

THE POET, THE PRACTITIONER, AND THE
BEHOLDER: REMARKS ON PHILIP HEFNER'S
"CREATED CO-CREATOR"

by Vitor Westhelle

Abstract. Philip Hefner's notion of the created co-creator is treated here as a concept in its procedural sense. The concept as a theoretical construct offers a substantial account of human capabilities, their ingenuity to transcend the intrinsic and bring about a new order of growth and development. However, the limitation of this concept is its neatness. It suppresses that which cannot be suppressed. This otherwise straightforward concept fails to give a realistic description of the human in situations of being on the edge that points to an end where there are no alternatives or negotiations. What is promising in the created co-creator is that it is able to incorporate elements of the Western philosophical and theological anthropology. I propose that the created co-creator reflects and elaborates the Aristotelian human attributes of *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poiesis*.

Keywords: analogy; created co-creator; irony; *poiesis*, *praxis*, *theoria*.

My remarks here on Philip Hefner's notion of the created co-creator are developed in two stages. I attempt first to show what the notion, in my opinion, does not do—what in my reading it lacks. Then I try to demonstrate what I see it accomplishing. But before I elaborate on those two points I offer a brief introduction.

Created co-creator is a neat idea, in the sense that it has distinct contours. It is well organized and able to serve many purposes. It has been used as a figure of speech, a trope, a metaphor, and a symbol with an array of denotations and connotations (d'Aquili 1994; Gerhart 1994; Gilkey 1995; Hefner 2002). However, I am concerned here to treat it as a concept, a *Begriff* in the Hegelian sense, a theoretical construct that anchors a

Vitor Westhelle is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, IL 60615-5199.

[*Zygon*, vol. 39, no. 4 (December 2004).]

© 2004 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

broad theological and anthropological system. It purports to present an encompassing vision of the human as a crossing into transcendence. Created co-creator is the concept that offers a tangible description of what in more abstract terms has been described as human self-transcendence, the ability of human beings to go beyond their natural endowments by creating culture and inventing environments of belonging. The concept of the created co-creator is thus able to address anthropological notions that not long ago were absent from the theological vocabulary but now are decisive for it, such as *mestizaje*, hybridity, emergence, and even Donna Haraway's "cyborg" (1991, 149–81).

There is an aura of optimism surrounding the notion of the created co-creator that could be attributed to an anthropology that resembles or finds its origin in the famous dictum of Irenaeus (one of Hefner's favorite theologians of the early church): "The glory of God is a living human being." But the Hefnerian notion of the created co-creator teaches us also to trust and believe that modernity, this unfinished project led by a restless critical search for certainty and rejection of all truisms, can indeed work—and as it claims it will, if we are responsible and willing to make some corrections as we move along. As an analogy in contemporary theory, Hefner's program is to theological anthropology and to the interface between science and religion what Jürgen Habermas's is to modern philosophical rationality, morality, and aesthetics. Both thinkers have an unassailable trust and confidence in human capabilities and open possibilities of growth and development, yet for Hefner, unlike Habermas, this is predicated on the human relation to and dependence on God.

Such an affirmative anthropology contrasts sharply with a Hobbesian pessimistic view of "man as a wolf against man" (*homo homini lupus*). This road not taken by Hefner finds expression in his own Lutheran theological heritage in Mathias Flacius Illyricus's condemned argument that with original sin human beings had the imprint of the image of God replaced by the image of the devil. Hefner's Lutheran lineage is closer in this respect to the affirmative anthropology of the likes of Andreas Osiander—who, it is worth noting, was probably the first theologian to engage "modern" science by defending and writing the preface for Nicholas Copernicus's *De revolutionibus orbium* in 1543.

SHADOWS

What the concept of the created co-creator does not accomplish, in my opinion, is to present a plausible account of the human in circumstances where there is no longer an economy, no middle, crossing-over, self-transcendence, or mediations. For example, I cannot read the created co-creator in the face of the Palestinian teenage girl who wraps herself in explosives. Neither can I read the created co-creator in the skillful U.S. Air Force pilot

who at 35,000 feet drops bombs on Iraqi villages without ever seeing a human target. The created co-creator does not account for a reality in which there is no commerce anymore, in which there are no longer means, transactions, or an economy. Such a condition can be described by its precisely symmetrical opposite: the gift. The phenomenology of being on the edge and that of the gift are similar in that they mirror each other. Both signal the end of an exchange, of commerce and trade—in the case of the gift, by sheer presence; in the case of what I miss in the created co-creator, by the experience of utter absence.

Let me present an illustration from the arts. In 1936 Salvador Dali painted “Soft Construction with Boiled Beans: Premonition of Civil War.”¹ This is probably the most dramatic representation of the years leading to the civil war in Spain. The painting is of a body tearing itself apart and forming a sort of a frame in which the middle is just emptiness set in the backdrop of a clouded sky, suggesting an impending storm. This painting, less known than Picasso’s “Guernica,”² is however at least as powerful in presenting a world in which human beings no longer find any meaning or mediation by which life’s possibilities might be negotiated; humans are no longer able to construct their subjectivity. Unlike in “Guernica,” where the dim light of an electric bulb seems to indicate at least a possible source of hope, in “Premonition of Civil War” the heavy sky in the background does not suggest any hope for relief.

These anthropological observations are not alien to a central feature of Christian theology. Let me call it the apocalyptic. Regardless of its validity as the “mother of Christian theology,” as Ernst Käsemann has argued (1969), it played an important role particularly in early Christian thought and has continued throughout the ages. And even if it is now not featured in most of mainstream theology, it still addresses the plight of millions if not billions of people in the world. It accounts for an experience that is exemplary, given in Kierkegaard’s discussion of the sacrifice of Isaac, in which hope is against all hope. In the experience of facing the end of one’s world, in the surrendering of any guarantee, or allowing for any negotiation, another, inverted world announces itself, and nothing and everything collide. In the trespassing of this boundary between worlds, the known that is negated and the unknown that is imminent, inscribed as a mere cipher, we have the apocalyptic condition. Michel de Certeau (1984) has defined this condition as one in which there is no longer strategy. Tactics is the end in itself.

The concept of the created co-creator seems to me to inscribe itself in the great and venerable tradition of mediation theology. The assumption that it is possible to transit between the mystery of the eternal and the understanding, or rationality, of historical transience grounds mediation theology. The very attempt to engage or even yoke science and religion or theology and culture lies at the very core of a theology of mediation. It

relies on the possibility of making analogical moves between the divine *theos* and the human *logos*. However, such a theological stance is opposed by a minority report that equally belongs to theology, namely, the diacritical tradition, which often emerges only as a counterpoint, yet a decisive one. There is no apology necessary for bluntly aligning the created co-creator with mediation or analogical theology, which is after all the majority report, the received view in modern theology.

However, in my reading of Hefner's theology there is a vein in his theological mine that has always resisted precisely the surrendering of theology to a metaphysical system, to a system ruled by analogy. And I am suggesting that I do not see this reflected in the notion of the created co-creator. The concept seems to be ruled by a potent analogical argument alone. What I miss is the diacritical countermove of irony. This move that I find missing is well reflected by the anecdote about his grandmother's recipe mentioned in the opening pages of Hefner's *The Human Factor* (1993, xiii–xiv): "This is a joke," but it "may work out." In this there is irony, the moment of dissonance, and a diacritical noise in the midst of a regulated system, which I do not find expressed in the created co-creator. What Nadine Gordimer once said about literary texts could be said about theology, even if only in part, but indeed a part: a narrative must strike the reader like a pistol shot in the middle of a symphonic performance.

This is what I think the concept of the created co-creator does not do: it suppresses the ironic gesture, the dissonance that comes along with a difference that cannot be concealed. It is too clean and neat for the apocalyptic dis-ease of being on the edge of human endurance, at the point where rationality cannot reason itself out but turns against itself and becomes demonic. But more seriously, jest and laughter are exiled from academia.

ANALOGIES

After these critical remarks, though what the created co-creator does is already implied, I would like to lay it out in a more systematic form. There is a simplicity about the concept that is elegant and suggests straightforwardness. It is remarkable to observe how a great concept can bear the weight and impel a vast theological argument. Like a painter who renders into the canvas what books would fail to express, such is the beauty of theological concepts. They are to theology what a prayer might be to religion, or a poem to art, or a formula to mathematics. They evoke a world and seek to order it. Just think about some of these concepts that still inhabit the theological vocabulary: *logos*, *theosis*, *basileia*, *metanoia*, *donum superadditum*, justification, *mirabilem mutacionem*, absolute dependence, ultimate concern, *totaliter aliter*, and so on. (They are often kept in the languages in which they were originally uttered exactly because they are concepts; they are not common nouns with a semantic value comprised by and confined to a dictionary entry.)

Created co-creator belongs to this category of concepts. What it does is evoke images and create rational frames that are embedded in it. The concept that Hefner coined evokes thoughts concerning the human nature in its relationship to both God and the rest of nature, human and nonhuman, that theology calls creation. In doing that it tries to isolate the uniqueness of the human, suggesting core elements of what belongs to Western philosophical and theological anthropology (Hefner 1973; 1997; 2001). Although Hefner may never have made this argument, I propose that the genealogy of the concept of the created co-creator can be traced back to the Book V of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which defined human beings by three fundamental attributes inherent in their nature: *poiesis*, *praxis*, and *theoria*.

The elaboration of Aristotle's argument is aided by analogy to the Greek theater. There are three basic components that are part of theater. First, there is the building of the stage and the writing of the play itself. Second, there is its actual performance. Finally, there are the spectators. The first element is what is called *poiesis*, the act of creating something that ends in an objective reality. The second is called *praxis*, the craft of doing something for the sake of doing it well. The third is called *theoria*, the art of observing and being exposed to something. I suggest that the created co-creator is a theological elaboration of precisely these three distinct human attributes. Each one is in a directly proportional relation to the three component parts of Hefner's concept of the created co-creator. I present them in the inverse order in which they are formulated. The first is a noun (creator), the second is a prefix (co-), and the third a verb (created). The three together reflect Aristotle's attributes of what it means to be human.

Poiesis: The created co-creator is a poet. The word refers to the ability to create something that was not there before. It produces an objective result (like a stage, or the text of a play, to keep the analogy of the theater). The word is used for all human labor, physical and mental (the etymological root of the English "poetry"). The "poet" is the carpenter who makes a chair out of rough wood. The poet is also then the one who says that which brings about or evokes a new meaning in language, which had not been expressed exactly like that before. In the Septuagint *poiesis* describes God's own creation of the world. As the Nicene Creed literally says, God is the poet of heaven and earth (*poieten ouranou kai ges*). In the New Testament *poiesis* is also used for the miracles of Jesus. The poet enunciates a new reality and brings it to life. In the Creed this is the work of the Spirit who is described as *zoopoion*, the giver of life. The poet labors. And as long as human labor is creative it belongs to the same activity that is also attributed to God, to Jesus, and to the Spirit. This is probably the most scandalous element in Hefner's formulation. It places the human creative activity alongside God's. The argument against the formula resorts to the exclusive Hebrew word *bara* (in the first verse of the book of Genesis) to

describe only God's creation. This verb is never used in connection with human activity. But the Septuagint translates it as *poien*, which Claus Westermann defends by pointing out that in many other places of the Hebrew Scriptures words used to describe God's creating activity are also used for humans (Westhelle 1986).

Praxis. The prefix *co-* in created co-creator suggests relations, implies mutuality and partnership. Most interpretations of the created co-creator I have seen seem to assume that this partnership is with God and with God alone. I propose that the first inferred meaning of the prefix refers to the human ability to do what we do because we are in *human* partnership and relations of exchange and interaction within the human community. This is what the word *praxis* entails. Strictly speaking, a practitioner is a performer immersed in a web of communicative relations. While this is and must also be ultimately applied to our cooperation with God, we ought not to forget that it necessarily implies our horizontal fellowship in relations of solidarity among ourselves. It is because of this solidarity, because of our capability of being for one another, even to the point of altruism, that also establishes our relationship to God. It is an old rabbinic tradition to interpret the first account of the creation of *Adam* in Genesis as the creation of the first interhuman relationship (*adam* = male + female). And from there it follows that it is this archetypal entity that is endowed with the image of God, therefore also capable of co-union (communion) with God. This is what *praxis* entails: the communicative action and interaction for the sake of doing it well, as Plato defined it in the *Republic*. In the analogy of the theater, it is what the performers do, and after the performance is over nothing objective is left. What was performed survives in the intersubjective experiences that have shaped the characters. I believe that this is what underlies Hefner's ecclesiology as it was presented in his Hein-Fry lectures some years ago (Hefner 1998a, b, c). The church is about this *praxis* of communion and mutuality. To phrase it in the words of the character Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: "People go to church to *share* God, not find God" (1982, 176)

Finally we come to the first word in the created co-creator triad. This for me corresponds to Aristotle's *theoria*, the act of contemplating, observing, envisioning, "speculating" (which is also the third stage of the medieval rule of piety: *contemplatio*). This is what being theoretical technically means. Phrasing it in another way, and taking an insight from the anthropic principle, it would look like this. If we are only able to observe that which has made possible our emergence as creatures, then the original conditions that presuppose existence cannot be empirically observed but only contemplated, speculated, envisioned. Being created means, therefore, to recognize that we are not that which ultimately brings us about. We are not the cause or origin of our own selves. We can only "see" it, as the apostle Paul says, with the eyes of faith. All creation in this sense is a

piece of poetry originally engendered by another mind, another breath, another Spirit that has brought us out of that which was not, out of anything that can be empirically established. Having been uniquely created calls us then to be beholders of the “mazing” realities of the world that sustains us but cannot explain its own origin, not even the fact that it did not need to be so. And this did-not-need-to-be-so we can only gaze at and contemplate by an “amazing” vision (*visio*), which in theology is called the gift of grace.

These three aspects that are so succinctly put together in the concept of the created co-creator reflect three basic categories that are developed by Hefner. *Created* is expressed by the doctrine of the creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). The prefix *co-* gives expression and wraps in itself the whole doctrine of the image of God (*imago Dei*). *Creator* reflects that in which we are immersed and are part of; it reflects participation in an ongoing creation, *creatio continua*. Hefner’s theology of creation, his ecclesiology, and his Christology are embedded in his concept of the created co-creator.

All said and done, would it not be derisively entertaining to discover that the hyphen in co-creator was indeed a cipher for the missing irony that I curl my lip at in the concept? The joke then would be on me, but it “may work out.”

NOTE

A version of this essay was delivered at the Chicago Advanced Seminar in Religion and Science, “The Created Co-Creator: Interpreting Science, Technology, and Theology,” organized by the Zygon Center for Religion and Science, Spring 2002.

1. The painting can be viewed at http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/modern_contemporary/1950-134-41.shtml.
2. The painting can be viewed at http://museoreinasofia.mcu.es/coleccion/coleccion_ING.php.

REFERENCES

- D’Aquila, Eugene G. 1994. “The Summa Hefneriana: Myth, Megamyth, and Metamyth.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 29 (September): 371–81.
- De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.
- Gerhart, Mary. 1994. “Eclecticism and Loose Coherence: A Risk Worth Taking.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 29 (September): 383–88.
- Gilkey, Langdon. 1995. “Evolution, Culture, and Sin: Responding to Philip Hefner’s Proposal.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 30 (June): 293–308.
- Haraway, Donna. 1991. *Cimians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Hefner, Philip. 1973. “The Self-Definition of Life and Human Purpose: Reflections upon the Divine Spirit and the Human Spirit.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 8 (September–December): 395–411.
- . 1993. *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- . 1997. “Biocultural Evolution and the Created Co-Creator.” *Dialog* 36 (Summer): 197–205.
- . 1998a. “The Church as Well of Possibility.” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25:4 (August): 245–67.

- . 1998b. "The Community of Possibility: Belonging without Conditions." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25:4 (August): 268–90.
- . 1998c. "The Demographics of Possibility: People's Church." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25:4 (August): 291–318.
- . 2001. "Cyborg and Created Co-Creator: New Images of Being Human." Presentation at the American Academy of Religion, Denver, Colorado, November.
- . 2002. "The Created Co-Creator as Symbol." Chicago Advanced Seminar in Religion and Science, organized by the Zygon Center for Religion and Science (Spring).
- Käsemann, Ernst. 1969. "On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic." *New Testament Questions of Today*, 108–37. Great Britain: SCM Press.
- Theissen, Gerd. 1994. "A New Synthesis of Knowledge and Faith." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 29 (September): 389–99.
- Walker, Alice. 1982. *The Color Purple*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Westhelle, Vitor. 1986. "Labor: A Suggestion for Rethinking the Way of the Christian." *Word & World* 4/2: 194–206.