer in to constrict human life, and threaten its ultimate extinction, only to be forced back again by the divine re-creation of dawn. Political enemies also press in and threaten to destroy the ordered fabric of society, similarly to be pushed back by divine action.

There is thus a blurring of what we see as natural and social categories. On the one hand, creation is seen as involving a divine battle with the armies of chaos. On the other, the redemptive acts of Yahweh are interpreted as creative. The product in both cases is Israelite society, the redeemed people of God. A good example of this interplay is to be found in Isaiah 51, where the cosmological battle with the sea-monster at creation is run into the foundational redemptive act at the Red Sea, constitutive of Israel as a political entity:

Awake, awake, put on strength,  
O arm of the Lord ...  
Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces,  
that didst pierce the dragon?  
Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,  
the waters of the great deep;  
that didst make the depths of the sea a way  
for the redeemed to pass over? (Is 51:9)

In this case, creation and redemption are not artificially separated, but mutually interpreted. Both are seen as aspects of God's seamless action in the creation of redeemed Israel.<sup>16</sup>

The purpose of this excursus into the Old Testament is not to argue that we should still personify the Sea and the Night, and thus retain a fully mythical world-view. It is rather to note four characteristics of divine creation as shown here that might be of interest in the derivation of an alternative account of human creativity:

- (1) Its home territory is not the realm of ideas (Rorty), of the material world (Novak), or of our own existential subjectivities (Habermas), but the social world.
- (2) Unlike in the self-expressive model, it involves struggle with an intractable, or even hostile, (social) material.
- (3) *Pace* Rorty, although innovative, it is also directional: newness is not valued for its own sake, but only if it has a

specific character: the character of the redeemed community, a community embodying the divine justice.

(4) The concept of creation is not to be separated from the concept of redemption.

### III

My second suggestion is as follows: if, as is widely accepted, the cross is the ultimate symbol of *redemption* in Christian theology, should we not, in the light of section II above, look here for a transformation of our understanding of divine *creation* as well—and therefore of human creativity? If it is the case that ‘the crucified Christ (is) the foundation and measure of Christian theology as a whole’,<sup>17</sup> that ‘the paradigm of divine action is the Cross of Christ’,<sup>18</sup> that it is supremely here that we are to find the revelation of God,<sup>19</sup> then surely it is here too, in this paradigmatic divine action, that we should find our model for divine creation. Moreover if, as Karl Barth suggests, our ‘creaturely activity’ ought to ‘take the form of correspondence to the divine activity’,<sup>20</sup> then the cross will function as the paradigm for human creativity as well.

Let us allow that this is the case. I suggest that two results follow. Firstly, the paradigm for the divine creative *Chaoskampf* becomes the paradoxical activity of God in the cross of Christ. Not the making of the material world, but this creative struggle—a struggle that is the birthpangs of the kingdom of God—should act as the ultimate reference point for assessing allegedly ‘creative’ human activity. Secondly, the homeland of the concept of creation moves from the natural (or subjective) world to the social world. The paradigm product becomes the new eschatological communities, a new social order witnessing to their future consummation in the New Creation of the Kingdom of God.

It is that which the Old and New Testaments term ‘New Creation’,<sup>21</sup> I conclude, a concept rich in social and ethical overtones, that is the paradigm for a Christian concept of creation. Creation ‘refers to the act by which God will remove injustice from the holy city and bring about a truly just and peaceful society’.<sup>22</sup> The models of creativity implied by Rorty, Novak, and Habermas, judged in this light, are lacking. Thus although it is true (so Rorty) that creativity involves transformation or newness, this newness is neither primarily in the realm of ideas, nor unidirectional. Although it is true (so Novak) that it is primarily societies rather than individuals that can mirror the creativity of the divine Trinity, this creativity is neither primarily to be located in the economic dimension, nor in the institutional arrangements of late capitalist society. And although it is true (so Habermas) that creativity involves expression, what is to be expressed is not our decentred subjectivities, primarily in various art forms, but the nature of God in actions constitutive of a

certain form of society.

At the end of creation, so we are told in Genesis 1:1—2:3, God surveyed what he made, and pronounced judgement upon it. He found the result—the embryonic human society represented by Adam and Eve—neither simply new, economically productive, or artistically expressive, but *good*. I propose that human creativity needs to have a similar character if it is to be worthy of the name.

- 1 See, for example, G. Dawson, 'God's Creation, Wealth Creation and the Idle Redistributors', in D. Anderson (ed.), *The Kindness that Kills*, London, 1984, pp. 13—20.
- 2 On 'ideology', see, for example, D. McLellan, *Ideology*, Milton Keynes, 1986.
- 3 R.J. Clifford, 'The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation', *Theological Studies*, 46 (1985), p. 509.
- 4 R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford, 1980.
- 5 Rorty alludes here to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, (trans. N.K. Smith, second edition, London and Basingstoke, 1933, p. 17).
- 6 J. Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, London, 1984, p. 51.
- 7 See especially M. Novak, 'A Theology of the Corporation', in M. Novak and J.W. Cooper (eds.), *The Corporation: A Theological Inquiry*, Washington D.C., 1981, pp. 203—224 (= 'Corporation'); M. Novak, 'Creation Theology', in J.W. Houck and O.F. Williams (eds.), *Co-Creation and Capitalism: John Paul II's 'Laborem Exercens'*, Washington D.C., 1983. pp. 17—41 (= 'Creation').
- 8 See, for example, P. Thompson, *The Nature of Work: an introduction to debates on the labour process*, London and Basingstoke, 1983; C.R. Littler (ed.), *The Experience of Work*, Aldershot, 1985.
- 9 Habermas' views on aesthetics are in fact more complicated than these quotations suggest. See J. Habermas, 'Questions and Counterquestions', in R.J. Bernstein (ed.), *Habermas and Modernity*, pp. 192—216, especially pp. 199—203.
- 10 J. Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', *New German Critique*, 22 (1981), p. 9.
- 11 J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol. 1, London, 1984, p. 20.
- 12 D. McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford, 1977, p. 161, my stress.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 14 For the following, compare Clifford, *op. cit.*
- 15 Clifford, p. 509.
- 16 Clifford, p. 515.
- 17 J. Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, London, 1979, p. 59.
- 18 N. Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach*, London, 1979, p. 152.
- 19 D. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, London. p. 104.
- 20 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4, Edinburgh, 1961, p. 482.
- 21 See, for example, Is 65: 17—19; Rev 21: 1—5.
- 22 Clifford, *op. cit.*, p. 519.