

Creativity, Love, and Metaphor

A Christological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This essay treats the concept of divine creativity, arguing that such creativity emerges both within an absolute context and is motivated by love. The key term for this concept of divine creativity stems from a proper understanding of metaphor – the incorporation of new meaning within an already familiar term – which not only grounds all creative acts but also illuminates divine creativity in this loving context. That is, to the degree that God's creativity emerges in and through the person of Christ, and to the degree that, what we say of Christ can be said of God, the total nature of God can be unfolded through the concept of self-sacrificial love. This love must include God's creativity for consistency's sake.

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I outline a primordial relationship between divine creativity and divine love, and I do so through a middle term of “metaphor.” I will argue that the person of Christ forms an original metaphor through which God creates the world *ex nihilo*, and that the nature of this metaphor renders the being of God as defined by love. As such, I will rely deeply on the theological thought of a neglected 20th century theologian, Eberhard Jüngel, developing especially his linguistic and theological reflections in the context of a Christocentric worldview.

METAPHOR AND HUMAN CREATIVITY

The first question to be dealt with, here, regards the act of creative human insight and what constitutes such an act. That is, what are we doing when we are creating? An answer is not altogether forthcoming, for the world of aesthetics – that world with which we generally associate creativity – was not itself always creative in the sense that we currently use it, namely, in terms of the development of novel aesthetic experiences. For instance, the older world of iconography and mimetic art was based not necessarily on what we think of in terms of creative human insight (although it would be disastrous to claim that there is no creativity in mimetic art); it was based on customs and standards already traditionally laid out, given over to the iconographer. Certain figures were to stand at the forefront of the icon in particular configurations, and some were to be background characters; some had halos, and some did not. All of this depended on the social customs of who deserved halos and who did not.

However, this notion of mimetic art can stand as something of a negative criterion for what we tend to mean when we talk about creativity today. For better or worse, we are talking about the incorporation of something new within a piece of art, a song, a painting. We mean that the individual is the individual artist – the creative genius – who lets his or her creative genius shine. Indeed, the concern with creativity in the world of aesthetics emerges with romantic ideals and their influence on the arts rather than constituting some intrinsic property of aesthetics itself.¹ To the degree that romantic ideals stand strong within much of the art world, however, the two are easy to conflate.

Within such a set of ideals, then, we can come back to that first question: what are we doing when we are creating? To no small degree, we are creating something new – or at least relatively so. David Hume, however, makes a helpful clarification in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that remains useful here despite the empiricist reductionism. He states that the mind can piece together disparate images into endless combinations, which shows a certain limitlessness to the human mind.² So we can imagine unicorns by combining a goat horn and a horse. On the other hand, to the degree that all of our ideas are taken from experience, the mind is very much limited, for experience itself is limited to what actualizes itself in the world of our knowing. Thus, we can only piece together a goat horn and a horse because we have “seen” each.³

I think this distinction is important because it points us to the nature of what it means to create and what we are doing when we have creative insight. We are piecing together disparate ideas, sounds, colors, shapes, in new ways. We are imaginatively constructing something like a new world. At the same time, we can only do such based on the world that we know either through direct experience or second hand experience. In other words, in the

1 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 82-83.

2 Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 11.

3 Ibid.

act of creative insight, we are taking a world with which we are familiar, and we reconstruct it into something partially familiar and partially novel.⁴ In such a reconstruction, the world we knew is upset, and new possibilities are drawn out of that world. One can even say, that the act of creative human insight is the act of drawing out new possibilities the familiar possibilities in which we're already engaged as creative persons.

With this idea, we begin to move toward an answer to the question of what constitutes the act of creative human insight. However, I think the idea can be made more succinctly. If creating means drawing new possibility out of the old and familiar, at the base of creative insight is the act of establishing metaphor, which certainly seems like a strange thing to say. Metaphor, after all, is a very limited poetic device that could by no means stand as the base of human creativity. However, to understand the direction of this argument, one must see, say, poetic metaphor (the arena in which we're most familiar with the term) as a species of a broader sense of metaphor that by all means subsists within the poetic device, but altogether goes beyond it, too. This sense of metaphor first takes its meaning from the fact that being itself is linguistic in nature.

According to the aforementioned theologian, Eberhard Jüngel, the process of establishing metaphor constitutes the basic manner in which language – and through it, being – is formed.⁵ It works as the basic form of all discoveries (in the realm of aesthetics or elsewhere) to the degree that a discovery is no discovery at all until it comes to be articulated in words. This “coming to speech” is no small matter.⁶ Charles Taylor, who thinks similarly to Jüngel on these points, can give something of a quick summary of this hermeneutic tradition when he distinguishes between three basic philosophical attitudes toward language. The first believes that language is ancillary to the being of things such that he signifier takes its intelligibility from the sig-

4 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 88.

5 Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” 48 & 53.

6 *Ibid.*, 59.

nified.⁷ Such is the “classical” philosophical attitude toward language. The second attitude opens up with the nominalists and is consummated in Enlightenment thought.⁸ This view sees language as instrumental to our relationship to the world, either helping or hindering us from seeing the truth of things to the degree that language is clear or opaque. While language comes to affect our relationship to the world, language from this view is only a purveyor of information. The third understanding of language is one that sees our articulations and the concerns behind these articulations as constitutive of the world.⁹ That is, language still takes its cue from prior linguistic expressions, but it is also involved in the process of articulating the world anew, clarifying the world, expressing the world to someone. This last version is the quasi-romantic view of language adopted by Jüngel when he emphasizes the importance of “coming to words.”

As such, language cannot be merely a signifier or an instrument; it must be that place in which being can be unearthed, uncovered, articulated. To talk about “language” and “reality” is to talk about one and the same thing – or to talk about reality always presupposes talk in the first place. Thus, if one thinks of a world as an interrelated set of signifiers (words) that hold constitutive sway over the signified (beings) in accordance with our concerns, then one sees that it is precisely the signifiers (words) that open up the signified (beings) in accordance with our lived concerns.

Here, however, we come back to this notion of metaphor. That is, the basis of such acts of linguistic uncovering is found in this broader notion of metaphor. Metaphor must be understood as a manner of drawing out new linguistic (and thus ontological) possibility.¹⁰ It does this by incorporating into a signifier something alien to the predicate of that signifier’s prior

7 Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 96.

8 *Ibid.*, 97.

9 *Ibid.*, 98.

10 Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” 61.

know definition.¹¹ Two of the most famous metaphors in the west through which this idea can be better seen are the following: “Achilles is a lion” and “Jesus is the lamb of God.”¹² In the first metaphor, the term lion, which evokes ideas of the African Savanna and its fiercest beast of prey (which itself also evokes that other metaphor “the lion is the king of the beasts”), is predicated directly to the subject Achilles. In predicating this fierce beast to Achilles, Homer says that the essence of Achilles, who is himself defined by his warrior status, is fierce and to be reckoned with in battle. Achilles himself is this fierce lion, then, and the world and imagery of the lion is brought in and predicated of Achilles such that the being of the term Achilles is opened up to a greater degree than it was by simply calling him a brave warrior.

The second metaphor, “Jesus is a lamb” provokes a number of almost opposing ideas. It most certainly draws upon the sacrificial language of ancient Israel and the role a lamb could play within that system (the Passover meal, for instance). But it also draws upon the gentleness and helplessness of the animal that is subjected to that system, its innocence and docility. In it, this man Jesus becomes defined by his innocence of person and divine sacrifice, as one who innocently give of himself, even to the point of death on a cross. Without belaboring the point, the predications in both metaphors highlight something essential to that subject that were unknown in that manner prior to the metaphor.

More importantly, in a very important way, these examples highlight precisely how metaphor stands at the base of all creative acts, which is certainly true of the world of aesthetics, be it the sub-world music, painting, story-telling, or, most obviously, poetry. A metaphor allows two elements, previously unrelated, to be sensibly and thoughtfully brought into relation to one another. So, one can imagine Charlie Parker, playing through the

11 Ibid., 21.

12 Ibid.

chords of “How High the Moon,” and overlapping it with a tune that was to become his “Ornithology;” in the old standard, he sees new melodic and harmonic possibilities. Or, one can see in a van Gogh the transition from the so called “real” and definitive lines and shapes of his primogenitors, to a world defined, yes, by perceptual shapes, but incomplete shapes, undefined by absolute beginnings and ends.

This notion of human creativity, however, can be expanded even further. When, for instance, we engage in any creative human act – Galileo’s redescription of the world according to a heliocentric model, a quick fix with bubble gum to the leaky faucet in our bathroom – we are redefining the possibilities of the worlds in which we live according to metaphor: assimilating two previously unknown things into a novel unity.¹³ That is, we redefine a world according to relatively new possibilities such that our older worlds could never exist in that oldness any longer. The metaphor allows, then, for the articulation of new possibility, the discovery of something previously unknown.¹⁴ Metaphor undergirds all creative acts by articulating through alien contexts new relations.

DIVINE CREATIVITY AND METAPHOR

I have been speaking so far within a “relative context” of creativity, namely, that of human creativity and its dependency on tradition, experience, etc. Human creativity as illustrated in the Hume example is always constituted by the drawing out of new possibility – the metaphorical re-articulation of signified – according to a given world that already addresses us. We are, in other words, thrown into a predefined world, given over and predisposed to certain linguistic trends and concerns. We do not create or

13 Ibid., 48.

14 Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 53.

discover absolutely. Yet, for the same Jüngel mentioned above, one can intimate an absolute sense of creativity as well, or so I will argue. The absolute sense is found in God and God alone. To some of Jüngel's useful thoughts on pertinent matter, then, I would now like to turn, depicting especially the way in which God's absolute sense of creativity not only conforms to the idea of metaphor but grounds it in the first place.

For Jüngel, the original act of creation is found in a novel address of God.¹⁵ Here, God draws up something from nothing; God creates *ex nihilo*. This *ex nihilo*, however, is extremely important, for it suggests that God creates through and in metaphor. That is, in the beginning and besides God, there is nothing.¹⁶ In this sense, the "is" of this phrase does not predicate the existence of nothing. Nothing, in this regard, is not and cannot be. It does not constitute some primeval material extant beside God from which God forms the world. Jüngel will not agree with certain panentheistic and process trends on this point. No, nothingness is precisely that: nothing. And the phrase "besides God there is nothing" only denotes the aloneness of God.

Unlike humans, then, there resides no pre-existing horizon from which God creates, not so long as this nothingness denotes the aloneness of God. In this regard, God actually creates an "alien context" or otherness in God's initial act of creation. This is done by God's relating to God's self as the difference between God's self and another. Thus, when Jüngel states that God creates *ex nihilo*, he indicates that God is opening up the possibility of an other to God's self with which God could relate as the difference between God's self and this other. In the broadest sense (which does not mean the most concrete and telling sense) one could call this "other" the world.¹⁷

God creates the world *ex nihilo* and, in so doing, becomes the difference (to steal a phrase from Karl Rahner) between God's self and the world who

15 Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*, 223.

16 *Ibid.*, 223.

17 *Ibid.*, 223.

stands within the nothingness of the word.¹⁸ But what has this to do with the idea of metaphor? *Everything* – at least from Jüngel’s theological perspective. In order for God to create the world, God must relate to that world *as this difference*. However, if God so desires to relate to the world in God’s difference from the world, it makes sense to describe God’s relationship to the world as metaphorical in the strict sense of the word. That is, God would have to relate to the world as something utterly different than the world, manifesting this absolute difference in terms that the world could understand – according to terms that are familiar to the world. This would further mean that the original creative act in which God creates the difference between God’s self and the world is itself a metaphorical act, one in which God’s difference is related to the world understandably.¹⁹ And such is precisely what Jüngel argues constitutes the nature of creativity in God. God’s creative act is itself metaphoric, grounding the possibility of all other metaphor in itself.

JESUS OF NAZARETH, PARABLE, AND METAPHOR

As interesting as any of these thoughts might be, certainly there must arise the question of whether these thoughts have any bite to them or whether they relegated to a realm of abstraction. That is, while I’ve maybe clarified the possibility of metaphor as related to original and absolute creativity, I’ve failed to show that it remains a actual option for interpreting God’s creativity. One can only open such an option can option, however, by showing *where* God has achieved this metaphoric relating of God’s difference to the world. Such a metaphor is found in Jesus of Nazareth, the

18 “God establishes and is the difference of the world and himself.” Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 62. Jüngel, however, definitively reflects a similar language: *God as Mystery of the World*, 224.

19 Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*, 302.

Christ – the one who unfolds for us God’s difference (an alien context) in terms that we can understand.

According to Jüngel’s interpretation of Jesus, Jesus is the Word and image of God, to be sure. He is, in accordance with classical Trinitarian thought, a concrete unfolding of God and, thus, a portrayal of God’s difference between God’s self and the world; Jesus is the one who gives insight into God’s being by being “con-substantial” with the Father. (Jüngel does not use this language, but it is still helpful in expressing the tradition context of Jesus’ divinity, which will be affirmed here.) Jesus is all of this, however, in terms of a metaphorical character or, to be more precise, a parabolic character.²⁰ This latter point I will need to explain.

According to Jüngel, a parable is an expanded metaphor and a metaphor a more concise parable. Rather, the parable is a metaphor in narrational form and a metaphor the parable to the point.²¹ Just like a metaphor, the parable brings new meaning to a subject by means of its predicate, only for the parable the predicate of the subject is no single term but a story about that subject.

Take, for instance, the following parable: “[T]he kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matt 13:45-46). In this parable, the kingdom lacks direct definitional description; we gain no direct insight into the makeup of the kingdom of God being spoken about. However, we are confronted with a seemingly impractical merchant who seeks a pearl of great quality. When he finds it, he gives up the entirety of his merchandise – presumably that into which he had planned to incorporate the pearl – for the pearl itself, which is by no means what one would expect the merchant to do. As such, we are turned around and opened up by the story – we thought the merchant wanted to sell the pearl – caused to

²⁰ Ibid., 302.

²¹ Ibid., 290-91.

question this strange turn of events – the merchant wants to hold onto this pearl that he has sought – and, as such, brought into contact with that toward which the parable orients us: the kingdom. In this regard, we have no direct experience of this kingdom, but the parable opens us to an expectation of the kingdom as that which turns the normal order of things on its head.

Jesus of Nazareth is the parable – or extended, narrational metaphor – of God. And as this metaphoric relationship of God to the world, Jesus is the familiar subject, the human-person, whose life is totally defined by that which is totally and completely alien to himself – the difference that is God. I will come back to the nature of this difference shortly, for the difference’s precise character is an extremely important matter. For now, something must be said on Jüngel’s highly Christological interpretation of God.

For one, if Jesus is God’s parable, Jesus must in himself be truly defined by this difference and truly define this difference to the world. If he is not, Jesus cannot truly manifest this difference that is God between God and world. And if he does not actually define this difference, Jesus can, say, give off some “information” about this difference without ever truly allowing God, through the difference, to relate to the world as the difference that God really is.²² For Jüngel, (and I’m projecting into Jüngel now for I am moving beyond his thought in some ways), Jesus must truly and ontologically be that difference to the degree that we affirm him as God not by virtue of his moral character, which is godly enough; but we affirm his divinity by virtue of that character truly and absolutely establishing the relation of God as the difference in this world. Jesus, in other words, must himself be divine, however that will come to be interpreted. (I will say more on this idea in the next section.)

It is for this reason that Jüngel affirms that Jesus of Nazareth – the parable of God – forms the internal covenant between God and world such that

²² Jüngel, *God’s Being is in Becoming*, 10.

God will be a God for this world as its difference between God's self and the world and the world will be a world for and in light of a relationship to God as this difference. In other words, the humanity of Jesus is the Logos by means of which God creates in the first place. Given that the Logos of this creation is itself metaphoric – the creation of a relationship between God as difference and the world as other than God – we see in Jesus the original metaphoric-parabolic act of creation, which must now be defined.

METAPHOR, CREATIVITY, AND LOVE

I have said that the act of creation is a metaphorical act in human and divine terms alike. However, in that divine act of absolute metaphorical creation – a creation that is intrinsically bound up with the man Jesus of Nazareth – there stands a certain trajectory that has remained thus far untouched: God's absolute creativity remains self-identical to God's love.

To move back to the thought of Jüngel and his reflections on Johannine literature, one must take seriously the idea that God is love and, even more importantly, that this love is irreducible to human love.²³ This idea can be drawn out by way of the relationship between selfhood, world, and loving.

Selfhood always signifies a self-relation in the context of a relationship to a world. That is, one is thrown into a world and, as such, given over to certain possibilities. Selfhood emerges when one comes to define one's self by orienting one's narrational path through those possibilities through both a reflection on those possibilities in the context of one's desired path. A self, then, in is a self-relation, relating itself to both a grounding world and its place within it, and one can say that, since the 18th century, the west has tended to think of this self-defining process individualistically. In love, how-

²³ Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*, 342.

ever, one's "ego"²⁴ is drawn beyond one's immediate world and one's singular possibilities. Instead, the ego comes to desire another and freely acquiesce to that desire for the other, finding its rest in the other's possibilities.²⁵ In this regard, one's self is no longer the ground of one's relationship to the world; rather, one's world is blown open by the self's free commitment to the other and her world. One becomes oneself, in other words, through the other, in whom one invests oneself. The self-in-love is a self who remains a self-relation but for whom a thou – a beloved – constitutes its self-relation.²⁶

Even phenomenological speaking, love is at least partially defined by self-giving such that in the giving of one's self, one gains one's self-identity in the first place: an identity of loving relationality. The question for Jüngel is what this has to do with God? The answer is this: God, who is known through Jesus of Nazareth, is the very act of self-giving and self-sacrifice as expressed in Christ. In this regard, and first, the man Jesus of Nazareth displays this notion of love in its perfection, at least so far as the biblical and ecclesial witness goes. Jesus lives a life dedicated to the good of not only others but of that Other who is constitutive of his very personhood: God. If the man is not healing the sick and raising the dead, he is mercifully taking upon himself a self-sacrificial crucifixion, and calling into question all forms of violence and oppression through his person and life. Jesus gives for the sake of those around him, Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile alike.

As with Trinitarian logic, what can be said of Jesus can be said of the One who sends him. So, we can say that God, whose parabolic image is found in this man as God's Word, is a driving force behind Jesus' actions. God affirms the trajectory Jesus' life and death to the degree of eternally self-

24 I use this term as a shorthand to define the nature of the self in the context of an individualized world. This is not to say such an understanding of the self is ontologically correct but to say that, after Descartes, the west has hyperbolized the individualistic understanding of selfhood.

25 Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*, 319.

26 *Ibid.*

identifying with it.²⁷ Here is where Jüngel makes one of his more interesting claims, namely, that God self-identifies with this man even to the point of the cross, where God “dies” with this man in his crucifixion.²⁸ Jüngel does not affirm a sense of divine impassibility although he most certainly counters this lack of impassibility with the eternal trustworthiness of God’s undaunted faithfulness to God’s covenant with creation, which is ultimately seen on the cross. God is the one who, in Jesus the Christ, takes the cross upon himself, and in this self-sacrificial love, shows God’s love for us.

The love of the cross, which is first shown to be “within” God, cannot remain as such. Love cannot *merely* form some external characteristic of God. When love is predicated of God it must be self-identical with God lest a self-contradiction should emerge: that the notion of a love who gives itself *in its entirety* – self-sacrificially on the cross – also holds something back in that giving. No remainder can stand within God when God speaks God’s Word in Christ, even if this Word spoken remains, as Love itself, greater than that which we can so conceive – to steal a phrase from Anselm.²⁹

God is love, and thus love defines the essence of God in God’s entirety. Such, at least is the proper understanding of the Trinity. God is intrinsically a self-giving love who, in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rests the identity and constitution of each person within the dynamic act of giving itself to the

27 One ought briefly to note that, while it’s true that attributes of the Son are said of the Father in classical Trinitarian language, that same language separates the human and divine natures in the man Jesus. There is always a distinction, then, between what’s done to the man Jesus and how it affects the Father. Some modern Lutheran theologians like Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel, to name two, seem less willing to retain this distinction, and rightly so in my mind. Part of this willingness to express such a relation must be bound up with Luther’s own understanding of the communication idiomatum, namely, that divine and human attributes do not stay cleanly separated as in the Calvinistic and Thomistic stances but intermingle.

28 Indeed, Jüngel tasks himself with thinking through not merely some self-destruction of God as such but the profound and positive significance of God’s death and how such overcomes the pull of our existence towards nothingness. Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*, 209-10.

29 *Ibid.*, 374.

other, from whom each other also, thus, receives itself. No divine person exists unto itself but only in self-sacrificial, self-giving, eternal relationality.³⁰

More importantly, the statement that God is love draws us nearer the crux of this section, namely, determining the relationship between God's love and creativity. As love, God must create in love, for all things performed by God must stand within and be consistent with the love that is God. God's creativity is, thus, united to God's lovingness. The two form a primordial unity: creativity is the offspring of love insofar as love must be related to something beyond itself, but so too is God's love the offspring of God's creativity since the absolute dimension of creativity place God into contact with that other than God. God, thus, creates, in love, for the sake for relating to something other than God, through which God will also relate to God's self. God chooses freely to be a God who is in relation, a God who gives of himself, as Trinity and through the self-sacrificial Word, to that other. So to say, God is a freely giving love whose love creates otherness.

CONCLUSION

What, then, is there to say about the relationship between divine creativity and love? Divine creativity is an expression – if not the expression – of God's. If God is love, and if love unfolds itself through a self-relation through an other, creativity seems to be God's mode of unfolding this otherness and God's loving relation to it. Thus, God's love emerges in God's creative action, which is known, seen, and understood in the walking parable that is Jesus the Christ.

In this regard, herein also lies the importance of metaphor for this unity of love and creativity. The one who God first loves and in whom God loves all things is this person, Christ. Jesus, in his life death and resurrection con-

30 Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming*, 81.

stitutes the internal covenant of creation – the Logos – by whom, in whom, and through whom God makes all things. God calls forth creation for the sake of being with this person and, through him, all of creation. Through Christ, then, God parabolically unfolds that which is other than God while simultaneously revealing God’s identity to creation as the difference of love within creation that makes a salvific difference.

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