

Daring to be Creative: Divine Creation as a Blueprint for Human Creativity

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Creativity and The Birth of the World

From a Christian theological perspective, the original plan and foundation for all human creativity comes from God's loving act of creation as recounted in two ancient Hebrew accounts of creation in the book of Genesis (Gen 1.1-2.4a; Gen 2.4b-2.25). The Hebrew word *Bereshith* means 'in the beginning' and translates into the Greek word *Genesis*, meaning origin or birth, and provides the title for the first book of the Hebrew scripture. Like most Hebrew books of the bible, the title of this book is taken from the book's first words:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1.1-2)

The first chapters of the book present the reader with two imaginative visions of the divine creative process. Both accounts begin by telling the story of God, the creator, who imagines and speaks into existence and names the world, through the sacred sequence of six days while resting on the seventh. The second vision (Gen 2.4b-2.25) presents God forming humans and animals like a potter, and planting a garden. These sacred narratives set the scene for all subsequent works of human creation. The poetic narrative of Genesis 1 and 2, composed in the first millennium BCE testify to God's loving formation of, and intimate involvement with the earth, from the origins of life. God is like a divine artist, outlining the domains of creation, with broad brush strokes. In the Priestly account (Gen.1-2.4), the drama of cosmic life begins with the creation of three domains, light (Day 1), waters and sky (Day 2) and dry land (Day 3). From Days 4 to 6 God adds greater detail to the picture by literally filling in or 'populating'ⁱ the three domains he has already formed, by creating sun, moon and stars (Day 4), sea life and birds (Day 5) and finally land creatures (Day 6). God's delight in and sanctification of creation is evident through the refrain, 'And God saw that it was good'. It is important to note that the English word 'God' is related to the Anglo-Saxon word for "good" or *gad*.ⁱⁱ Genesis affirms the world as the good creation of the good God.ⁱⁱⁱ Divine creation is 'world affirming' and Genesis presents both the process and product of creation as worthy and delightful. Indeed Norman Habel suggests that the earth is not just a theme in the narrative of Genesis 1, but *erets* or earth, is the main character of the plot of the story.^{iv} By this he means that earth is a character who participates with God in the creation process as the word of God stimulates life to emerge from the earth.^v The verses 'let the earth bring forth' illustrate the creative power that resides in the earth itself. Earth is pristine, 'evoking God's pleasure and celebration'.^{vi} It is interesting to note that the double application of the refrain 'and God was pleased with what he saw' on the third and sixth days of creation, reinforces divine approval for the created world. This is significant since the climax of the creation account in Genesis 1 is achieved on the sixth day through God's simultaneous creation of the first male and female human beings.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. (Gen. 1.26-30)

Since humans are made in God's image they also have a capacity to create. Human creativity, although not identical in form or nature to divine creativity, nonetheless enables humans to co-create with God according to their own nature. The concept of creation emerging from Genesis refers to both 'the process by which the universe was made and the created order which emerged'.^{vii} What becomes apparent from Genesis is that creation is not simply a once off divine event which occurred in the remote past. Creation provides a blueprint against which humans can view and interpret all creativity, both divine and human. In John Paul II's words God is a 'kind of exemplar of everyone who produces a work: the human craftsman mirrors the image of God as Creator'.^{viii}

Creation is not locked into the past as a remnant of an ancient historical epoch. Neither is it a narrative concerning beginnings and endings, exclusively focused on the origin and destiny of cosmic and human life. In the biblical text creation is an ongoing process where humans are invited to enter into co-creation. It is important to note that God's creative process calls all humans to become co-creating human stewards, and not human oppressors of the world. Creation is not a human possession, to be exploited by humans, but a positive ethical and ecological process that calls humans to preserve and hold in trust, the dynamic created world, for God and for all of creation. In Gen. 1.28 human procreativity and care for the earth, is part of God's plan for ongoing creation.

Of course there are radical differences between the Creator and the creature, between divine and human creativity. The Latin word '*ex nihilo*', is used to describe God's creation 'from nothing'. By this is meant that without the use of any pre-existing material or force, God's personal will becomes form and event. There is a long history of Christian theological reflection on God's *ex nihilo* creation of everything, in its whole substance. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the Council of Florence (1442) as well as Vatican I (1870), affirm the teaching of God's creation of a good creation out of nothing. 'The doctrine of creation thus leads to a critical world-affirming spirituality, in which the world is affirmed, without falling into the snare of treating it as if it were God.'^{ix} However it also needs to be emphasised that just as the Creator is not identical with the creation, neither is divine creativity synonymous with human creativity. The human craftsman does not create something out of nothing but rather gives new form and meaning to something that already exists. Human creativity is incremental and results from combining, perceiving or using, pre-existing elements of the created order in an original manner.

For instance pre-existing marble was transformed by Michelangelo's creativity and sculpted into the statue of David. This work of art was not a creation *ex-nihilo*. Much creativity draws on innovative presentations and perceptions of pre-existing ideas or forms. In such a manner Darwin and Wallace's theories of evolution built upon the scholarship of pre-existing scientific research. Emily Dickinson's poetic genius resulted from a combination of pre-existing words in an original manner to reflect her own particular experiences and ideas.

Artistic creativity and its relationship to the divine

If divine and human creativity are neither identical nor co-extensive, one may legitimately ask what relationship exists between both? Creativity is hugely complex. In popular imagination it is often associated with the process of creating something exceptional. Artists are often identified as people of exceptional creativity, whose gifted work shows originality, sensitivity and imagination. In the fine arts, sculptors, writers and musicians use their talent to create works of aesthetic value. By aesthetic value is meant, not just an appreciation of the beautiful, but a sensibility and feeling for life. As Joyce Miller notes, it is important to remember that the opposite of aesthetic is anesthetic or lack of feeling.^x Accordingly one might identify as artists, those individuals who exhibit exceptional skill, sensitivity and feeling. Any exploration of European culture reveals a litany of men and women whose exceptional creativity manifested itself in the form of literary works (Austen) or sculpture (Rodin) or music (Mozart) or the visual arts (Dali) and so on. Of course for every acclaimed artistic genius there are multitudes of less acclaimed or gifted fine artists. To some extent, all fine artists, with varying degrees of talent and success, are capable of creating works of aesthetic value. However the appreciation and public reception of works of fine art often leads to divisive opinions as to what is of artistic worth. In 1995 the Tate gallery in London awarded the Turner Prize to the avant-garde artist Damien Hirst for his shark in formaldehyde (*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*). Successive Turner finalists including Tracey Emin's exhibit of a dishevelled bed (*My Bed*) in 1999 caused widespread controversy and exposed the critics' and the public's radically divergent understandings of art. Whatever the nature of art, many hold that hard work, skill and trial and error form part of the creative process. Indeed for Aristotle, poetry (*poesis*) was a combination of inspiration and craft. Great art does not usually emerge automatically and instantaneously as writers, painters, sculptors and musicians combine hard work with the spark of originality and imagination. For instance if one looks at the original manuscripts and notebooks of many writers such as James Joyce or Wilfred Owen, one can see crossed out words, the rephrasing of lines and multiple drafts of stanzas, which testify to a creative process and craft, which is time consuming, gradual and subject to intense effort.

The notion of creative artist inspired by Genesis

It is understandable that if one holds to a narrow understanding of art as fine or performance art, then the majority of human beings are not, and never can be, artistic in this professional sense of the word. It would be naïve to expect an ordinary person to be able to perform a ballet or compose a concerto. However a tradition which builds upon the Hebrew and Christian scriptures legitimately views all human beings as creative artists. Continuing the rich Judeo-Christian tradition which acknowledges God's call for all humans to become co-creators, John Paul 11

challenged narrow interpretations of the arts and the artist by affirming that all humans are entrusted with the creative task of crafting their own life, of making it a work of art, a masterpiece.

Through his 'artistic creativity' man appears more than ever 'in the image of God', and he accomplishes this task above all in shaping the wondrous material' of his own humanity and then exercising creative dominion over the universe which surrounds him. With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of his own surpassing wisdom, calling him to share in his creative power. Obviously, this is a sharing which leaves intact the infinite distance between the Creator and the creature.....'

This perspective liberates the artistic and creative process by acknowledging that every human being has artistic capacity and potential. This universalizes the artistic impulse and capacity so that everyone is an artist entrusted with a divinely given, life-long, ongoing task of co-creation with God. John Paul's latitudinarian perspective is shared by many other thinkers. Derek Webster^{xi} holds that everyone is creative, and that creativity is 'the highest possibility for a human being'. Thus viewed art is not only the concern of the exceptionally gifted or the professional fine or performance artist. Artistic engagement and human creativity are essential aspects of what it is to be human. The three year old who delights in banging the keys of the piano in random order is creative, albeit with a different degree of skill, just as the concert pianist playing a Rachmaninoff concerto is creative. In the creative process there are infinite varieties of skills and forms of expressions, all with varying meaning. All human activity and expression is potentially creative and all humans are called to become artists in their own right. One may ask, if all human beings are creative, then what about a person in a coma, a person in a permanent vegetative state? Can such a person be creative? One could answer that by virtue of living and being created as a unique human being who is unconditionally loved by God, the person on a life-support machine, unable to manifest any signs of creativity to the skeptical eye, embodies a wondrous, mysterious, unique presence with their own DNA, fingerprints, physical and spiritual presence. Moreover human creativity is not wrapped up tightly in the individuality of the human person. Humans are called into relational creativity with other human and animal and plant forms, with *erets* (earth) itself. Their creativity develops through relationship with others. Each human being has his or her own biological history, social context, relational network and unknown future. Their unquantifiable embodiment of creativity is specific to them. If everyone can be creative, simply through the fact of their being human, this raises crucial questions such as 'What is creativity?' and 'What is art?'

The difficulty with answering these questions is that creativity is notoriously subjective. As Maggie Webster notes, 'What one person considers to be creative another may find unimaginative or mundane'.^{xii} Furthermore there are culturally and socially variant ways of viewing creativity. What is perceived as genius in one society or group of people (e.g. Turner judges) is seen as insanity in another (e.g. public opinion). The very essence of creativity necessarily involves a dynamic plurality of interpretations and expressions. There is no one way of being creative or no inherent recipe for creativity. Furthermore there is no overarching understanding of how creativity works. Margaret Boden succinctly states 'Creativity is a puzzle, a paradox, some say a mystery. Inventors, scientists and artists rarely know how their original

ideas arise. They mention intuition, but cannot say how it works. Most psychologists cannot tell us much about it either'.^{xiii}

Inhibitors to human creativity

However puzzling the source and nature human creativity may be, it is quite clear that humans frequently experience blocks or impediments to creativity. The popular caricature of tortured artists like Van Gogh, links creative genius to madness. This caricature is so prevalent that the painter Leslie Anne Butler famously stated 'It seems that one has to be sick, depressed, weird or tortured to be thought of as an outstanding artist.' Creativity is frequently associated with a rejection of conventional ways of seeing and doing things and creative people are sometimes presented as being unhinged and counter cultural. Creativity is frequently experienced as both mysterious and burdensome. When Picasso was asked 'What is creativity?' he allegedly replied 'I don't know and if I did, I wouldn't tell you'.

While the nature of creativity may be contested, what is less rarely contested is the fact that human creatures frequently experience inhibitors to creativity. These include lack of imagination and confidence, personal doubt and exhaustion, cynicism and the numbness of routine. Myriad factors can potentially inhibit creativity. Lack of encouragement, repressed imagination, and fear of daring to be different, may prevent humans from acknowledging and exploring their own creative potential. Sometimes these inhibitors come from external sources such as a dearth of resources, public opprobrium or political censorship. However the reverse can also be true. Sometimes having every resource at one's disposal can dull one's sense of originality and spontaneity. Commenting on this, Maser, a contemporary Irish graphic artist, notes that if he were a teacher 'I wouldn't need a lot of expensive equipment in my classroom, just the basics: we'd make do. Sometimes having everything only hinders your creative output.'^{xiv}

Conclusion

One could argue that the greatest inhibitor to creativity is not externally imposed but comes from within the human person. One major obstacle to creativity lies in the perception that only exceptionally gifted people or professional artists are creative and that Christian theology has little or nothing to say about human creativity. Christians who take Genesis seriously must dare to challenge the notion that Christian faith and spirituality have nothing contribute to human creativity. In the Judeo-Christian tradition creativity is an innate part of what it means to be created and loved by God so that it is impossible to live a human life without manifesting elements of creativity.

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- ⁱ Borg, M.J. *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002) p.64.
- ⁱⁱ Oehler's Theology of the Old Testament; Strong's and Young's concordances. From New Unger's Bible Dictionary. Originally published by Moody Press of Chicago, Illinois. 1988.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Borg, p.75.
- ^{iv} Habel, N.C., & Wurst, S. (eds) *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield: The Pilgrim Press, 2000) p.35.
- ^v He reads the story with ecojustice eyes and uses the word Geophany to describe the 'Earth Story' found within Genesis.
- ^{vi} Habel, p. 45.
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