

The Role of Receptive Love in Creation

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Two preliminary notes:

(1) I am glad to be a participant in this Open and Relational Theologies session. This conversation exemplifies a theological task uniquely fitted to the AAR: bringing together truly different thinkers, people who might not otherwise interact, and articulating to each other our affinities, contrasts, and tensions in ways both rare and crucial to the present moment in our nation and world.

(2) Since some of you likely entered this room in the high hope of Catherine Keller's eloquence, before I begin, I want to acknowledge the work she has done in this area. While I am not able to channel her presence, I can offer a couple of sentences from *Face of the Deep*. She writes, "The *nova creatio ex profundis* requires our entire participation." And, "The scission, the cut, of the actual amidst the matrix of the possible makes *something*. It makes it *not from nothing but from everything...*"¹ Though my thoughts take some different turns, I share Keller's notion of creation, "not from nothing but from everything," and her sense, too, as you will hear, that "our entire participation" is required.

i.

My experience of reading these four papers on *creatio ex nihilo* this week was interspersed with spates of news, reports of renewed intensification of U.S. military aggression in Fallujah and other Iraqi cities. The conjunction of these events had the effect of deepening my sense that Christian theologies, as espoused at this historical juncture by the people of these United States, need to affirm the utter mutuality and dynamism of any creative relations claimed between God and the World.² To that end, I will respond to the papers, first by further critiquing the substantializing of God as a fixed subject who preexists relations with creation. Next I suggest, whether we take a pneumatological approach, whether we proclaim "God is Love," or project the divine as a field of activity, that we emphasize not only the outpouring, the creative *emanation*,

¹ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 238, 180, emphasis mostly mine. *Creatio ex profundis* is a phrase Keller attributes to Daniel Boyarin.

² In relation to the four papers presented in this session and to Philip Clayton's cogent response, my evocation of cultural-political actualities of the U.S. war in Iraq may seem to be a leap largely unrelated to *creatio ex nihilo* or to Christian doctrines in general. In a sense, that is true, as my method follows Whitehead in beginning in/with/from questions such as, "What actualities bear particular intensity in our world, how, why, and to what effect?" Moving *from* affective experience *into* speculation addresses, at least to some degree, "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" by acknowledging that "what" we value as concrete, as what *matters*, what—to the greatest degree we are able—we attend to, ought not to be our categories but the "*hows*" of the relational events of shared existence.

the “transjection” as Lyle Dabney aptly put it, but the role of *receptivity* in the creative dynamic of divinity. I inquire how the perpetuation of particular evils in our shared, aching, and often anesthetized world may be given theological warrant *by* a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Working toward a responsible Christianity—a Christianity that, even and especially through its notions of creative processes, seeks not to further the current human violences—I offer the imperative of valuing, *in the creative moment*, God’s *receptive* love of the world.

According to Henri Bergson, “Everything is obscure in the idea of creation if we think of things which are created and a thing which creates, as we habitually do, as the understanding cannot help but do.”³ Engaging a dynamic view of God-World relations involves taking on the metaphysics of substance, that is, confronting our habits of understanding created “*things*” and “a *thing* which creates.” In their papers, both Bracken and Dabney address this need, but I think we can go further.

The unhinging of the metaphysics of substance from theological concepts is in some ways an impossible task, given the constraints of the English language and the need to communicate anything at all. An example of this near impossibility is how Joseph Bracken, even as he takes pains to develop “the concept of field” as a way of addressing creation “with a flexibility not enjoyed by the classical notion of substance,” in the end continues to write God—as do each of today’s panelists and probably myself—as a grammatical subject. Bracken writes, “God allows,” and “God takes the lead.”⁴ Likewise Dabney re-substantializes the Spirit by grammatically making it the subject of its own agential predicates: “the Spirit raises,” “blows,” “brings forth.”⁵ Such grammatical constructions inadvertently reify a metaphysics of substance.

³ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell, (NY: Henry Holt, 1911), 261.

⁴ Bracken uses grammatical subject-predicate constructions to indicate the agencies in/of both God and creation. (“Both God and creatures exercise power.”) In keeping with the view I am proposing here, a better phrase might be, “power is exercised by God and creatures.”

⁵ Subject-predicate grammatical conventions even shaped the formulation of today’s question: “What does it mean to say God is relational?” How might substance-assumptions shift when the question is rephrased, “What does it mean to say, relating/relational is God?” That is, if the *subject*, as in a process view, arrives as the satisfaction or conclusion of a creative relational process, rather than as its beginning. As we shift further from the philosophical habits assumed and reified by our grammar, what otherwise obscured characteristics of the creative God-World relation appear?

As Whitehead writes, “The evil pronounced by the Aristotelian ‘primary substance’ is exactly this habit of metaphysical emphasis upon the ‘subject-predicate’ form of proposition.”⁶

The grammatical convention of positing a subject who preexists its predicate, its action, its constituent relations, and thereby attending to things and substances, is an instance of “misplaced concreteness,” of “neglecting the degree of abstraction involved when an actual entity is considered merely in so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought.” There are “aspects of actualities which are simply ignored so long as we restrict thought” (PR 8) this way.⁷ The “evil” Whitehead declares ensconced in a substance metaphysics and carried forth in our grammatical habits is established for him by our “neglect.” *What is being neglected* when we consider “God” primarily as the subject of the predicate “world,” God as the Creator, or even as the lover emanating love toward the beloved?

ii.

When we remove the emphasis of subject-predicate, the seamless fit of our grammatical habits with “the necessary distinction between cause and effect within Aristotle’s metaphysics” (Bracken 2) begins to unravel. Bracken cites Aquinas’ proposal that as the proper effect of fire is to burn, so the proper effect of God’s creativity, God’s agency, is the existence of the creature. Fire burns. God creates. But might the “effect” cradle the “cause”? Doesn’t *burning* (the predicate) characterize *fire* (the subject)? If so, the notion that “fire burns,” that fire is its own agent, is a commonplace form of misplaced concreteness, a widespread trick of grammar. What ways, obscured by grammar, might *the creator* (as subject) be subsequent to *creation* (the predicate)?

If creativity is a *motion* through which God and the World are utterly and dynamically joined, if both are always already relational, then the degree to which the act of creation may be mutual is

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, (NY: Free Press, 1978), 30. Hereafter cited in the text as PR.

⁷ Bracken also writes (and a couple of the other panelists imply), “Given the Trinitarian understanding of God...” (5, emphasis mine) Whenever we begin with a categorical “given,” that is, posit an abstraction as non-temporal, the halt “fixes” or “eternalizes” that category. To shape our insights, even wildly dynamic process insights, to a “given” Trinitarian model commits “misplaced concreteness” by treating the abstraction as more fundamental than the open-ended events of reality. The loss is in the constituent relations that are eclipsed or ignored as long as we think “through” the category.

extraordinarily difficult to speak in language. In process terms, the primordial nature (the realization of the wealth of potentiality) is not *before* acts of creation but is *with* creation; likewise, the consequent nature (receptivity and the richness of memory) is not *after* but, in Whitehead's words, "in unison of becoming with every creative act" (PR345).⁸ God and the World (and, simultaneously, God and a single actual occasion) are double-patterned propositions for one another, distinct yet irrevocably and intimately related modes of Creativity's motion. And, since a proposition requires a subject toprehend it, God is the subject of the (prior or coexistent) World in its propositional character. In other words, agency, as the capacity for influence, is external to either Godself or an actual occasion of the world. Michael Lodahl begins to get at this when he suggests that love may only be love as it extends toward an "object of love" other than itself, though I would change the word "object" to "subject." This extension of the mutuality of externalized agency opens the receptivity of God *in* the act of creation, or as Whitehead writes, opens "the world in its function as medium" (PR 288).

iii.

I want now to bring together some insights from each of the four papers. If God's "essence is love," as David Larson suggests, I want to interpret that essence in a Bergsonian way, essence as *change of state*: sugar, not as an unchanging chemical formula, but as its process of dissolving.⁹ From Bracken, I want the "structured fields of activity," that are *necessarily contextual*, and, from Dabney, I want to pick up both the *creatio continua* and the *creatio ex creatione*, the creation out of creation expressed by those beautiful imperatives, "Let the earth, let the waters bring forth." From Lodahl, I collect *creatio ex amore* (which sounds like an aria to be sung over pasta) and, especially, his invocation of Jonathan Edward's notion of that divine love as a "disposition to abundant communication."

God as love cannot create out of nothing, because part of the dynamic of love is *receptivity*. Love is not only outpour, not only transjective, not only speaking, love is also *active receptivity*,

⁸ Or as John Cobb has written, "There is no divine action apart from creaturely action... God is not another agent alongside the creatures. God acts only in them and through them." John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 157.

⁹ "If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy-nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning." Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 12.

¹⁰ listening, holding, and it is this facet of God as love that makes, for me, a moot question of *ex nihilo*. To invoke process terms: the consequent cannot be torn from the primordial. How can God be fully God, that is, have a consequent facet, that reservoir of feeling the always already, without creation?

Or, as Edwards writes, all glory is relational and reciprocal: “Here is both an *emanation* and *remanation*. The refulgence shines upon and into the creature and is [refunded] back to the luminary.”¹¹ Remanation is not mere reflection, but refraction, an increase in complexity: absorbing, shaping and layering, *creating* the return. Reality exceeds the intentions of the divine. A “disposition to abundant communication,” then, not only emits and extends love as its trajectory but actively receives the excessive world.¹² Without divine receptivity there is no mobility to creation. In a sense, all creation is re-creation.

iv.

This brings us to evil. If creative love involves receptivity as well emanation, if receptivity actively *catalyzes* transformation, the changes of state that *are* the essence of an entity’s love and creative ability, then to emphasize only the transjective, the emanation of God, the operation extending *toward* the beloved, to promote *ex nihilo* misses the very “essence” of God, the crucial

¹⁰ There are (at least) two ways of crossing the communication/comprehension gap, that is, of being relational. There is speaking, projecting, and there is listening, receiving. Creativity involves the process of becoming and the offering of that becoming. The relation can be theorized from (at least) two different perspectives: that of gathering/deciding and that of offering toward the future, both by means of prehension. In a process view, such receptivity is not passive but active. If there is any passivity in creation, it is in the transjectual, the “superjective” character, which paradoxically (at least to our habitual ways of thinking) is also the means of agency.

¹¹ Edwards, “The End for Which God Created the World” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 8: Ethical Writings*, ed Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven: Yale UP 1980, 334). The passage continues (I substituted Edwards’ later word “refunded” for “reflected” above): “The beams of glory come from God, are something of God, and are refunded back again to their original.” For Edwards, “Being in General,” which is the shared dynamism of God and creation, expands or contracts in response to creative acts of widening or refusing to widen the play of benevolent love.

¹² Lodahl implies that perhaps the world is loved better because God didn’t *have to*, that is “created freely and graciously *ex nihilo*” (2). Yet freedom may be less about whether or not there is a yes/no choice *to* relate/create than in *how* relations are borne in ways that further constitute reality. And as to grace, what is more gracious than receptivity? The promulgation of *creatio ex nihilo* matters, because as an image it shapes far-reaching cultural habits of perception and means of valuation. I lean toward the intuition that *ex nihilo* theologies, as they are imagistically taken up and inform interactions in the contemporary world, may be unwittingly valenced more by violence than by grace. (I also imply by this that the human image or mirrored reflection of God as omnipotent makes that theological position equally uninhabitable for us at this historical moment.)

transformations, and thus unintentionally may legitimate certain violences in our contemporary world.

Because there exists, as feminist theorist Judith Butler states, “the power of the anachronism to animate the contemporary field,”¹³ it is important to attend to the fundamental position *ex nihilo* occupies in dominant modes of U.S. Christianity. Here I part ways particularly with Larson, who writes, “Because we gain so little by turning away from the idea of creation-out-of-nothing, particularly when we are discussing the problem of evil, we do well to hesitate before making that move” (3). I disagree, because when we do *not* disestablish *ex nihilo*, what we lose is the conjoined reality of limitation and opportunity that *is* the context, act and essence of authentic creation. While I respect the *awe* Larson brings to his position as he writes, “that we exist, that anything does, is utterly shocking” (4), I do not believe we need to inhabit an *ex nihilo* view in order to wondrously and openly receive what *is*. In fact, *creatio ex nihilo* obscures too much of what is.

Creatio ex nihilo sustains images that we cannot abide. Butler again, writes of the initial attack on Iraq. “That the U.S. government and military called this a ‘shock and awe’ strategy suggests that they were producing a visual spectacle that numbs the senses and, *like the sublime itself*, puts out of play the very capacity to think.... And although the *New York Times* belatedly came out against the war, it also adorned its front pages on a daily basis with.... ‘bombs bursting in air,’ above the streets and homes of Baghdad (which are not surprisingly occluded from view.)”¹⁴ This occlusion from view of a city’s streets, its homes and inhabitants, and its civilization

¹³ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (NY: Verso, 2004), 53. Regulative language (tradition) has constitutive power. In Butler’s work on gender, she theorizes that “the origin” is a retroactive fiction, an effect of iterating (becoming) under constraints that pre-exist the subject. In what ways might *ex nihilo* be projected *back from*, i.e. be an effect of, our own mighty habits of becoming in the contemporary world? How does the predicate retroactively define the subject and, at the same time, fix the assumption of that subject’s existence as preceding its establishing relation?

¹⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 148-49, emphasis mine. Butler continues, “The ‘shock and awe’ strategy seeks not only to produce an aesthetic dimension to war, but to exploit and instrumentalize the visual aesthetics as part of a war strategy itself. CNN has provided much of these visual aesthetics” (Ibid). There are also other aesthetics involved in war, obscured by our “instant” or non-temporal media. Here in San Antonio while wandering the shopping mall, I was moved by those—also walking the mall—in dress uniforms, having just completed their basic training. Beautiful young men and women are doing the work of soldiers. These pre-war soldiers and sailors strode with bodies toned to the height of physical ability, confident, poised, brimming a desire to effect positive change in our world. Having lived in the San Francisco Bay Area during the Vietnam war, I could not help contrasting the posture, the hope of these 2004 soldiers, with veterans—bereft of health, youth, and the seeming possibility of their effecting positive change—whom I witnessed in the early 1970’s and for decades after. This “change of state” is also an aesthetic dimension of war, one that requires a temporal view.

predating by thousands of years our current technological transjects, this “neglect” of our own “degree of abstraction,” is exactly the “evil” Whitehead warns can occur as we over-emphasize subject-predicate formulations.

None of these panelists, nor their papers, whose gentle ways of reflecting I deeply appreciate, intend destruction by advocating in part or in whole a *creatio ex nihilo* position. But how a theory is used, how it bears fruit in the world is not fully separable from what that theory is. There is an inadvertent and dangerous legitimization borne by *ex nihilo* theologies. We need ways of revering the sacred entry of novelty, theological positions that do not even passively condone presumptions of a “new Iraq” or a “new world” as if out of nothing. In this world, Christians cannot invoke a love that is a speaking-forth without the love that is a listening. Love without receptivity is neither loving nor truly creative but is something else: aggression and domination. Just as future moments splay with more or less width *beyond* this shared moment, so too, complex religious and ethical systems, valuations, and lives *precede* our entry, that is, the agential projections of our speech, weapons, moralities, bullets, bombs, and advertising. As members of the American Academy of Religion, as persons who have chosen to critically reflect on religion *from the perspective of our world’s political and cultural superpower*, to reify *ex nihilo* lends a too dangerous, even if unintended, warrant to our own irresponsiveness.

Both God and the Creation “are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty” (PR 349), God and concrete actualities as sources of novelty one for the other. If we value or worship only God’s emanation as creative, and not the *receptivity that catalyzes the creative transformation of the divine becoming*, we hegemonically insure (and obscure) that, culturally, *projection* is valued more than relational contexts or the grace of receptivity. What we *receive* is that to which we are creatively called to respond: uncontrollable, uncertain, and certain to change us. Why would a God who loves be any less?

