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Imitatio Creatoris: The Hermeneutical Primordality of Creativity in Moral Life

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This article uses postmodern hermeneutical resources to argue that moral life involves a radical and primordial capability for creativity. There would be nothing new in saying that morality *makes use of* creativity: ethical principles require imaginative application to particular situations, moral sentiments need creative expression, literature can help clarify ethical understanding, moral traditions must undergo constant transformation over time, the "other" calls for the self's endless moral deconstruction, and oppressed groups demand new structures of society. What I want to suggest here, however—on the level of metaethics, or the *kind* of activity that is moral (as opposed to what may actually be right or wrong to do)—is that creative making, fashioning, and transforming lie at the very core of human moral practice. That is, moral practice is creative not just incidentally but inherently.

This view joins increasing efforts to move beyond the usual metaethical debates about modernist universalism versus premodernist particularism, that is, situating moral practice either beyond or within historical traditions. More profoundly, it also challenges a claim that unites a great deal of premodern and modern Western moral thought from Plato to Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and even Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. That claim is that "ethics" must be fundamentally distinguished from "poetics," the former being public, rational, and fixed over against the latter as private, subjective, and dealing with changeable appearances. This ingrained distinction, now more or less assumed, is both flawed and dangerous. In the following, I challenge it in a fundamental and even primordial way through a hermeneutical rereading of the Genesis 1 mythology of humankind as an "image of God." I propose that this text, particularly in Christianity, has served as a lens for separating ethics and poetics, while in fact it may be read, instead, to suggest quite

the opposite: that moral life involves a capability for the *imitatio Creatoris*, that is, humanity's deeper self-humanization by imitating the divine act of Creation in the ongoing creation of our own finite moral worlds.

THE PLATONIC LEGACY

Why do we tend to assume today that, while virtually all other areas of human endeavor involve some kind of dynamic and open-ended creation of the given into the new—from the arts to science, technology, and culture—moral life somehow stands apart as either applying or retrieving some order of fixed and unchanging good? The answer to this question has to do in part with the slippery nature of moral relations themselves, involving by necessity multiple and even incommensurable interests, perspectives, and goods. But it also contains deep theoretical roots in an ancient Greek quarrel of the philosophers and the poets, which in turn left its mark very early in Christianity and was incorporated in different ways into premodernity, modernity, and even postmodernity.

Plato did not start this ancient quarrel, but he did draw its lines especially sharply and influentially. At least a seventh of his *Republic* addresses why the poets—such as Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Sophocles—not only fail to articulate the essential “idea” (*eidos*) of goodness and justice but, as poets, distort it.¹ It is not the philosophers who corrupt the youth (as Plato's teacher Socrates had been executed for) but the “makers” of pleasant and beguiling images and stories. According to Plato, “The imitative poet produces a bad regime in the soul of each private man by making phantasms that are very far from the truth and by gratifying the soul's foolish part.”² Why? Because the activity of poetics (*poiêsis*) is by definition the “imitation” (*mimêsis*) of truth, making it able to grasp only the world's changing visible appearances and not its eternal invisible depths. “The imitator, we say, understands nothing of what is but rather of what looks like it is.”³ The very establishment of philosophy as the pursuit of truth and goodness, in fact, depends to a significant degree for Plato on overturning the mere poetic “making” of “images” (*eikones*) of truth and beginning to uncover truth as it actually “is,” Truth as invisible and unchanging Being.

While Aristotle is more moderate in this regard than his teacher,

¹ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic, 1968), 377b–403c, 595a–608b.

² *Ibid.*, 605b.

³ *Ibid.*, 601c.

Plato, he continues to separate ethics and poetics unequivocally. In book 6 of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle insists that “production [*poiêsis*] has an end other than itself, but [moral] action does not: good action [action involving *phronêsis* or practical wisdom] is itself an end.”⁴ That is, poetics (broadly understood) is the activity of producing something beyond the poetic act itself: a poem, a play, a chair, a building. *Phronesis* or moral wisdom, in contrast, is the activity of acting well as such: being courageous, acting beneficently, practicing justice, and so on. Aristotle's definition of the good life as “activity in accordance with virtue” hangs significantly on this distinction. Virtue (*aretê*) is not fundamentally the production of anything new, of “external goods” in the world, but the excellence or perfection of “internal goods,” goods already constituting the true aims of being human. It is possible, on Aristotle's view, for a poet to “imitate” good actions—hence he is kinder to them than Plato—but good action itself is not poetically produced; it realizes an already natural and habituated orientation to right ends.⁵

Such distinctions have had an enormous influence through the ages over Christianity. Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, continually signifies wayward human existence through the trope of his early life as a teacher of “rhetoric,” since here, “through clouds of smoke,” he and his companions used the art of poetics to become “deceivers and deceived in all our different aims and ambitions.”⁶ Poetic cleverness is contrasted with his later life after conversion when he is finally and eternally anchored by God's unchanging moral righteousness, a place beyond mere worldly appearances that brings him to an invisible peace and rest. Augustine exhibits a deep, and to us today rather surprising, antipathy toward the theater, which he accuses of teaching audiences to find pleasure in imaginary pain instead of painfully confessing the awful truth of their sinfulness; only in this way is one opened up to the true enjoyment of God.⁷ He likewise undertakes virulent criticisms in *The City of God* of the made “images” worshipped in Roman idolatry, which he opposes to the Christian worship of the one true invisible Maker beyond any possible human imitation.⁸

By the time of Thomas's *Summa Theologica*, the distinction of poetics

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (New York: Macmillan, 1962), bk. 6, 1140b, lines 5–6.

⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, 2nd ed., rev. and enlarged (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 661–713.

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), bk. 6, chaps. 1–2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, bk. 3, chap. 2.

⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 1984), bk. 2, chaps. 7, 25, 27; bk. 4, chap. 32; bk. 8, chap. 23; and bk. 19, chap. 23.

from ethics is fully taken for granted. In the brief sections he devotes to it, Thomas directly and explicitly follows Aristotle to argue that "art is the 'right reason of things to be made'; whereas prudence [that is, phronesis] is the 'right reason of things to be done.' . . . Now 'making' and 'doing' differ . . . in that 'making' is an action passing into outward matter, e.g. 'to build,' 'to saw,' and so forth; whereas 'doing' is an action abiding in the agent, e.g. 'to see,' 'to will,' and the like."⁹ Again, since moral virtue is judged according to its internal habit or end, it is of an entirely different nature than art or creativity, whose goodness or worth is defined principally by the external form of its product.

One can find this distinction of ethics from poetics also ingrained within the otherwise very different world of modernity. Immanuel Kant, to take the example of the most influential ethicist of the Enlightenment, separates the two (respectively) in his second and third critiques, arguing that morality realizes human freedom in its imperative, autonomous, and lawlike sense, as opposed to what is now called "aesthetics," which realizes freedom in its subjective, heteronomous, and expressive sense. Poetics as "aesthetics" comes to mean something considered more humane and refined than Greek making, craft, or imitating: namely, the perception or reproduction of the beauty and sublimity of art or nature. Aesthetic judgment does, for Kant, claim a kind of universal assent (to say a flower or a painting is beautiful is to say others should find it beautiful too). Yet it is universal only in the subjective sense that it claims to exhibit "good taste." As Kant says, "I cannot be talked into it [good taste] by means of any proofs."¹⁰ Ethics, by contrast, is universal in the different, objective sense that it demands proof. The ethics of the "categorical imperative" requires precisely that one should not act according to subjective preferences but rather by what is necessarily obligatory, the unchanging "moral law."¹¹

The depths of the distinction of ethics from poetics here can be seen by its assumption even by modernity's critics. Nietzsche's transvaluation of values, for example, claims to move finally "beyond good and evil"—beyond ethics as rationalized ahistorical law—to a vision of human life

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1947), pt. I-II, Q. 57, a. 4.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (1790; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 166.

¹¹ Interestingly, however, the Kant scholar David Guyer has argued that an "ulterior motive" of Kant's third critique may have been to "make our practical [moral] freedom palpable to us" in the actual "experience of freedom," given how abstract it remains in the second critique (*Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 3 and 335). This does not alter the fact, though, that ethics and aesthetics remain in Kant inherently distinct.

characterized in part by pure making and invention.¹² Radical though this is, it still rests on the contrast of morality and aesthetics, however much it inverts their priority. Nietzsche's "superman" throws off the shackles of the Kantian moral law only, in fact, to embrace a rather Kantian aesthetic freedom of taste (combined, it is true, with a Greek poetics of self-making) as the more authentic human activity. Our most sublime actions should be motivated by the beauty and power of the inner human spirit as opposed to the mere mass thinking of morality. As a result, Nietzsche's will to power and revenge against resentment do not overturn but in fact necessarily presuppose the ancient quarrel between the moralists and the poets—the difference being only that he chooses the latter over the former. In a way, it is Plato's own banishment of the poets from the city that is to blame for their Nietzschean eternal return: now cloaked in the Trojan Horse of aesthetic nihilism or self-making authenticity.

The major result of these long-standing historical distinctions for moral thought today is a profound and widespread metaethical assumption, powerful but rarely articulated, that poetic activity may perhaps be *useful* for moral life (or not) but moral life is precisely *not itself* a poetic kind of activity. Even with postmodernist ethical sensibilities toward multiculturalism, historicism, and particularism, ethicists and ordinary persons still generally imagine that ethics is not fundamentally a meaning-making activity in the same way as are the arts and sciences. As I have argued elsewhere, the recent recovery of Aristotelianism into narrative and tradition-constituted moral theory still preserves much of Aristotle's poetics-ethics distinction: by assuming that while traditions may be creatively formed over time, this occurs only in the service of a presumed hidden and unchanging moral core and in the service of a historically fixed common good.¹³

Whether one believes that moral practice rests on universal or on historical grounds, moral norms are not thought to be "made" by us. Moral life does not involve a struggle to produce anything fundamentally new. Rather, we are conditioned to seek out steady ethical harbors: determined rules or moral laws, incontrovertible principles, historically established virtues, traditional or cultural coherencies, just equations of power, even hospitality for the ineffable other. Rules, virtues, power, and responsibility may change, and they may even change in response to narratives and literature, but they change only in order better to

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (1886; New York: Vintage, 1966).

¹³ John Wall, "Phronesis as Poetic: Moral Creativity in Contemporary Aristotelianism," *Review of Metaphysics* 59, no. 2 (December 2005): 313–31.

approximate some unchanging or lost moral core. If most of us can no longer believe in a Platonic metaphysical Good, we still largely accept Plato's underlying suspicion of moral creativity and inventiveness. Indeed, the great horrors of the twentieth century—from its unprecedentedly violent social experiments to its vast new capabilities for technological and environmental destruction—would seem to make human creativity even more ethically problematic in the contemporary world than ever before.

IN THE IMAGE OF CREATION

If there is a creative dimension of moral activity, it must be sought, not just in creative products like narratives and literature, but more fundamentally or primordially on the level of human capabilities. Our question is not what actual goods human creative capabilities may create, but what it means for moral life to involve a creative capability. Rather than begin with theories of art, technology, or science, I want to begin instead with moral practice itself in order to peel back some of its own possible poetic presuppositions. If I do so through poetic texts like myths and symbols, this is only because these may more clearly reveal underlying human moral poetic capabilities.

Let us examine, in this light, the ancient biblical mythology of humankind as created "in the image" of its Creator. As claimed in Gen. 1:27, "God created humankind in his image [*tselem*], in the image [*tselem*] of God he created them; male and female he created them."¹⁴ This symbolism has variously been interpreted in Judaism, Christianity, and modernity to suggest human capabilities for such things as rationality, knowledge of God, dominance over other creatures, assistance to God, rest, reflexivity, and self-transcendence.¹⁵ Less often, however, is it juxtaposed with the line that immediately follows, a line that gives God's very first biblical command to humanity: "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'" (Gen. 1:28).

Leaving aside debates about the ambiguous Hebrew meanings of "subdue" and "have dominion," this first command to be fruitful and multiply is arguably in part the text's own interpretation of what it means for human beings to act uniquely as images of their Creator.

¹⁴ I use the New Revised Standard Version throughout.

¹⁵ For the variety of meanings of this term in Christianity, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1980), 204–5.

God himself appears in Genesis 1 not as Judge, Prime Mover, pure Intellect, or even yet Redeemer. God appears, in the very first place, as the Creator of the world who has just herself been fruitful and multiplied. God has just created night and day, land and waters, plants and animals, and the whole plurality and diversity of the Creation as we know it. This includes, finally, God's "multiplication" of God's own self in God's image in humankind. In the image of this Creator, human beings may be commanded, albeit in their own limited and ultimately fallen ways, to share also in the fruitful creation of their world.

The term "*tselem*" or "image," which occurs hardly anywhere else in the Bible, will shortly be used again, in fact, in Gen. 5:3, where Seth is said to be an "image" of his father, Adam. Somehow *adam*—in the sense of "humankind" generally—is originally an image of God in a similar way that a child may be said to be an image of its parent. (I return later to issues of gender.) Human beings are primordially—that is, mythically, originally, and prior to their fall—affirmed to have been created by God. But what this actually means, in part, is that they are also, even after the fall, affirmed to have been created in such a way as to be likewise capable of going on to create analogously for themselves. A similar double meaning can be found in the Latin *imago Dei*, where "*imago*" can suggest not only reproduction, copy, or shadow—as in the more obvious and static interpretation of Gen. 1:27—but also a more dynamic imitation, similitude, or likeness.

What is primordially—indeed mysteriously—characteristic of human beings, this myth could be read to suggest, is their capability, in some likeness to their Creator, for the creation of their own relational, social, historical, and moral worlds. The command to "be fruitful and multiply" points, ethically, not just to domination over the world but more fundamentally to a responsibility as imitators of the world's Maker to make this world a better place, to produce something more and better within it. In this case, one could say with Philip Hefner that humanity is a "created co-creator" with God, a "free creator of meanings . . . who takes action based on those meanings."¹⁶ However, from a moral and not only scientific or cultural point of view, we can add that the command affirms the fundamental goodness of humanity's capability for co-creating its own societies and relations.

This Creation symbolism also offers, no doubt against the self-consciousness of its actual authors, a symbolism for symbolism itself, an "image" for humanity's strange but apparently original capability for

¹⁶ Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Meaning* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 259.

making its own "images" of its world. The myth is on some level, however much one may think it inspired by God, itself also a human creation. No animals or plants have myths of their origins. None of them appear to be quite the same kind of creative, originating creatures or to be moved to ponder in quite the same way their relation to the world's original Creation. Genesis 1 is in part, from this angle, a story about the divine-human activity of "creating" that the story itself (whether consciously or not) also imitates or images. It provides this capability a concrete interpretation and meaning. In Judith Butler's sense, the story "performs" its own telling, exhibiting the human activity that it also depicts.¹⁷

Perhaps the story's strangest suggestion of all, in fact, is that the Creator creates not just a world but also an "image" of itself within that world, namely us. The myth is on some level a dark liminal mirror—an imitation, if you will—of our own deepest capability for creating images of the meaning of our own humanity. As in Michelangelo's painting *The Creation of Adam*, humanity and God are in a sense affirmed as mirror images of one another, reaching out in creative tension to touch each other's outstretched fingers. The myth points to an ultimately mysterious human capability for making such things as myths in the first place—something no actual human creation could ever quite capture since it would always already be presupposed.

Such a reading of Gen. 1:27 offers a countersymbolism to one of the chief ways in which the Bible has historically been used precisely to separate ethics from poetics: namely, through the opposition in the prophets and writings and beyond between being good and making "graven" images. These prohibitions need not necessarily be read as moral imperatives against human creativity as such. They may, rather, in light of Genesis 1, offer a warning against an otherwise originally good human creative capability's moral and ritual corruption. The *objects* we make to be likenesses of God (including, finally, even Genesis 1 itself) must inevitably fall short of our own likeness to the Creator as *subjects* commanded to be fruitful and multiply in God's image. Indeed (in a way that, as we will see, connects this myth to postmodern phenomenology), the very opposition of created "objects" and creative "subjects" itself implies a perverse dominion over our surrounding world that contradicts humankind's more original possibility (as "being-in-the-world") for harmonious fruitfulness within it. The covenants at Sinai and elsewhere are, after all, themselves efforts, in the face of humanity's incessant self-

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

defeat, at creating a new and better human society—and precisely through human beings relating to one another more fully in, rather than apart from, their Creator.

RECONSIDERING IMITATION

This creative possibility can be rendered somewhat more concrete by considering an alternative and largely forgotten Jewish and Christian tradition of interpretation of the Genesis myth. This chiefly ancient and medieval tradition reads the *imago Dei* as not just something passively received but also a responsibility and a command, precisely, to imitate the Creator: an *imitatio Dei*. According to Martin Buber, rabbinic teaching has frequently understood the Genesis image of God to mean that "following the deity raises itself . . . to the idea of imitating the deity."¹⁸ The most prominent expression of this tradition is the imitation of the Creator on the Sabbath, the imitation of God's seventh day of peace and rest. The original Sabbath immediately follows, and can be juxtaposed with, the Genesis 1 affirmation of humanity as God's image. It symbolizes a form of rest that is not just passive but also active, something we must do. But this imitative imperative (if we may call it that) also has a more explicitly moral dimension, Buber claims, because imitating God "is what becoming a blessing for the other peoples means: setting a living example of a true people, a community."¹⁹ The avoidance of graven images coincides with Israel functioning as a different kind of moral image for the world. Despite corruption and violence it is nevertheless possible to represent in one's actions something of humankind's original capability for peace and fellowship.

The most systematic exploration of this ethical reading of the image of God is found in the twelfth-century Jewish theologian Moses Maimonides. While Maimonides shares with Thomas, as above, the effort to synthesize biblical religion with the ethics of Aristotle, he does not accept Aristotle's separation of ethics from imitative poetics. Instead, Maimonides argues for an *imitatio Dei* or imitation of God as humanity's highest moral perfection. As he puts it, "The perfection, in which man can truly glory, is attained by him when he has acquired—as far as this is possible for man—the knowledge of God, the knowledge of His Providence, and of the manner in which it influences His creatures in their production and continued existence. Having acquired this knowledge he will then be determined always to seek loving-kindness,

¹⁸ Martin Buber, *On the Bible*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1968), 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

judgment, and righteousness, and thus to imitate the ways of God."²⁰ Imitation clearly does not here mean only the mimesis of the visible world (as for Aristotle). It means, in a more mythic register, acting in the likeness of a God who is prior and primordial, a God who is this visible world's underlying invisible Creator. Both individuals and the people of God collectively may be defined in part by their primal capability for imitating their Creator's perfect rest and goodness, for imitating what is deepest within humanity itself as God's image rather than what is corrupted in historical actuality.

Similar examples of this ethical imitation or imaging of the Creator can be found, although in less systematically developed ways, in a number of early Christian theologians. Mathetes writes, for example: "Do not wonder that a man may become an imitator of God. He can . . . [who] takes upon himself the burden of his neighbor . . . [and] who, whatever things he has received from God, by distributing these to the needy, becomes a god to those who receive [them]."²¹ Clement of Alexandria exhorts: "He is the [true Christian], who is after the image and likeness of God, who imitates God as far as possible, deficient in none of the things which contribute to the likeness as far as compatible, practicing self-restraint and endurance, living righteously, reigning over the passions, bestowing of what he has as far as possible, and doing good both by word and deed."²² Origen links the imitation of God to contemplative purity: "Every one who imitates Him according to his ability, does by this very endeavor raise a statue according to the image of the Creator for in the contemplation of God with a pure heart they become imitators of Him."²³ And the Pseudo-Clementine literature associates imitation rather flatly with good deeds: "Warn and exhort the worshippers, that by good deeds they imitate Him whom they worship, and hasten to return to His image and likeness."²⁴

What happened to this imitative moral imperative in Christianity? One could argue that it became overshadowed by the growing influence of Platonism. Augustine in particular, as we have seen, refashions Plato's moral-poetic distinction to strongly condemn all image making

²⁰ Moses Maimonides, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Michael Friedländer (New York: Dutton, 1904), chap. 54.

²¹ Mathetes (anonymous "disciple"), *Epistle of Mathetes to Diogenes*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), chap. 10.

²² Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), bk. 2, chap. 19.

²³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* [Against Celsus], trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1953), bk. 8, chap. 18.

²⁴ Pseudo-Clementine, *Recognitions*, in Roberts and Donaldson, *The Apostolic Fathers*, bk. 5, chap. 14.

as unworthy of rest in the one true God. And, it must be said, the early Christian imitative tradition does have a metaethical problem: namely, how to overcome the moral self-deception of idolatry, the turning of humanity's images of God into its own merely finite aims and desires. This problem of original sin, so powerfully articulated by Augustine, is something I will address shortly.

But we may at least ask whether Augustine is right to separate imitation and morality so categorically. Augustine's own cleansing (in effect) of Christian ethics of the *imitatio Dei* rests, in the end, on a deep and problematic Platonic assumption: namely, that images as such can imitate only visible appearances in the world. The plausible alternative that Christianity appears largely to have abandoned is that it is possible also to "imitate" the invisible image of God still deep within ourselves, to turn inward toward our own primordial capabilities for mirroring or reflecting our own Creator. If this origin is lost—this origin of origination, if you will—it may still speak to us from within our own mythological human depths. We may still be able to hear the inner command for fruitfulness and multiplication.

Idolatry, from this perspective, is then not a simple Platonic turning away from morality to poetics, but rather a more self-defeating perversion of a basic human moral poetic capability. Idols in effect objectify or fix something ultimately subjective and unrepresentable. In this case, Gen. 1:27 can be read as affirming not only a passive human *created* goodness—as the Christian tradition has long continued to hold—but also, and at the very same time, an active human *creative* goodness in the limited capability for imitating the activity of Creation itself.

CREATIVE MORAL HERMENEUTICS

Such an interpretation of human moral creativity can be developed in more contemporary and reflective terms through the unique metaethical resources provided by phenomenological hermeneutics. We have largely relied so far on an ancient myth and certain premodern interpretations of it. A postmodern retrieval of moral creativity must be made in a new (and, dare I say, creative) way. In particular, it needs to respond to the above now thoroughly entrenched (and not altogether unwarranted) arguments against the poetic nature of moral activity. Phenomenological hermeneutics helps us avoid reducing moral life to either the application of fixed moral principles (like the starry heavens above, as Kant says) or an opposed retreat into either Nietzschean aestheticism or conserving traditionalism. Each of these options as-

sumes, as I have pointed out, a poetic-ethical separation. Elements of postmodernity open up instead the possibility for viewing morality as an activity in media res, an activity that takes place within particular moral histories but also disrupts and transforms them through their ongoing and dynamic reinterpretation over time. Such a simultaneously passive and active, historical and innovative, contextualized and reflexive understanding of the human moral capability holds the greatest promise for a new appreciation for the inherent creativity of moral life.

We can find some initial resources from phenomenological hermeneutics in the work of Paul Ricoeur, one of the leading hermeneutical ethicists of the twentieth century, and in particular in his "poetics of the will." Adapting the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Ricoeur argues that ethical willing and action rest ultimately upon a human capability for "ethical intentionality." Moral practice first springs from neither subjective feelings nor objective laws or values but from humanity's dynamic and innovative "desire to be" as an active participant in and shaper of its world. This ethical intentionality or being-in-the-world has religious dimensions in that it may be affirmed, more primordially than historical corruption, as humanity's "absolutely primitive . . . joyous affirmation of being-able-to-be [*pouvoir-être*]."²⁵ Ethical intentionality is a human capability that is never completed in this world itself. It consists, rather, in each person's inborn ability to create or interpret received historical environments into his or her own ever more coherent and profound meaning.

This hermeneutical approach, briefly stated here, allows us to view moral life as dynamic and changing rather than as either fixed or conserving. It involves humanity in an endless and never fully realized quest for generating new social worlds in relation to one another. Moral values are at once always already passively formed in one's given social historicity and yet always also expressions of particular selves' unique perspectives and capabilities. Moral values are ultimately neither inherited from coherent traditions nor exhausted by the expressions of individual freedom. Rather, as Ricoeur puts it, "values [belong to] a history which I invent. Yes, that is the paradox of value: it is not completely a product of history, it is not invented, it is recognized, respected, and discovered—but only to the extent of my capacity for

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "The Problem of the Foundation of Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy Today* 22, nos. 3-4 (1978): 175-92, 177, 178, originally published as "Le problème fondement de la morale," *Sapientia*, no. 3 (juillet-septembre 1973): 313-37.

making history, for inventing history."²⁶ Ethical intentionality or the "poetics of the will" involves this kind of originary interpretive capability, a mysterious and primordial faculty for investing one's diverse and complex world and relations with ever greater (or ever less) meaning and direction.

A phenomenology of moral capability allows us to recognize, in this way, a profound link between ethical "intentionality" and what may be called a certain poetic "tensionality." Ethical intentionality or will may be poetic precisely in the sense that it plays on a basic human tension between inner interpretive capability and outer historical conditions of meaning and possibility. Neither of these subjective or historical dimensions finally exists or has meaning without the other. Historical conditions, from a moral point of view, include anything from plural moral traditions to the complex diversity of history to individual circumstances to the force of the alterity of others to power and the given structures of society. The moral will does not transcend or stand apart from any of these incredibly diverse conditions. Rather, it consists in a capability for creating moral meaning *within* its passively received moral environments, insofar as it actively inhabits and transforms its multiple world relations into a moral identity of its own.

Here, the implied moral "tension" may be compared, by way of illustration, to Sigmund Freud's rather narrower interpretive hermeneutical "tension" between the active ego and the passivity of the id and the superego. Just as psychological health arises from a productive "working through" of conflicts and repressions at the dynamic intersection of consciousness and the unconscious (in such ongoing practices as dream interpretation, psychoanalytic catharsis, and superego sublimation), so also in moral life may intersubjective and historical tensions move the self toward previously unformed and even cathartic meaning in relation to others. Social, relational, historical, and cultural "tension"—a term that comes from the Latin *tensio* or "stretching"—is a condition for the possibility of moral identity and meaning in the first place. The human moral "desire to be" is realized through an original, unavoidable, restless, and indeed apparently infinite innovation and working through of new social relations.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim V. Kohák (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 75, originally published as *Philosophie de la volonté I: Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (Paris: Aubier, 1950).

HERMENEUTICAL NARRATION

This intentional capability includes, for us temporal or historical beings, the possibility for moral narration. Moral narration need not refer merely to the application or living out of moral narratives. It can suggest more fundamentally what actual moral narratives also presuppose: namely, a human moral capability to narrate. It is in narrative stories that ethics is frequently said today to contain a "poetic" dimension, whether in the form of literature, history, or tradition. But this is only to use narratives for some larger independent end—whether that end is greater justice, respect for human differences, or more coherent moral communities. More primordial is the human capability for practicing and realizing narration as a moral end itself.

The Gen. 1:27 myth can be said in part to represent, from this angle, a narrative of the human narrative capability: a narrative of a capability that lies at the very origins or limits of human narration as such. This capability is here represented by humankind being affirmed as an image of a Creator who creates, precisely, by narrating. That is, the Creator is affirmed to have made the world by speech ("And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light"; "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'") and over a period of time (seven days). Genesis 1 is a story of the world as created by story. As the image of such a Creator, humankind is placed in touch with narration's ultimate mystery: the impossibility, finally, of narrating our capacity for narration itself. Such can only be mythologized as an image of something invisible and divine: a peculiar form of narration that resists reduction to anything that could ever be understood from actual history. From this angle, human ethical narration is affirmed as an imitation of divine narration. It consists in a primordial capability for simultaneously ahistorical (or free) and historical intentionality over time.

Richard Kearney has recently developed a poetic phenomenology in which moral life is understood as narrative in a similarly radical sense. Kearney argues that human relations call for constant narrative undoing and retelling because they are inherently fragile, finite, and in need of disruption by others. "Our very existence is narrative, for the task of every finite being is to make some sense of what surpasses its limits—that strange, transcendent otherness which haunts and obsesses us, from without and from within."²⁷ Ethical narration expresses a core

²⁷ Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 231.

human capability for making coherent meaning within the actual limits, strangers, mysteries, and possibilities of one's surrounding world. "The challenge," according to Kearney, "is to envisage the existence of a narrative self prepared to work through the pain of the past in dialogue with its Others . . . [forming] a narrative identity woven from its own histories and those of others."²⁸ (Note here the somewhat Freudian language again of "working through.") The moral task involves an endless narrative "interlacing of alterities" into new and more fully shared narratives of an ever more radically loving and hopeful kind.²⁹

Kearney helpfully suggests that this poetic moral capability is therefore ultimately "religious" in the sense that it stretches human moral understanding beyond its own visible boundaries and limits. "Human existence is always hovering about those frontiers that mark the passage between self and other, real and imaginary, known and unknown. Indelibly marked by finitude, the human self has never ceased to ponder its boundaries or to imagine what lies beyond."³⁰ Taking his cue from Emmanuel Levinas, and to a certain extent the later work of Jacques Derrida, Kearney claims that ethics involves a responsibility to "the other" that must ultimately appear radically "impossible." The deepest passivity of moral life is not the self's tradition-constituted historicity but its responsibility constantly to renew itself before each other as a face of the Wholly Other. According to Kearney, however, it is only through the open-endedness of narration that one can, hope finally to give this trace of the Wholly Other the kind of radically self-disrupting response it ultimately demands in this world. (We need not enter here into the phenomenological debate about the possibility/impossibility of "giving.") Only in this poetic mode is the impossible Other not just a disorienting shock but also an "impossible made possible" through the self's endless practice of its own moral world's narrative self-transformation.³¹

This religious capability for moral narration also finds hermeneutical resources in the feminist theological ethics of Sallie McFague. McFague's "metaphorical theology" shows that the fight against violence and oppression in this world is inherently metaphorical, parabolic, storied—and hence a world-transforming practice. For McFague, "metaphors shock, they bring unlikes together, they upset conventions, they

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 228.

involve tension, and they are implicitly revolutionary."³² Poetic language and "tension" not only name difference, according to McFague, but also introduce into moral relations a "liminal" dynamics that opens up harmful differences to radical restructuring.³³ The metaphor of God as Mother, for example, disrupts and challenges traditional patterns of patriarchy by opening up possible new human meaning and relations. The restructuring of moral society is not a flight from the poetics of metaphors—and, I would add, narratives—but rather their ever more radically inclusive refiguration. Indeed, McFague uses female imagery of God to reimagine the very inclusiveness of humanity in God's image: "As the *imago dei*, we are called to mother, love, and befriend the world, both other human beings and the earth."³⁴

These poetic hermeneutical perspectives from Ricoeur, Kearney, and McFague help us reimagine the relation of ethics to poetics in a different way than in the powerful and continuing legacy of Platonism. Poetics is more here than either the Greek and premodern imitation of visible actions or the modern (aesthetic) perception of worldly appearances. It instead includes a fundamental, original, and necessarily invisible human moral capability to create social relations that are new and hitherto unimagined. This new poetic hermeneutics in effect recasts the old tradition of the *imitatio Dei*. It suggests—or rather affirms—that creating new moral worlds expresses a human capability that, however lost and corrupt, remains also primordially human. In mythical terms, poetics remains as humankind's potential for the finite imitation of the world's original Creator.

What can be imitated, ultimately, is an unimaginable possibility deep within one's own humanity for narrating one's moral world anew. A condition for the possibility of moral meaning at all is the ability to interpret, narrate, and transform the brokenness of moral history into a new history that is less meaningless, violent, and oppressive. Moral history so profoundly shapes human moral identity that history's faults and distortions can be overcome only insofar as humanity can finally be affirmed, through myth, as capable of its own poetic historical narration.

IMITATIO CREATORIS

How, then, in the end, can moral creativity be saved from the traditional Platonic objection to the moral corruptibility of human poetics

³² Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

itself? This can be done by forging a link between the above contemporary hermeneutical advances and our earlier reflections on humanity as an *imitatio Dei*. Moral life can finally be reclaimed as "poetic" through a fresh and indeed creative mythological affirmation of moral "imitation" as such. This is what I mean by symbolizing humanity as uniquely and originally an *imitatio Creatoris* or "imitation of the Creator."

As an "imitation of the Creator," humankind is capable ultimately of the ongoing new creation of its own historical moral world. This capability is historically particular and universally inclusive all at once. It represents an impossible possibility that could never be fully realized so far as any one of us could tell and that in fact is inevitably distorted into the creation instead of moral worlds characterized by meaninglessness, violence, exclusion, and oppression. (This is the case even with the traditional Christian understanding, which I am not following here, of the "New Creation" as the invisible and/or visible church.) Human moral creativity falls short of perfection insofar as it devolves—as it inevitably to one degree or another does—into narrative incoherence, violence toward other humans and creatures, or the marginalization of entire groups from creative social participation of their own.

Yet, on the level of metaethics, an adequate response to human corruptibility in history cannot finally be made on the basis of a Platonic dualism that pits ahistorical morality against changeable poetics. Rather, human corruptibility can be overcome only through a still more primordial affirmation of the human capability for imitating in its own world something of its Creator's mythical activity of radically inclusive world Creation. The traditional *imitatio Dei* needs to be deepened from mere rest or example of righteousness into an open-ended capability for narrative world transformation.

We can begin to suggest such a possibility for humanity's *imitatio Creatoris* by rereading the mythology of Genesis 1 in a way more deeply educated by contemporary phenomenological hermeneutics. If humankind is created "in the image" of its Creator, Gen. 1:27 immediately names this image as multiple or plural: "male and female he created them." Whatever kind of fruitfulness and multiplication may be commanded, it is to take place within human relations' differences and otherness. The cosmological creation of humankind is also ethical in the sense that it mythologizes ultimate possibilities for otherwise broken or alienated human relations. To be an image of the Creator is not to retreat into isolation or individuality, to assert oneself in domination or power, or to rest within any particular historical community.

It is, rather, to imitate Creation itself in its temporal dynamism, verbal power, productive tensionality, and narrative diversity.

The specific difference of male and female need not here be read literally as a call to biological pro-creation. From a poetic hermeneutical point of view, it both affirms and commands a broader social generativity. The production of biological offspring is one possible form of such generative creativity, and it is surely the most important physical condition for the possibility of the formation of societies over time. But the larger hermeneutical condition for this possibility lies in the narration of meaning over time from amid human plurality and otherness. "Gender" in Gen. 1:27 may be reread as a mythological affirmation of human "generation": the capability for the ongoing "genesis" or "engendering" of human relations and worlds. In this case, the command to imitate God's fruitfulness and multiplication is at least in part a command for humankind in turn to create and renew given society. Male and female are symbols of the primordial moral ability for the kind of (re)productive tension or stretching that may engender new forms of community on the basis of difference.

A similar poetic reading of the Genesis 2-3 story of Adam and Eve helps us relate this command for original creativity to original sin. When read as an eternal pattern for the human moral order, this story has of course been used for millennia to uphold deep structures of gender oppression. But read poetically, the sexual difference instead mythologizes human moral tension in its profound creative ambiguity. Adam and Eve's fall is precisely into "shame" at their generative difference. In hiding their "reproductive" capabilities from one another, humankind in the process hides (in the bushes) from its own very Creator. Human relations lose their dynamic tensionality and crouch in silent stasis.

At the same time, however, the image of the Creator still beckons from within; the Creator's voice can still be heard. The possibility for the imitation of Creation is not altogether lost but hidden and now indirect. This ambiguity can be illustrated by Adam and Eve's joint invention of clothing, their very first postfall act. The loincloths, hastily stitched together, cover over human generative difference. But at the same time, they indicate humanity's persisting if corrupted capability, in the imitation of God, for creating together with one another something altogether new. Clothing is (symbolically speaking) a creative solution to humanity's shame at social difference. The moral tension that each of us actually experiences with others and in society is not only all too inevitably divisive and destructive but also, and ultimately, the

grounds for the promise and hope of social relations that are radically new.

Human community under such fragile circumstances constantly devolves into a community of mere difference alone. The original sin, from a poetic point of view, is the failure to embrace our own deeper capabilities for creating ever more inclusive social worlds. The possibility for a living creative tension among others is on some level always already defeated by the use of human creative faculties in merely limited ways, by historical stasis and consolidations of power, and by all too human anxieties that leave us naked and ashamed before one another. In symbolic terms, the invisible "fruitfulness" of social generativity in the image of a Creator is inevitably (if understandably) overcome by the idolatrous temptation of the visible "fruit" of a fixed and tangible "knowledge of good and evil." The products of creative life are mistaken for creative life itself. Moral uncreativity is perhaps similar in this respect to bad literature: repetitive of worn-out clichés (as also in Hannah Arendt's description of the overwhelming reliance on clichés by Adolf Eichmann), lacking a more inclusive movement and tension, or uninvested with openness to larger and wider meaning.³⁵ In any case, the challenge for us morally creative beings is to turn tensions of fear and division in human relations into tensions of inclusive production and multiplication. It is to imitate the Creator's perfect Sabbath, which is no mere final stasis but a living harmony of the ongoing differences between night and day, land and water, plants and animals, and the whole Creation in all its marvelous and interacting diversity. The expulsion from the Garden of Eden is a loss, from this perspective, not of placid amoral inactivity but of the vital capability for generating, on the basis of human multiplicity and otherness, an ever more complex and diverse narrative of humankind.

In this case, the moral imitation of Creation must inevitably remain both hopeful and problematic. At the center of moral creativity lies the ambiguity of human social tension. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama: "I must confess that I am not afraid of the word 'tension.' I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a kind of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. . . . [We need] to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1963).

racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood."³⁶ Moral intentionality does not find peace and rest—its desired ethical Sabbath—by fixed values and orders alone, however necessary these may be for limiting violence and oppression, but by embracing as far as possible human tension in its possibility for narrating ever more inclusive moral worlds. The negative prohibitions that “separate” or “part” violent persons and groups should ultimately serve the positive possibility for the “participation” of all in creating community between rather than in spite of human difference.

A hermeneutically sophisticated *imitatio Dei* will therefore resist all too frequent appeals to poetics as merely an expression of individual subjectivity or as its opposite, a representation of a given traditional narrative to be applied and adhered to. Understood instead as an *imitatio Creatoris*, humanity is ultimately responsible for narrating itself over time. Its capability for doing so is presupposed in the fact that human beings tell moral stories and myths at all. The impossible possibility commanded by our own mysterious natures is to imitate our own Creator in creating ever less distorted, violent, and exclusive historical worlds. Those done violence can find herein a deep well of empowerment to work toward transforming the social order. Those who perpetrate violence can discover that social creativity belongs to humanity as such in all its vulnerability, difference, and otherness. In both cases, what is to be imitated, in a hermeneutically dynamic way, is neither a lost nor an eternally fixed moral order but our own morally invisible creative humanity.

CONCLUSION

It would take further work to describe how such an inclusive and narrative human creative capability might realize itself in substantive moral norms.³⁷ Clearly, they would not involve history's coming to completion or its being left behind in an ahistorical or ineffable transcendence. Clearly also, no single individual could fully imagine what such a perfect narrative creativity would actually look like, involving as it does the working through of the creative tensions of actual human difference, even if each can and must participate. The aim would con-

³⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail—April 16, 1963,” in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 433.

³⁷ I have pursued this question to a certain extent in John Wall, *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 186–93, and “The Creative Imperative: Ethics and the Formation of Life in Common,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 45–64.

sist in no Hegelian synthesis of historical forces either, for what is to be realized is a dynamic capability for making meaning amid rather than beyond historical plurality. The aim is nothing less than the imitation within our own diverse, complex, and finite moral worlds of a dynamic, narrative, and radically inclusive Creator.

The creative moral capability is ultimately best imagined through the strange language of myth. Myth can simultaneously capture the narrative thickness of actual social dynamics yet also press it toward its own more primordial creative possibilities. Myth arises out of and subjects to critique particular historical conditions. Moral creativity is more concretely imagined the more its mythologization—as, for example, in McFague's all-embracing Motherhood—disrupts and transforms present history in a freshly inclusive way. The symbolism of a kingdom of God, by contrast, may now imply such hierarchical social domination that it can no longer function well as a symbol of the hoped-for new human community. Gustavo Gutiérrez offers still another possibility of the symbolism of “creative freedom” through “work”: “Humankind is created in the image and likeness of God and . . . fulfills itself only by transforming nature and thus entering into relationships with other persons. Only in this way do persons come to a full consciousness of themselves as subjects of creative freedom which is realized through work.”³⁸ In whatever form, such moral myths are themselves on some level all-too-human creations. Even the myth of the Creator Mother can transform human society only so far. Nevertheless, the value of myth for moral practice and thought lies precisely in its capacity for opening and transforming moral life. It can provoke our easily lost yet always also available faculty for creating together a more profoundly humanized social world.

All I have claimed here, however, is that moral practice involves, even if it is not exhausted by, a primordial creative capability. However such a capability may be realized substantively, my point has been to argue, against a long history in Western moral thought, that such a capability is not ancillary or hostile to moral practice but rather presupposed within it. Poetics is the condition for ethical life's transformative possibility. What it means to be an *imitatio Creatoris* is to be capable of imitating an invisible and dynamic creativity deeply impressed in the human will. This original human creative capability is absolutely necessary for forming worlds of moral meaning that may overcome historical distortions and violence and respond to human difference.

³⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, 15th anniversary rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 168, originally published as *Teología de la liberación* (Lima: CEP, 1971).

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Without it we are likely to retreat into unchanging moral certainties or a simplistic moral pluralism. The more profoundly human possibility is to engage in the endless but ultimately more rewarding task of creating real historical tensions into ever more meaningfully inclusive moral worlds.

These considerations may also help us reflect on the nature of ethics as a disciplinary inquiry. Somewhat like artists, novelists, and even social and physical scientists, ethicists should function, at least in part, as investigators and disrupters of accepted wisdom, imaginers of provocative new moral possibilities, transformers of shared social and cultural worlds, and contributors toward creating more inclusive human meaning. They should do this in creative and fruitful conversation and tension with other disciplines, transforming and being transformed in relation to them.⁵⁹ Ethicists can contribute to society in both theoretical and practical ways by challenging ingrained moral ideologies, naming and exposing real social tensions, and innovating new possibilities for social and relational worlds and practices—that is, by engaging their world creatively. This task is already part of the ongoing interpretive conversation of ordinary moral culture. Ethicists may raise social dynamics to higher levels of intentional reflection in the hope of helping humanity better respond to its own primordial poetic capability for “making” this a better world.

⁵⁹ In this respect, my project has similarities with the “multidimensional hermeneutic” approach to religious ethical inquiry proposed by William Schweiker in “On the Future of Religious Ethics: Keeping Religious Ethics, Religious and Ethics,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (March 2006): 135–51.