

# THE CREATIVE IMPERATIVE

## Religious Ethics and the Formation of Life in Common

John Wall

### ABSTRACT

Challenging a long-standing assumption of the separation of ethical from poetic activity, this essay develops the basis for a theory of moral life as inherently and radically creative. A range of contemporary post-Kantian ethicists—including Ricoeur, Nussbaum, Kearney, and Gutiérrez—are employed to make the argument that moral practice requires a fundamental capability for creative transformation, imagination, and social renewal. In addition, this poetic moral capability can finally be understood only from the primordial religious point of view of the mystery of Creation as such. Humanity as an image of its Creator is called to the endless impossible possibility of the re-creation of its own complex, plural, and fallen social world. Such a perspective is opposed to views of moral life as the application of law-like principles or the recovery of past moral histories. Without a better understanding of moral life's radically creative imperative, we miss a vital element of social relations' distinctive humanity.

KEY WORDS: *creativity, ethics, Kant, Nussbaum, poetics, Ricoeur*

IN THIS ESSAY, I WANT TO USE A VARIETY OF CONTEMPORARY post-Kantian resources to explore the role in moral life of *creativity*. In my view, such a role has been obscured by a modern Romantic subjectivization of the creative act, as well as by a longer philosophical separation—going all the way back to Plato and Aristotle—of poetics from the moral realm. The height of this separation of ethics from creativity can be found in Nietzsche, for whom “every creative deed . . . issues from one’s most authentic, innermost, nethermost regions,” which lie beyond the stultifying realm of responsibilities, mores, and society, indeed “beyond good and evil” (Nietzsche 1898/1967, 304, 309). Is there a meaningful sense, however, in which ethical life—in all its social, historical, and dialogical dimensions—is fundamentally a creative, productive, or poetic task? Does living a good life require in part a core creative capability? Can creativity be thought as a characteristic of not just the arts, literature, science, and technology, but also how we live and act responsibly toward one another?

## 1. Michelangelo's Creation of Adam

Let us begin rather impressionistically by briefly reflecting on a classical work of art: Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam." This remarkable scene, painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican during the height of the Italian Renaissance, is so familiar to us that we easily miss some of the rather surprising questions it opens up. God leans forward, surrounded by a host of angels, to touch a reclined and naked Adam's outstretched finger, while Adam himself is casually resting on an elbow and half turned away. It appears to be God who, floating through the clouds, is the one anxious to see this moment of divine-human contact come about. Moreover, as the eye is drawn to the meeting of the divine and human fingers, what must strike us is not just God's power but also God and Adam's *resemblance*. Adam and God are in fact mirror images of one another, gazing at one another almost as if at their own reflections. Adam receives this mysterious gift of "creation" from a Creator who in fact looks very much like him, who perhaps even has a certain very human anxious vulnerability in needing humanity's touch. On the ceiling of one of the most venerated sites in Christendom, depicting the very origins of humanity, we are invited to view not only humanity's creation but also humanity's *likeness* to its Creator.

Michelangelo's image is of humanity as an "image of God," referring to Genesis 1:27: "God created humankind in his image [*tselem*], in the image [*tselem*] of God he created them." This verse itself, like the painting, has a mirrored structure; it is an image of an image. The next place where this word *tselem* appears in the Bible is in Genesis 5:3 where Seth is said to be an "image" of his father Adam, suggesting that if Adam is to God as Seth is to Adam, a significantly stronger likeness of humanity to God may be meant here than we are usually accustomed to imagine. Nowhere else in the Bible is this mirrored likeness of humanity to God so sharply pictured. Indeed, the usual "images"—as taken up, for example, by Jean-Luc Marion (1982/1991) from the writings and the prophets—are different Hebrew words for "graven images" and "idols" that point instead to God's *dissimilarity*.

Michelangelo invites us, however, to go perhaps still further. For his painting itself—his image of this image—not only *depicts* creation but *is itself* gloriously and self-consciously *creative*. The painting stands as itself an image of humanity's own remarkable gift for creativity. Is it not possible that Michelangelo meant not only to repeat the biblical story but also to *embody*—that is, to *illustrate* not only by telling but also by showing—what humanity as an "image of the Creator" might really mean? The very creativeness of such a beautiful work of art itself seems to mirror the creativeness of humanity's Creator, displaying Michelangelo himself as, like Adam, an "image of" his Creator. This suggests a

three-fold image—the painting imagines the Genesis mythology which imagines humanity as an image of its Creator—which points in turn to humanity’s potentially *infinite* creative possibilities. Perhaps, of course, the only way for us to imagine a God who created us in God’s image is as a human being like us: muscles taut, hair flowing, arm outstretched. But this only confirms the suggestion that created humanity and its Creator should be understood to have a certain *primordial* (even if also historically fallen) resemblance. Whether we are made in God’s image or God in ours, Michelangelo could be interpreted as suggesting that humanity created in the image of its Creator is a humanity endowed with its own mysterious and ultimate *creativity*.

The Latin “*imago*”—as in *imago Dei*—captures much of this mythological complexity. In one sense, it means simply reproduction, copy, shadow: we are lesser images, passing shadows, mere copies of the primordial Creator of everything. But in a different sense, “*imago*” also means imitation, likeness, similitude: the possibility is open to us to affirm ourselves as made in the Creator’s creative likeness. This ambiguity in the human likeness to God has been exploited by theologians in different ways: Augustine’s fallen yet free soul; Aquinas’ historical yet natural law; Calvin’s depraved yet elected existence (we cannot enter this larger conversation here). Such a Creator may be radically beyond comprehension, a Giver to whom we can give no adequate return, a source of creativity before which self-creativity must appear impossible; but it can nevertheless be symbolized in creation mythologies as our own radical origin, our ultimate ground. As “*images*” of our Creator, our own creativity is revealed to be limited but real, self-enslaved yet free, fallen and shadowy yet *primordially good*.

Let me suggest, finally, that the priestly authors of Genesis themselves give this *imago Dei* a somewhat ambiguous meaning, a meaning that again I think Michelangelo’s painting well illustrates. On the one hand, they largely associate being made like God with having “*dominion*” over the earth, implying humanity’s sovereign power. On the other hand, God’s first instruction to those created in God’s image is to “*be fruitful and multiply*” (Genesis 1:28), suggesting creativity of a more generative and productive kind. Richard Kearney shows that these can be subtly blended when he argues that “*to be made in God’s image is . . . paradoxically, to be powerless, but with the possibility of receiving power from God to overcome powerlessness*” (Kearney 2001, 108). In other words, human power may consist precisely in its *impossibly possible* power for transformation, of both itself and its world. Genesis itself suggests as much if we consider the nature of this Creator in whose image we are said to be made: a Creator whose majesty lies in creating form out of chaos, light out of darkness, land amid the waters, and, in the end, a humanity which *itself* has a certain freedom and power of its own. The

mystery of human creativeness lies in our power in the image of God *to create* (as paradigmatically in Michelangelo's painting) form out of chaos and light out of darkness.

## 2. Paul Ricoeur and Humanity's Creative Capability

Power, however, raises the question of ethics, and it is on this that I want to focus our discussion. In doing so, I have no intention of suggesting a specific teleological order such as the supposedly "created" nature of human male-female sexuality. This, to me, reduces the mythological dimensions of human createdness to mere allegory—indeed, idolizes it, making it a *graven* image. Nor do I think human creativity is part of some larger religious moral narrative. On the contrary, it is already presupposed in the fact that humanity can *form* narratives at all. Rather, our primordial creativity points to a mysterious origin and ground of human relations as such, an origin re-grasped, insofar as this is possible, in a radical human *capability*, a capability for transformation, renewal, and self-transcending hope.

### 2.1 *A poetics of the will*

We may take a first step toward understanding such a morally creative capability by looking into the moral anthropology of the French hermeneutical phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur. As part of his larger philosophy of a "poetics of the will," Ricoeur suggests that moral life has its grounds in humanity's ineffable capability for creating meaning within its fallen world. Like his phenomenological forebears Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Ricoeur believes that understanding and truth lie first of all, not in empirical observation, but in the ways objects appear as meaningful through language to their interpreter. Even objects like texts, which for Ricoeur are forms of language having a certain "distanciated" or empirically analyzable structure, ultimately lack meaning without being appropriated into the self-understanding of a reader. The human capability for meaning is realized through a phenomenological detour—or hermeneutical circle—in which subjective understanding is mediated via objective realities in the endless task of the interpretation of one's world.

However, using Kant's theory of "radical evil" from *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1960, 15–39), Ricoeur also argues that humanity must finally be affirmed as ultimately created good, even if only as a matter of faith, because it inscrutably and paradoxically turns its own will against its phenomenological capability in actual moral history. Behind the human capability for meaning—indeed at the origins that make meaning a human *task*—is a primordial disproportion within the

will itself. “As radical as evil may be, it will never be more originary than goodness, which is the *Ursprung* in the field of ethics, the orientation to the good as being rooted in the ontological structure of the human being, or in biblical terms: creation, createdness” (Ricoeur 2002, 284). While evil implies a “loss of capability as we have it in the symbolic mythical language of slavery, self-inflicted incapability” (Ricoeur 2002, 284–85), goodness can be affirmed as the *still more* primordial and mysterious capability—presupposed within this very loss of capability itself—for hopeful self-renewal. This places Ricoeur in a tradition of Christian moral thought from Augustine through Luther and Schleiermacher that views a meaningful life as grounded ultimately in faith, faith, that is, in humanity’s primordial goodness despite evil.

But Ricoeur’s unique spin on this tradition is to understand this original human moral capability under the rubric of poetics. The centrality of poetics to Ricoeur’s thought has been noted by many of his readers (Schaldenbrand 1979; Mongin 1988; Greisch 1992; Kellner 1993; Grondin 1993). Kearney perhaps puts it best when he says that “Ricoeur’s ultimate wager remains a hermeneutics of the creative imagination . . . [that indicates an] ability to say one thing in terms of another, or to say several things at the same time, thereby creating something new” (1989, 2). Ricoeur’s otherwise bafflingly diverse investigations into symbolism, metaphor, narrative, and philosophical and biblical hermeneutics have in common that they are efforts to describe humanity’s root ontological capability to produce or create meaning in the world. Meaning is in some sense always already present in our world, but as human beings it is also something we must endlessly form and develop for ourselves.

This poetic capability is at root one for situated semantic innovation. We at once find ourselves already embedded within a field of sedimented historical languages and traditions, and yet also reflexively represent ourselves to ourselves and others in the way we bring this field into phenomenological appearance or *Dasein*. However, unlike Husserl and Heidegger, language for Ricoeur is inherently also a dimension of the human will; that is, it always in some sense creates something *new* and peculiarly *my own*. It belongs to the singular utterer who forms it into meaning. A symbol, for example, is not just an expression of culture but also a “spontaneous hermeneutics” that reaches understanding only insofar as it “gives rise to thought” in its interpreter (Ricoeur 1960/1967, 348). A metaphor, similarly, is “the most brilliant illustration of the power of language to create meaning by means of unexpected comparisons” (Ricoeur 1975/1978a, 27). And narratives are forms of language that not only configure plots but also open up and hence “refigure” the narrative identities of their readers (Ricoeur 1983/1984, 52–87). In these and other ways, language presupposes a human capability or will to *form* meaning, not just through a Gadamerian “fusion of horizons” of past and present,

but also, and at the same time, through language's creative *innovation* in the direction of the will's own open future.

Even though Ricoeur generally separates his philosophical from his religious writings, one also finds the suggestion in his work that this creative capability rests *ultimately* on a certain primordial faith in human capability as a mysterious and radical gift. Ricoeur's project of a "poetics of the will" was in fact originally intended to be an exclusively theological one, complementing and in a way completing his hermeneutical phenomenology. This poetics was to investigate, as Ricoeur puts it, "the world as created . . . [involving] *the death of the Self*, as the illusion of positing the self by the self, and the *gift of being* which heals the rent of freedom" (1950/1966, 30). Although this project was never completed in a theology of creation, it did continue to exert an influence through Ricoeur's continued "biblical hermeneutics," which, among other things, investigates the primordial disproportion underlying the human capability for meaning in which the self loses itself in self-created illusion yet still remains capable of ultimately creating or forming itself anew.

This healing of freedom is a reply to the radical evil of human self-enslavement, above, precisely because it constitutes an "originary affirmation" of human capability itself (1978b, 178). Faith recalls for Ricoeur something like his mentor Gabriel Marcel's Joy of Yes in the sadness of the finite (Marcel 1950/1960). Or, as Ricoeur himself puts it, faith can still grasp amid human evil "the joyous affirmation of being-able-to-be, of the effort to be, of the *conatus* at the very origin of ethics' very dynamic" (1978b, 178). In the midst of alienation, brokenness, and exile, we can still affirm what the authors of Genesis 1:31 claimed so long ago, that "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (see Ricoeur 1991, 197; 1987/1995, 298). The poetics of the will is essentially, therefore, an affirmation of humanity as created capable of meaning and goodness despite its inevitable self-captivity to narrowness, disproportion, and alienation from itself.

## 2.2 *From poetics to ethics*

This originary affirmation of the human capability for meaning is the basis in Ricoeur for a series of ethical insights. These insights are not metaphysical absolutes, but symbolic and mythological expressions of goodness that serve to transform human existence in the direction of its own transcending possibilities. For the self-enslaved human being, the capability for goodness remains a hyperbolic and radical limit, and yet through faith it comes alive as the impossible possibility for the renewal of our broken human community. This appears to be what Ricoeur means by saying that moral capability is liberated through an "economy of the gift": despite being truncated and distorted in actual history, social life in

common with others can be affirmed as that for which we are ultimately given or created.

This economy of the gift has a three-part dialectical structure that is remarkably similar to the three-part structure of Ricoeur's *philosophical* ethics that moves from the teleological good to the deontological right to their culmination in practical wisdom in situation (Ricoeur 1990/1992; see also Wall 2001 and 2005). Even though Ricoeur never says as much, this parallel structure suggests that the gift radicalizes and hyperbolizes what is already available to ordinary human moral understanding, even if in the process it also liberates and transforms it. This gift is presupposed *a priori*, as in Kant's solution to the practical antinomies (and also in a way the mystical *a priori* in Rudolf Otto), as a condition for the possibility of human goodness. But the economy of the gift moves more broadly through a kind of hermeneutical arc from faith in human teleological goodness to deontological love for each and every other to the practical wisdom of hope for humanity's eschatological social reconciliation. Tracing this transformative dynamics of the gift will help us see why Ricoeur thinks moral life rests ultimately not on the fixed moral law but on primordial human creation.

The notion of faith as affirming humanity's originary goodness radicalizes our ordinary capability, in Ricoeur's view, for self-esteem (*estime de soi*), that is, the capability for "judging well and acting well in a momentary approximation of living well" (Ricoeur 1990/1992, 180). Borrowing from the Aristotelian Alasdair MacIntyre, Ricoeur asserts the teleological imperative of forming a "narrative unity of life," that is, "the integration of actions in global projects, including, for example, professional life, family life, leisure time, and community and political life" (Ricoeur 1990/1992, 177). Unlike MacIntyre, however, Ricoeur views this broad human good as realizing the singular teleological capability of the self as such, not just to appropriate its historical traditions but also to transform and innovate them into meaning for itself. A narrative unity of life is "good" only insofar as it realizes the individual's mysterious capability for forming meaning for itself in this conflicted and self-enslaved world.

This suggests that at a deeper level our capability for narrative unity is both historically impossible yet mythologically affirmable for selves as bearers of the gift of creation, or, as I would say, as made in the image of their Creator. Faith does not provide some privileged access to God's plan for the world, much less a grand narrative into which we should try to fit our lives. Instead, it frees human narrative creativity as such to embrace its own possibility in the world. The gift of faith, as Ricoeur says, "*reanimates* this whole dynamism [of moral life] beginning from its point of departure . . . [so that] the strategic level where the evangelical morality operates is precisely that of the [teleological] ethical intention"

(1978b, 189–90). Faith is in this sense the grounds for the possibility, in the face of the self's own radical evil, for teleological self-narration in the first place. It serves the function of opening up what Ricoeur calls a "movement between naked and blind belief in a primordial 'I can,' and the real history where I attest to this 'I can'" (Ricoeur, 1978b, 177).

But this rather Augustinian interpretation of faith does not do justice to a second moment in moral life that Ricoeur's rather more Reformed sensibilities demand: namely, a second gift of *love* for the other. Love is understood by Ricoeur as a command to pass on the gift one receives in faith in oneself also to one's neighbor, to the stranger, to one's enemy, and ultimately to all creatures. Ricoeur formulates love as an economy: "because it has been given to you, give in turn" (1991, 198; 1987/1995, 300–302). This mythological give-and-take opens the self up to its own ever more radical capability not just to respect the other but also to transcend itself in responding to the other's infinitely disruptive otherness.

Thus, Ricoeur makes much of the fact that the traditional way of framing deontological ethics in the golden rule, "do to others as you would have them do to you," is placed in Luke 6:27–31 immediately after the hyperbolic claim by Jesus to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Ricoeur 1991, 197–98). Through this juxtaposition of ordinary and excessive moral commands, the golden rule itself is hyperbolized into the impossible possibility that you should *give* the infinite gift that you have received in turn infinitely to others. This, Ricoeur says, is scandalous, impossible; and yet we can still, through this gift, affirm ourselves as radically capable of it.

Here Ricoeur comes close to what his French colleague the Jewish ethicist Emmanuel Levinas calls the moral command from "the face of the other" as a trace of the Wholly Other beyond historical understanding and being (Levinas 1961/1969 and 1974/1981). Like Levinas also, Ricoeur speaks of history as enmeshed in the evil of the other's violent reduction to self-interest. But unlike Levinas (and we cannot settle the complex differences between them here<sup>1</sup>), Ricoeur grounds this call from the other, not in the other's alterity, but in the prior originary affirmation of faith in human createdness. The gift of love can be given to the other only insofar as the self experiences the given goodness of humanity as

<sup>1</sup> I discuss this relation in depth elsewhere (2005), as have others such as Joy (1993, 332), Wallace (2000, 312), and Kearney (2003). The most forceful Levinasian critique of Ricoeur is made by Cohen (2001, 283–325), where it is claimed that Ricoeurian self-esteem precludes genuine responsibility to otherness as such. Similar claims are made by Caputo (1993) and Critchley (1999). Although I acknowledge Ricoeur does not grasp the other's primordial origination of the command as well as does Levinas, I do not think this precludes the self from being called to make the other a creative response based on its own radical sense of having been made in the image of its Creator.



such. This means that for Ricoeur the command does not reduce the self to what Levinas calls the other's "hostage," to subjectivity in the form of "subjection" or Levinas' "passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter" (Levinas 1974/1981, 11, 14, 19, 141, 180–85). Rather, love is both passive and active at once, a receptivity to the alterity of the other that simultaneously appeals to the self's own radically created capability for *making* the other a response. Love links the negative command from Sinai not to kill to a still more primordial creation mythology that positively affirms humanity's original goodness.

### 2.3 *The poetics of hope*

But the poetic nature of Ricoeur's ethics only fully comes to light in a third and final moment of the economy of the gift in which faith and love give rise to hope. Hope is also for Ricoeur a mythological "gift," but now from the point of view of eschatology rather than origin, the radically open future toward which our createdness ultimately directs us. Without hope, human history by itself would be abandoned to cynicism, the play of raw power, the totalization of discourse. The evil here is not just self-enslavement or violence, but, much as in the liberation and political theologies of figures like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jürgen Moltmann, also the inevitable worldly distortion and one-sidedness of power. In his philosophical ethics, Ricoeur illustrates this problem through ancient Greek tragedy, where figures like Antigone, Creon, and Oedipus find themselves either victims or accomplices in the inevitable tides of social and political narrowness and blindness (1990/1992, 243–49). One is reminded of uses of Greek tragedy in German figures like Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and even Heidegger, for whom tragedy describes an ontological—and not merely accidental—human failure to realize genuine human community in history (see Szondi 1978/2002 and Schmidt 2001). In Ricoeur's terms, we face yet another form of historical human incapability, this time the incapability for the practical formation of society in common.

What is most interesting about Ricoeur's notion of hope, for our purposes, is that it too, like love, is rooted in a primordial affirmation of human createdness. It is not just Kant's hope for the immortal soul's ultimate reward in the afterlife of happiness for having followed duty (Kant 1956, 117–28), but hope for humanity's teleological new creation in history. Here, for Ricoeur, "the symbol of creator is 'repeated,' but from the angle of anticipation and not just from that of remembrance. The God of beginnings is the God of hope. And because God is the God of hope, the goodness of creation becomes the sense of a direction" (Ricoeur 1987/1995, 299). Hope "repeats" faith by turning a sense for created human goodness into the affirmation of humanity's common directedness

toward a kingdom of God. But hope also includes the deontological dimension of love, because it posits this kingdom as intended for *all*, and within this world, regardless of difference and even enmity.

Hope is therefore the creative culmination of Ricoeur's entire economy of the gift. The final gift is the impossible possibility for forming an ever more reconciled life with others in community. One paradigm for this new creation is the Abrahamic covenant, which for Ricoeur symbolizes the promise that the God of Creation "has approached, has been revealed as He who is coming *for all*" (Ricoeur 1969/1974, 404–6, emphasis added). Read in light of the primordial human creation, the covenant is not fixed in time like a blueprint for all later societies, but a symbol given meaning through its power for social and historical transformation. Similarly, the resurrection symbolizes for Ricoeur, not just personal salvation, but "a new creation *ex nihilo*, that is, beyond death" in the reconciliation of God with humanity overall (Ricoeur 1969/1974, 406, and 1995/1998, 154). What is to be resurrected in the end is not just one body or even one community of disciples, but the promise of a new Adam, a new humankind. What is affirmed in hope is the radical human capability for ever more inclusive social renewal, for the fulfillment of the *common* humanity originally given in creation.

### 3. The Creation of Community

What is compelling about Ricoeur is that he offers, beyond the ancient division of ethics from aesthetics initiated by Plato and Aristotle and carried over by Kant, a vision of moral life as inseparable from its historically transformative dimensions. Creativity is not just involved in the application of universal moral laws to real life, but is itself a dimension of moral capability, presupposed *a priori* in all our efforts to live ethically in the world. The renowned Kant scholar Paul Guyer has argued, in fact, that Kant's own aesthetics, in his third critique (2000), may in part have been an effort to deepen the ethics of his second critique precisely by linking moral freedom to the *sublime* freedom to make judgments of value about the world (Guyer 1993). However true this may be (and it is much debated), Kant's primary legacy in modernity was to have linked aesthetics to subjective "genius" (2000, 186–96). Thus, the Romantics Rousseau, Schleiermacher, and Hölderlin developed aesthetics as a sphere of pure self-expression, either separate from, or as ultimately in Nietzsche (and arguably Heidegger too) superior to, the moral realm as such. Ricoeur helps us question this now prevalent opposition of ethics and aesthetics by showing how the creative capability underlies moral responsibility and social renewal. (Of course, Hegel is aware of moral life's larger socially transformative dimensions, but in Ricoeur we have a figure who does not reduce social creativity to a totalizing movement

of Spirit [*Geist*]; on the contrary, moral creativity remains the impossible possibility, the radical capability, precisely of the self, the will.)

At the same time, however, Ricoeur's affirmation of such a moral capability remains in my view peculiarly abstract. It shares a certain disconnectedness from historical particularity found (arguably) in other Continental ethicists like Levinas, and indeed in Kant himself. In my judgment, this detracts from the notion that ethics has to do with individual and social transformation, and thus ultimately with creativity. The gift's radicality, while important, should not obscure its messy and particular humanity. I want, therefore, to now move both with and beyond Ricoeur to articulate something I think we found more concretely pictured in Michelangelo, namely that the mystery of human createdness lies not just in a gift of moral freedom but more specifically also in the capability for actual human creativity. Is it possible that in the moral realm we are not only created *by* a Creator but also created precisely *in the image of* this Creator, so that we ourselves may morally *create*? If so, at what kind of ethical community should capable creators aim? What kind of actual life together can we hope to create?

### 3.1 Moral imagination

Let me start with some reflections on moral imagination. If we are capable not only of moral goodness, but also of forging morally good communities in the crucible of our concrete lives with others, then it seems to me we ought to be capable of *imagining* each other ever more profoundly, particularly, lovingly, compassionately. This is something one could say, mythologically, that Adam and Eve "lost" in their fall. Prior to eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (which could imply a certain hubristic moral abstractness), Adam and Eve symbolize a human capability for life in harmony *within* difference, in their case within the difference of masculinity and femininity. This is only one possible way to symbolize human difference; others could be parent and child, native and foreigner, oppressor and oppressed, and so on. Adam and Eve are different, but their difference is, so to speak, in full view, without tragic conflict, not yet a source of social separation. After the fall, it is precisely their difference that they feel compelled to "cover over." The fall is in part a failure of imagination, in the sense that concrete otherness is a source no longer of joy and mutuality but (for Adam and Eve, at least) of shame, anxiety, and alienation.

This kind of primordial harmony amid difference (whatever the particular difference may be) remains for human beings impossible, yet it can still beckon us at the limits of our social imaginations. Just as Michelangelo's painting is an image of humanity as an image of God, Genesis can be read as an image in part of our radical possibility for

*imagining* one another. The story suggests that despite its impossibility in history, we are ultimately created capable of sympathetic mutuality with others precisely in their otherness. Gender is in a certain sense an apt symbol here in that it is between the genders that human beings procreate (cloning aside) and hence enable the re-creation of human community over time. Similarly, to imagine gender difference as nevertheless reconciled at the origins of history is to mythologize the ultimate human capability for imagining social creativity in common. What we may be called to imagine, as creatures made in the image of the Creator of the first human relationship, is our own capability for transforming human separation into community, in all the infinite ways this may be accomplished: in other words, for being fruitful and multiplying in the sense of *making* human community at all.

The American philosophical ethicist Martha Nussbaum helps us lend this capability for moral imagination a certain concreteness. Here I am thinking of her theory of the role of moral relationality in literature.<sup>2</sup> Novels, plays, poems, and the like, Nussbaum claims, provide a kind of education in our capability for “moral imagination” by sensitizing us as readers to characters’—and by extension others’ in general—concrete and singular particularities (1990, 152–56, 183–85). According to Nussbaum, “stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars, not as representatives of a law, but as what they themselves are: to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new; to care deeply about chance happenings in the world, rather than to fortify ourselves against them; to wait for the outcome, and to be bewildered—to wait and float and be actively passive” (1990, 184). Our literary capability for entering imaginatively into stories is vital for our moral capability in the real world of overcoming what she calls our everyday “obtuseness” toward and “simplification” of one another’s particular otherness (1990, 162).

Like Ricoeur, Nussbaum refuses the usual separation of Aristotelianism and Kantianism and ends up, in my view, with a kind of concrete Kantianism grounded in the capability for moral imagination. Nussbaum appears to accept a Kantian grounding of ethics in human freedom, but to reject Kant’s separation of moral freedom from the aesthetic, viewing morality itself as creatively imaginative at its very core. This can be seen in the way Nussbaum revises John Rawls’ explicitly

<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum, in fact, has an extensive theory of ten or more moral “capabilities”—such as “life,” “bodily integrity,” and “practical wisdom”—which she defines as “the functions without which (meaning without the availability of which) we would regard life as not, or not fully, human” (1999, 39). None of these expresses directly her earlier theory of the capability for moral imagination. However, in my view, imagination is central to how we picture a “fully human” life in the first place, and how we picture others as sharing this as well.

Kantian moral end of “reflective equilibrium,” which she replaces with the particularizing capability for “perceptive equilibrium,” or the loving and mutual imagination of each other in their concrete singularity (Nussbaum 1990, 182–85). What is especially interesting here is Nussbaum’s (perhaps unwitting) exploitation of Kant’s connection between ethical and aesthetic freedom—both being *a priori* capacities of human life—while refusing to consign the latter to the mere perception of beauty and opening it up also to the loving perception of the other. The moral capability then becomes, in a way, a creative one, at least in the sense of extending oneself toward a greater appreciation for difference in others and attempting to give such difference one’s own imaginative response.

Nussbaum does not apply this concretizing end of moral imagination to *mythological* stories of primordial human origins. Doing so, however, allows us (now in a somewhat Ricoeurian fashion again) to extend her analysis into the further claim that sacred stories can educate our moral imaginations both particularly and, and at the very same time, radically and disruptively. In the end, contra Nussbaum, we have to acknowledge the ultimate *impossibility* (despite its possibility) of moral sympathy being fully realized, for there are intrinsic limits to our capability as finite and self-enslaved creatures for imagining otherness as such. Nussbaum’s purely philosophical approach obscures this theological depth in which the moral imagination appears as radical fallen, so that the problem is not just lack of perceptiveness but also (as even Kant acknowledges) the inscrutable moral self-alienation of the human will.

At the same time, however, we can still affirm ourselves as *capable* of social imagination if we can mythologically—and not just literarily—imagine ourselves as *primordially* imaginative in the image of our Creator. Part of what this Creator created, after all, is humanity as an *image* of Itself. Similarly, can we not say that, in the image of this Creator of images, we too *can* create images of others, despite the profound historical impossibility of doing so completely or at all adequately? We too can breathe life into a social realm that we ourselves nevertheless constantly reduce to the dust and ashes of simplification. We can creatively imagine others as also, in their very particularity, diverse and singular images of humanity’s Creator. As Elizabeth Johnson has put it, the “human spirit . . . is a sophisticated evolutionary expression of the capacity for self-organization and creativity inherent in the universe itself” (Johnson 1993, 38–39). Except that this spirit, this breath of life, is in humanity also a peculiarly moral task, the task of ourselves imagining one another in our radically particular otherness.

This excursus into the moral imagination in the end helps us to concretize the notion of moral creativity by suggesting that love is not just a capability for transferring the gift of creation analogically onto the other

(as in Ricoeur), but also the effort *to create* an ever greater, if always incomplete, sensibility to the other's particular historical narrative. Love for others is something we must actively and imaginatively pursue in the context of the concrete realities of this world. It is not just that in creating my own narrative unity of life I should account for the other as also self-creative, but also that I should strive to form narratives of otherness itself in ever more radically imaginative ways. The good Samaritan manages to interrupt his walk along the road not just because the hurt stranger is another creature like him—or even an Other as a face of God—but also because he has the capacity to *imagine* the stranger's narrative particularity to a radical depth that others do not see. Far from reducing otherness to sameness, as Continental ethicists often fear, the capability for social imagination can resist oversimplification and violence by engaging otherness in its own concrete historical particularity. This means that the other's infinite irreducibility can be met only through a moral imagination that is open to its own mythological self-transcendence, its primordial capability for imagining others as particular self-creating creatures as well.

### 3.2 *Moral transformation*

Let us, however, go further. It is one thing to imagine otherness, another thing to engage it in socially productive and transformative discourse. Imagination should not be conceptualized as an end in itself, but as a detour on the way toward the re-creation of social relations. As Habermas has insisted, moral life has to go further than recognizing difference as such to also engaging difference in an actual "intersubjective process of reaching understanding" (Habermas 1983/1990, 67). In our case, what has to be accounted for is the demand that diverse selves can together create new community. Or, in mythological terms, we are ultimately capable in the image of the Creator of creating, as symbolized in Adam and Eve, human relationality, of making life in common precisely on the basis of difference.

This impossible dialogical possibility demands a creativity of an inherently unstable and endless kind. In history, my creativity always undermines yours, and yours mine; we remain in some measure creatively incommensurable. Creativity in common can be articulated concretely, however, in part by positing a connection between the *image* of God and the *kingdom* of God. If the former implies, as above, humanity's primordial capability to create, the latter can suggest humanity's radical capability for the re-creation of community. This helps us render Ricoeur's vision of the gift of hope for a "new creation" not just a *repetition* of creation but also something humanity as an image of God is responsible for *creating* ever anew in its own history.

Moltmann links this new creation to the concrete politics of *mission*: “the *pro-missio* of the kingdom is the ground of the *missio* of love to the world” (Moltmann 1965/1967, 224). Or, as he elaborates, “the world is not yet finished, but is understood as engaged in a history. It is therefore the world of possibilities, the world in which we can serve the future, promised truth and righteousness and peace” (1965/1967, 338). The promised kingdom of righteousness and peace is also humanity’s own “promise” in the sense of its ultimate future possibility. It is a mission for socially creative renewal. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his Birmingham jail cell: “Human progress never rolls in the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively” (1963/1985, 438).

This liberationist theme, which takes Ricoeur’s and Nussbaum’s quasi-Kantianism in a new and more socially dialectical direction, is still related to the capability for moral creativity. The mission of social transformation is ultimately rooted in a sense—even if not exhausted by—the unique status of humanity as creative in the image of its Creator. Facing the historical realities of marginalization, oppression, and social alienation, we can nevertheless affirm ourselves through faith as capable together of creating history anew. Without this affirmation, history is reduced to the victory of power over powerlessness, the inexorable entrenchment of political and economic oppression, we might even say the failure of inclusive social imagination. By contrast, the empowerment of selves presupposes an affirmation of both oneself and others as capable of imagining and re-creating their shared life in community. The great liberationist Gustavo Gutiérrez speaks, in fact, of “the continuous creation, never ending, of a new way to be human” (1971/1988, 21). While it probably remains the case that liberationism (again in the legacy of Kant) tends to gloss over humanity’s concrete narrative particularity, the connection I have been drawing to human creativity in the image of the Creator is nevertheless arguably presupposed. Witness again the words of Gutiérrez: “Humankind is the crown and center of the work of creation and is called to continue it through its labor (cf. Gen. 1:28). . . . By working, transforming the world, breaking out of servitude, building a just society, and assuming its destiny in history, humankind forges itself” (1971/1988, 90).

Although building a just kingdom of God against oppression places a different spin on the creative capability, it shares with Ricoeur’s hope for reconciliation and Nussbaum’s more concrete imagination of the other a sense for humanity’s ability to become not just history’s victim but also its ongoing transformer. In this way, we are able to imagine ourselves as co-creators of social history despite its having been hijacked by *merely*

historical power. No social scientific or even philosophical accounting of history could explain why as historical beings we can nevertheless, however minimally and interminably, re-create social history itself. This possibility can be pictured only mythologically, at the limits of history as we actually know it, at the limits of freedom's distorted enmeshment within it. The picturing of a social dialogue aimed at the kingdom of God is itself, in fact, a creative act, and hence a witness in its own right to our transcending social creativity. But in projecting such a mission, we also begin to gain a transformative purchase—without ceasing to be historical beings—on history itself. However much creation stories have been used to create and sustain social oppression, their deeper truth is a liberating or poetic one that points to our ultimate capability for social creativity in common at all.

The most profound way in which creativity is presupposed in moral life lies, therefore, in our capability for social hope. Although it is true, as Ricoeur argues, that hope is a hyperbolic gift, it involves also, within the context of actual historical power, the capability for social transformation amid particular difference. The other is to be imagined in all its disruptive otherness, but it is also to be engaged in the common human project of social re-creation. Reconciliation is not the repetition of a lost past but something we can affirm ourselves as ultimately capable of pursuing ever anew. This form of moral creativity comprises, if you will, a redoubling of imagination in that it imagines otherness in order to further imagine self and other ever more radically in common. In the image of our Creator, who drew chaos into form and light out of darkness, what we can ultimately affirm is that we are capable of creating moral community amid difference, however impossible such a task in fact appears.

#### 4. The Creative Imperative

We arrive, in the end, at a sense for how the kind of primordial human creativity illustrated in Michelangelo's painting may also begin to be elaborated (far beyond Michelangelo, to be sure) into something of a creative moral imperative. Just as a painter draws together a diversity of colors, impressions, and influences to create a work of art; or as a scientist collects multiple and conflicting observations and interpretations of its subject to form a new theory; so also, in the intersubjective realm, should moral selves on some level inhabit difference and conflict in such a way as to create ever more profoundly meaningful and reconciled life in common. Perhaps, unlike in these other spheres of human freedom, however, in moral life this creative capability must be radicalized. For the problem in moral life has to do with the creative realization of selves, not just in relation to media or objects, but in direct relation to one another,



so that it is all the more vital to insist on the *ultimate* creativity of each and every other. While art and science may have moral consequences (as in pornography and the atom bomb), ethics thematizes human relations themselves. Moral creativity is creativity between selves who remain, even if capable of joining together socially in history, also primordially mysterious to one another.

If creativity has been subjectivized in modernity, this has come at the price of a sense for how imagination, transformation, and renewal are also part of social relations and systems. Although it is widely acknowledged that societies evolve and develop over time, it is less clear how societies are more profoundly constituted at their very core by an *a priori* human capability for creativity in common. All too often we think of communities either as regulated by fixed laws, like Kant's analogy of the moral law to the starry heavens above; as mere sedimentations of past traditions and histories; or, by contrast, as evanescent structures of meaning that we can join and dispense with at will. The notion of a radically creative capability helps us see that communities are, instead, ongoing historical forms that we are called to create and re-create ever anew, and that this process should be guided at least in part by the ultimate poetic aim of a creatively reconciled humanity.

Although the image of humanity as created in the image of its Creator is a fruitful symbol to open our imaginations to this possible creative imperative, it is not the only such symbol one could use. Jewish, Christian, and other religions have multiple ways of mythologizing the creation of humanity in likeness to the divine, such as the human as spark or shard, the quasi-divine hero like the ever-cunning Odysseus, social transformation through prophecy and judgment, the mystery and oneness of communion, the spirit within and between each one of us. The point of such symbols of creativity, at least for moral life, should lie not just in the "moral" of the story but, more profoundly, in helping to expose humanity's primordial social creativity as such. Such mythologies place social relations within a transformative drama that holds up before us, as in a mirror, our own morally creative origins. The fact that we can mythologically imagine ourselves as creative—just as Michelangelo does so richly in his painting of Adam—should give us hope that even in troubled times like our own of worldwide conflict, deepening culture wars, biomedical revolution, and entrenched world poverty, ultimately difference can be the basis for creating community anew. We do not do so *ex nihilo*, but we are called to do so nevertheless.

Perhaps, then, we can revise Kant's declaration, "Have the courage to use your own reason!" (Kant 1959, 85)—his translation of the Enlightenment slogan, "*Sapere aude*" or "Dare to know," taken not incidentally from Horace's *Ars Poetica*—and say instead, with greater radicality, "Dare to create!"

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