

SYMBOLS OF JESUS

A Christology of Symbolic Engagement

ROBERT CUMMINGS NEVILLE

WITH PLATES OF A PAINTING

FROM CAVES TO COSMOS

BY BETH NEVILLE



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From Caves to Cosmos, by Beth Neville, 1994, photos by Steve Nelson/FAYPHOTO copyrighted by Beth Neville

between pages 158 and 159

1. The lines of dreams
2. Having arrived, we planted and the earth was fertile
3. God's rainbow's really fire, not light and water
4. Behold the past, a place we knew not when we dwelt there
5. What lines are there in the ether?
6. O what deaths are these, the supernovas?
7. In the end

CHAPTER ONE

God the Father

THE GOD OF JESUS AND METAPHYSICAL ULTIMACY: HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The necessary starting point for a Christology is God, the God worshipped by Jesus through the schematized images of his religion and the God whom Christians further schematized by special relations with Jesus himself. As with all the Christological symbols to be studied here, the analysis will include both a metaphysical theological theory of the “object,” God, and an interpretation of something in the human condition in terms of which God might be schematized, with a tracking of how the schematized images are legitimated by the theoretical conception relative to the human condition under certain specified conditions. Unlike the analysis of the other symbols, the preponderance of argument here will be on the metaphysical conception that in fact is at the heart of the theological ideas in the other symbols as well.

Paula Fredriksen, following E. P. Sanders and others, argues that we should assume that Jesus and his disciples were living as faithful Jews in most common respects except where there is specific reason to believe otherwise.¹ Jesus made many trips to the Temple according to the gospel stories, beginning with his circumcision (Luke 2:25–38) and annually during his youth (Luke 2:41). The synoptic gospels organize Jesus’ ministry around a progressive journey to Jerusalem for the Passover confrontation at the Temple, whereas John suggests many visits for a variety of festivals.² Thus whatever criticisms Jesus might have made of Jewish practice and observation of the Temple sacrifices, they were the work of an insider, not an outsider.

¹ See Fredriksen’s *From Jesus to Christ* and *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, Sanders’ *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, and Geza Vermes’ *The Changing Faces of Jesus*, for a selection of scholars otherwise different who agree on this point.

² See Fredriksen’s *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, chapter 5.

The earliest Church constituted itself in Jerusalem and its suburbs. The Festival of Weeks or Pentecost (Lev. 23:15–21) brought many pilgrims to the city and it was they whom Peter addressed in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2). The disciples regularly prayed in the Temple and got in trouble for teaching there so often (Acts 3–7). When Peter and the other apostles began coping with the Christian faith of Gentiles (Acts 10, 21, Gal. 2), it was in the context of the loss of the community's assumed practice of Jewish life, including Temple worship, because Gentiles could not advance into the Temple beyond the Gentile Court.³ All of Paul's letters, and possibly (though not likely) the Gospel of Mark, were written before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE when the possibility of Temple worship was ended.⁴ The other gospels and later pastoral letters reflect a community in which the connection with Jewish Temple worship had been broken and Christians could see themselves as over against other sects of Judaism, though all those sects were having to cope with the loss of the sacrificial temple ceremonies enjoined in the Torah.

All this is to say that Jesus and the early generations of Christians presupposed the conception of God of their Jewish contemporaries and only slowly modified this in relation to the growing importance of Gentile Christians and their culture.⁵ This Jewish conception was extraordinarily rich and shaped their imaginations through ritual life, especially use of the Psalms. Although scholars debate the specific content of this conception and its internal variations, at least five things stand out: (1) that God is creator of the universe; (2) that God is particular and definite as exhibited in the covenants, especially the Torah, not general and "all things to all people"; (3) that this particularity includes a specific history with Israel, as in the Exodus; (4) that the particularity also includes promises for the fulfillment of Israel; and (5) that God can be likened to a king under some circumstances and the nations to the kingdom of God, at least in their eschatological fulfillment. Each of these meant a great many things, not all compatible with one another. But the Christians took up all of them and developed them with their own many slants, also not always compatible.

³ See *ibid.*, pp. 42–73, especially p. 70.

⁴ The most recent study of dating of Mark is in Joel Marcus's *Mark 1–8*, pp. 37–39. He dates it after the flight of the Christian community from Jerusalem following the occupation of the Temple by Zealots in 67–68 CE and possibly as late as 74–75 CE.

⁵ For a careful review of New Testament texts on Jesus' conception or image of God, see Roger Haight's *Jesus: Symbol of God*, chapter 4. See also Anthony J. Saldarini's "Ultimate Realities: Judaism."

If Jesus and his disciples had a special emphasis to lay on the conception of God, it was to stress the image of God as father, as in the Lord's Prayer, the Pater Noster (Matt. 6:9–13, Luke 11:2–4), Jesus' Farewell Discourses in John (14–17), and his claim, setting kinship family aside, that "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt. 12: 50; see also Mark 3:31–35, Luke 8:19–21). Jesus was not the first in his tradition to call God "father" (see Isa. 63: 16 and 64:8, Wis. 2:16–18); that people, especially the people of Israel, are children of God was a common theme. But Jesus' teaching had the effect of placing God as father at the head of the kingdom of God ("Our Father. . . thy kingdom come") rather than God as warrior or king (e.g. 1 Sam. 8). Although he still employed the image of the king ruling the kingdom of God, in some parables (e.g., Matt. 22:1–14), the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) had overwhelming power to establish his rhetoric of God as father.

This conception of God the Creator as father of all people is different from conceptions of God as father of Jesus as Son of God exclusively. The Apostles' Creed (followed with variants by other creeds) expresses both senses of divine fatherhood. It begins, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary . . ." The first phrase identifies God's paternity with the creation of the entire cosmos. Michelangelo's famous image (figure 3) of the "Creation of Adam" on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel symbolizes God's paternity of all people. In a different sense of paternity, God is father of only one Son, Jesus Christ. That idea of the generative relation between the Persons of the Trinity (see chapter 4) had a different ground from Jesus' Pater Noster image of God as father of all. In fact, the Apostles' Creed identifies Jesus' personal paternity with the Holy Spirit (and maternity with Mary). Murillo's painting of *The Heavenly and Earthly Trinities* (figure 4) illustrates four Trinities: the divine Trinity in the vertical line down from God the Father to the Holy Spirit (the dove) to Jesus, the human family trinity in the horizontal cross-piece from Mary to Jesus to Joseph, the "natal" trinity of Jesus in the center moving left to his mother's womb and up to the inseminating Holy Spirit, and the "epiphantic" trinity of Jesus in the center again moving up to the Holy Spirit and right to the viewer and all humanity through Joseph who presents him. The Trinitarian concerns arose some generations after Jesus and his disciples. For Jesus himself, the fatherhood of God related to God as Creator of the universe with whom people can be as children.



Figure 3. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Creation of Adam*, 1508–12, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

The theme of God as Creator is thus central to Jesus' own religious practice and assumptions, and to his explicit teachings that advocate relating to the Creator on the analogy of a father; this centrality was carried on and made more explicit in the early Church. The theme is so central, in fact, that any contemporary Christology that attempts to be faithful to Jesus and his early followers needs to come to terms with the symbol of God as Creator of the universe and to possess a metaphysical conception that explains what that symbol schematizes.

The symbol of God as Creator is correlative, of course, to the conception of the universe created. Psalm 95, for instance, celebrates God as creator of specific things, the Earth's corners, the mountains'



Figure 4. Esteban Murillo, *The Heavenly and Earthly Trinities*, 1681–82, National Gallery, London

strength, the sea, the dry land, and people who are the sheep of his pasture. Genesis 1 takes a more systematic approach, starting with the most elementary character of existence, the cosmic distinction between light and darkness, and moving step by step to the complex cosmos. Job (38–41) employs an architectural metaphor for creation, with the cosmos likened first to a great building. The conception of the cosmos reflected in the Noah story (Genesis 6–9) was of a domed continent surrounded by water with water under the continent as well as above the dome; the flood opened the gates of the dome and threatened to undo all the distinctions in Genesis 1 that had made human habitation possible. The Hellenistic world of which the early Christians were a part assumed a hierarchy of domes or levels of reality extending upward to a variety of Heavens and downward to Hell (Eph. 1:20–23, 2:6, 6:12, Rom. 8:38, Phil. 2:6–11, Col. 1–3). In a remarkable passage the author of Ephesians (Eph. 4:7–10) evokes the image of Christ knitting the entire broken cosmos together, ascending above the highest heavens and descending into the depths of universe. This cosmology of levels of reality was formalized in Christian thinkers such as Origen.⁶

A contemporary Christology needs a metaphysical conception of God as Creator that correlates with our contemporary physical cosmologies and that can be schematized into the biblical tradition's images of God as father and creator. Contemporary scientific cosmologies reject the ancient Earth-centered view, which has deep implications for notions of salvation history. And they describe a cosmos far older and larger than that imagined in antiquity, one that evolves according to forces that in principle can be described scientifically. Contemporary cosmologies are unanimous in rejecting the cosmology of antiquity. But they still are contentious among themselves on crucial points such as the origin and end of the cosmos, as well as the determinateness of communicability among parts of the universe. So, a contemporary metaphysical theory of God as Creator needs to be tolerant of a number of different cosmologies that might yet turn out to be true.

Beth Neville's *From Caves to Cosmos* (between pp. 158 and 159) is a late-modern play on the creation symbols. Most antequely, it starts from the very Earth-centered view of a cave looking out (plate 1) and up (plate 3) to infinity (plate 7). But in plate 4 it reverses the direction of vision and

⁶ See Origen's *On First Principles*; on ancient Mediterranean cosmologies, see Richard Sorabji's *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*; on the spiritual significance of ancient cosmology, relating as much to time and eternity as to spatial arrangement, see Peter Manchester's "The Religious Experience of Time and Eternity" and Jean Pepin's "Cosmic Piety."

looks down on the Earth, objectifying it as the origin but not destiny of humanity, a kind of space-port for a greater journey; subsequent plates do not have a located angle of vision. Plate 3 is the cosmic rainbow connecting the earthly playing field with the orbital perspective, a direct allusion to Noah's rainbow sign that says the original creation will not be undone by releasing the primeval chaos of waters. The plate is called "God's rainbow's really fire, not light and water" to mark the priority of the original creation, and the seriousness of the rainbow; it is painted in "fire" colors, contrasting red with green in combinations that blur boundaries like the Christmas advent of God. "Oh, what deaths are these, the supernovas," plate 6, uses the same colors to reverse the creative fire in tight circles that implode and disappear, not the rainbow parabola creating connection. The paintings are structured around the Alpha and Omega of creation. Yet Neville's vision is thoroughly modern in laying that structure on the evolution of the race from cave-dreamers to space-travelers tacking on time's river (plates 5–6).

The second element mentioned above in Jesus' and the early Church's conception of God is that God is particular and specific, as in covenanting with Israel. The metaphysics of this needs to account for the particularity of this created cosmos, why there is this world rather than some other. In human terms, relating to the image of the Creator as father, we need to recognize and account metaphysically for how God can give us our particular lives, with their specific joys and troubles. People do not all enjoy the same chances or take the same risks.

The way to frame this issue metaphysically is with the distinction between two ideas of what is ultimate in reality, the idea that it is symmetrical and the idea that it is asymmetrical.⁷ The symmetrical idea supposes equilibrium at the base of things, a wholeness, or pure emptiness. Becoming attuned to the ultimate is losing one's particularity to be dissolved in the symmetry of the ultimate. The problem for symmetrical views of the ultimate is to account for the move from elemental symmetry to the determinate tilt of the particular cosmos.⁸ In the history of

⁷ I owe this distinction to conversations with Wesley J. Wildman, and believe it is he who first introduced it. Frank Close's *Lucifer's Legacy* is a witty romance on the hidden symmetries beneath the apparent asymmetries of nature, with Lucifer credited with the asymmetries that give us our determinate universe. The assumption here is that symmetry is ultimately what is most understandable, a mathematician's perspective. I shall argue, on the contrary, that asymmetry is the ground of rationality because it is the result of selective determinate creation, the making of something particular, and that such particular creation is what we most understand.

⁸ Close's *Lucifer's Legacy* is precisely the attempt to give this account, reducing asymmetry to symmetry.

Western theology, the Aristotelian notion of the Perfect Substance, the Neo-Platonic conception of the One and of God beyond the One, the Thomistic conception of God as pure, simple, undifferentiated Act of *Esse*, and the Eckhartian distinction between God and the transcendent Godhead, all illustrate various ways of specifying symmetry. So do Buddhist notions of Nothingness.

The asymmetrical idea is that the aboriginal ultimate is the very particular act of creating as such, creating a particular cosmos and hence making itself a particular Creator. The cosmos as well as God has a determinate tilt from the very beginning. The divine act precedes and causes the divine nature, in some appropriate sense of "precedes." The Creator is not a being apart from creating, but becomes a singular God as Creator in the creating. On the asymmetrical view there is no difficulty in accounting for the particularity of the cosmos; the interesting question is how the cosmos is as regular as it seems to be. Attunement to ultimate reality is reconciliation to the particular ground of one's particular existence, not emptying oneself into the One or None.

The asymmetrical view has the distinct advantage over the symmetrical one in providing a metaphysics for a God of particularity in creation, and also in relating particularly to a people such as Israel or the Church, to creating a world with promise for fulfillment, and to justifying metaphors for God such as kingship. (These are the other elements of the conception of God assumed in late Second Temple Judaism and its early Christian forms.) The asymmetrical idea is classically illustrated in the conception of creation *ex nihilo* (so long as that conception is not interpreted to mean that God is a substance who creates the world out of nothing *except the divine substance*).

To put the point somewhat paradoxically: A metaphysics of asymmetry which denies that God is a being apart from creating the world is more friendly than the symmetrical idea to the particularistic schematized images of a personal God who creates just this world, relates differently to different people, and is wholly "unfair" where fairness means treating people with equality. A symmetrical metaphysics claiming that God is intrinsically a personal perfect substance has grave difficulty accounting for the particularity of creation expected of persons because particularity is a deviation from symmetrical perfection, wholeness, or pure nothingness. The serious question for Christology will come, however, when I ask whether the particularity of an asymmetrical Creator *ex nihilo* can indeed be used to ground the symbolic personifications of God involved in Christology. That question is in suspension for

the moment while I emphasize the difference between the biblical schematized image of God the Father as a person and the metaphysical idea of God as Creator *ex nihilo* who has no reality apart from creating.

The philosophical or metaphysical ideas to be presented in the remaining three sections of this chapter are to be regarded under two rubrics. Under one, the metaphysics is only necessary to show it to be possible to employ the religious symbols faithfully in the late-modern age. As such, these ideas might be only one of several sets of adequate metaphysical ideas that would perform that function. People deeply committed to alternative metaphysical views can look upon these as only a sample, perhaps a false sample, so long as their own metaphysical ideas both are faithful to late-modern knowledge and richly ground the religious symbols.

Under the second rubric, the metaphysical ideas to be presented should be looked at not just to see whether they allow the Christian symbols to be applied today as their schematized images, but also to see what is true of the world, understood in late-modern terms, that is religiously interesting. The scientific, philosophical, historical, and social-scientific language of late modernity has flattened out what Tillich called the depth dimension of reality.⁹ Attention and recognition are restricted to things that appear strictly in time. A good late-modern metaphysics should be able to recover the depth dimension and thus require something like biblical language to be its vitalizing expression. The metaphysical ideas should identify and describe creation, and their schematized images in biblical and other religious symbols should convey their existential depth. Whereas the metaphysics of God as Creator describes creation, the schematization of those ideas as the religious symbols carries over what is important in the object of those ideas for human religious life.

A CONTEMPORARY THEORY OF GOD AS CREATOR

At this point it is necessary to explain the idea of God as Creator *ex nihilo*. The logical point here is not to “prove” this idea as a metaphysical hypothesis, only to explain the idea in reference to others and show how it is metaphysically plausible, tolerant of whatever science or any other

⁹ See Tillich’s essay “The Nature of Religious Language,” which is chapter 5 of his *Theology of Culture*; this essay discusses the depth dimension in direct relation to what is revealed through religious symbols. For more general discussions of “depth” see his *The Religious Situation* and *The Courage to Be*.

mode of inquiry discovers, and what its structure is that might bear the reference of the imagery of God the Father.¹⁰ The next section will continue the discussion into the topic of the temporality of the world relative to the eternity of God. The final section in the chapter will sketch a metaphysical ground for the symbols of the Logos and the Holy Spirit.

Suppose by hypothesis that God is the act creating everything determinate out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).¹¹ Without the act, there would be nothing. This would not be a metaphysically rich Nothingness, or a space-time empty of things. Just nothing. Of course, there is not just nothing, there is the world. And from the standpoint of the world looking back from its utter contingency to what would be if there were no creation, the nothing looks like the Abyss so intimate to the mystics.

The creative act itself is a sheer making, an asymmetrical creativity going from nothing to the determinate world. The act has a form, the particular form of the world created. Perhaps that form can be analyzed into interestingly different layers, with some elements of form being transcendental to all determinate things as claimed in the theory of the Logos put forward below. What is most interesting about the act, however, is its sheer creativity, the making of something.

The idea of creating something new is resisted by thinkers who believe that all ideas have to be about forms or patterns and that explanation means exhibiting first principles or forms.¹² They understand human creativity in terms of rearranging previously given elements, perhaps with a little randomness, so that creativity is only a changing of form. But any change within time involves at least a modicum of novelty. Consider all the elements that are real before the change. What is added to them to constitute the change? Whatever it is, it cannot be included in the prior elements or it would make no difference. If it is not included, it is novel, over and above the prior elements. The novelty might be a new form, or a partly new form (which is a new sub-form). It might be

¹⁰ The conception of creation *ex nihilo* has been a preoccupation in my work since *God the Creator*, which developed the idea in detail with fairly comprehensive arguments relative to other options. Summaries and approaches from other angles are to be found in *Soldier, Sage, Saint*, chapter 5, *Creativity and God*, *The Tao and the Daimon*, chapters 3–4, *A Theology Primer*, *Behind the Masks of God*, and *Eternity and Time's Flow*. Because the exposition in the text here is so abbreviated, I shall give more specific references to places where I have discussed points in detail with more consideration of objections.

¹¹ This supposition is defended as a positive hypothesis in *God the Creator*. Chapters 1 and 2 reject alternative theories for accounting for being and solving the problem of the one and the many. Chapter 3 mounts a positive argument based on the categories developed earlier.

¹² See my *Creativity and God*, pp. 46–47, 62–63, for an exploration of this relative to process philosophers who reject the explanatory power of creativity as making.

little more than the repetition of the old elements in their old form, but the repetition itself is new. Even if the world were absolutely stable through time with no change of form whatsoever, there would be the novelty of each moment adding a new instance to its predecessors or there would be no time.¹³ Contemporary physics has complicated this commonsense picture of endurance and change through time, though the point still holds: without novelty there is neither motion (and hence no passage of time) nor change.

Whereas in ordinary temporal processes change does involve antecedent elements that are rearranged with some novel additions, in the divine creative act there are no antecedent elements, according to the creation *ex nihilo* hypothesis. The act creates absolutely everything that is determinate. Whereas in our temporal lives we see bits and snatches of divine creativity (which is sometimes coincident with our creativity), in the divine creative act as such, the making of determinate novelty is total. The creative act does not make the world out of pre-existent matter. The Christian tradition has said that God has no co-equals.

Nor does the creative act make the world out of some divine stuff, although many theologians have said that. If the divine stuff is determinate, then we have to ask how God's nature got that way and the answer would have to be in terms of an antecedent divine will making it that way, which only repeats the problem back a step. If the divine stuff is simple and indeterminate, which is what most Neo-Platonic and Thomistic theologians have said, then whence arise the determinate things of the world? How do they get their boundaries and relations? To suppose that the divine stuff is pure fullness of being is to require that negations be introduced to delimit it into finite determinate parts. The negation of pure fullness, however, requires a positive act of limiting, the creation of positive determinations, in other words. Those positive determinations, or positive negations, are not contained within the pure divine fullness and so are novel and *ex nihilo*. Why then say that the creative act proceeds from pure fullness rather than nothing? The fullness has no character and is indistinguishable from nothing. Only an Aristotelian prejudice that you can't get something from nothing, "out of nothing, nothing comes," would incline a thinker to say that the divine creative act proceeds from fullness of being. Quite the contrary, what the divine creative act produces is precisely what cannot be found in the antecedent fullness, or nothingness, namely the determinateness

¹³ See my technical argument of this point in *The Cosmology of Freedom*, pp. 151–54.

of things. So it is better to say that the divine creative act is simply the asymmetrical making of determinate things out of nothing determinate: nothing, nothing, nothing.¹⁴

The dialectical argument of the previous paragraph is likely interesting or convincing only to people who have attempted to conceive God prior to creation as the fullness of being in some sense, and its dialectical complexity is likely baffling to those who are not aficionados of abstract metaphysics. But there is an experiential appeal to be made to the creativity of the divine act. In everyday life we encounter countless instances of the existences of things. *What* is encountered might be expected forms, but *that* they are there and then, even if expected, is not reducible to what they are. Our pragmatic interests usually direct us to the what, where, and when of things, not to their that which we take for granted. But often enough, we respond to the thatness with wonder.¹⁵ Poets make us attend to this regularly. Nature mysticism calls attention to the sheer existence of things systematically.¹⁶ In the end, after we have absorbed all the principles of existence and change, final intelligibility involves locating and focusing on the making of the things exhibiting those principles.¹⁷ Of course, the divine creative act does not have an internal nature that stretches through time so that we can understand steps in creation. It is simply the making of determinate things out of nothing.

The divine creative act results in the determinate things of the world. Those things constitute the terminus of the act, and hence its nature insofar as it has one. The determinate things do not exist in a medium apart from the creative act – that would have to be created too, and would be just another determinate thing. The world is the determinate achievement of the creative act, not something separate from the act but its completion. The world, of course, is temporal, a point that will be analyzed in more detail in the next section. “Completion,” “achievement,” and suchlike notions mean not temporal processes, but rather the act’s result, which is temporal process itself (among other things). The integrity of the world consists in its being *what* it is. *That* it is means it is part of God.

¹⁴ For this spelled out with many more combinations and alternatives, see my *God the Creator*, chapter 2.

¹⁵ The distinction between the *what* and the *that* is elaborated in my *Soldier, Sage, Saint*, chapter 5, as the basis for the creation doctrine.

¹⁶ On mysticism and nature romanticism, see *The Highroad around Modernism*, chapters 2 and 12, especially the latter, “Technology and the Richness of the World,” my answer to Heidegger.

¹⁷ On ontological and cosmological causation, regarding decision, see my *Religion in Late Modernity*, chapter 1.

What is the divine nature? God is the creative act that has nothing from which to begin and that makes the determinate world. The world is part of God because it is the act's own achieved nature and has no independent existence. At the "other end" of the creative act, as it were, is nothing. The nothing has no character. But because of the act's making of the determinate world out of nothing, the nothing is the source from which the world comes. Three interdefined notions are at work here: source, act, and product (or determinate world). The nothing would not be source without the act making it the source of the world. The act would not act unless from the source it makes the world as product. The product or world would have no determinateness unless it were made to be determinate from no determination. These three elements of God are symmetrically interdefined: each needs the others in order to be determinate. But what these elements together define is the asymmetrical act of creation of the determinate world from nothing.¹⁸

The three elements of God – source, act, and product – are the metaphysical rudiments of a Trinitarian theology.¹⁹ The source is the metaphysical referent for God the Father, the act the referent for the Holy Spirit, and the transcendental elements of the determinate produced world the referent for the Son. Much needs to be done with these notions before there can be any serious religious equivalence. The last section of this chapter will discuss the relation of the Word of God or Logos to the rest of creation as well as how the comprehensive divine creative act can be identified with the specifics of the Holy Spirit.

God's nature, on this conception of creation *ex nihilo*, is one of the products of creation, a conclusion that will be surprising to many. This conception in a vague way follows the tradition of Duns Scotus that the divine will precedes the divine nature rather than the tradition of Thomas Aquinas that the divine nature determines the divine will. For thinkers like Thomas who are wedded to a substance theory of reality, God can only create as an expression of the divine nature. Action, on the substance theory, moves from a given actuality to a new derivative from that. It is on the basis of this action-derived-from-antecedent-nature principle that Thomas and others can argue from things in the world by analogy back to the nature of God.

¹⁸ This point is explained in detail in my *God the Creator*, chapter 4.

¹⁹ For a discussion of this distinction relative to the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity, replete with an analysis of heresies, see *The Tao and the Daimon*, chapter 4, "Creation and the Trinity."

The belief that God's creativity must proceed from an antecedent nature funds the added metaphysical belief that God is a supernatural being apart from creation, which I am claiming instead is a schematized image. This implicit logic supports the common analogical inferences that God must create and act the way human beings create and act, but without limitation or imperfection. So, it is thought that, as we consciously entertain plans and choose, so God deliberates but with perfect wisdom. As we have an interior subjectivity that expresses itself in outer action, so God must have such an interior life. As we are addressed by others and respond out of our interior understanding and will, so does God who therefore can be addressed literally with petitionary prayer. The biblical images of God as a supernatural person, which evolved historically from naturalistic images of a storm-god, therefore can be projected onto a metaphysics of God as a substance who acts out of the divine nature. Although it is possible to see why supernaturalists gravitate to a model of God as substance, with divine will derived from divine nature and the products of will reflecting the divine nature, their analogies simply do not work.

To argue against this supernatural model of God it is helpful to consider the work of the contemporary theologian Keith Ward, who is only the latest in a great line of theologians from Thomas Aquinas to Austin Farrar defending the supernaturalist view. He holds that God is "a supernatural being of supreme power and value" who creates the world,²⁰ and he develops this idea through masterly discussions of central theological loci in *Religion and Creation*: divine creativity and power, wisdom, love, goodness, awareness, bliss, eternity, and the trinity. Ward's argument is the following:

God must have a given nature, which is not chosen, but which God possesses of necessity. It does not make sense to suppose that God chooses the divine nature completely, since there must already be a choosing nature in existence to make such a choice. For any choice to be made, there must already be knowledge of what could be chosen, power to choose, and some rational criteria of choice. There must therefore already exist a being with knowledge, power, and standards of choice. The divine nature cannot be caused by any other being, since then the Creator would not be the creator of everything other than itself. It cannot come into being out of nothing, since that would make it purely arbitrary and random. And it cannot cause itself, since a thing would have to exist in order to bring itself into existence, which is absurd.²¹

²⁰ Ward, *Religion and Creation*, p. 287.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Ward's basic argument is that the creation of the divine nature by the divine will is an unintelligible idea, that *of course* you need an agent with a nature to perform a creative act. He appeals to an anthropomorphic model of choice to say there has to be a divine chooser with knowledge, standards, and so forth. But that appeal is mistaken if God creates the nature of being chooser by choosing, as the creation *ex nihilo* hypothesis proposes. He claims it is absurd to believe that a thing could bring itself into existence, although that is what is asserted by those who believe the divine nature is something determined by the divine creative act.²²

Ward develops an extremely intelligent and up-to-date version of the Thomistic argument from analogy, according to which one begins with the claim that God is like a human person and then removes the limitations of finitude from human personhood, all in coordination with other analogies and considerations of divine transcendence. He needs the finite human side of the analogy of God as chooser in order to represent as absurd the view that God's choice or creative act creates the divine nature. He needs to say that God, like human beings, needs to have a choosing nature in order to choose, knowledge of possibilities in advance, and criteria of choice.

But there is something arbitrary about this. Why could we not just as well say that the difference between divine and human creative choice is that the former does not need possibilities, criteria or a creative nature in advance but simply and purely creates selectively, the creative choice being justified by what it brings about, including its own criteria? That is, why cannot the analogy with human creativity turn out to support the radical creativity of the creation *ex nihilo* idea? The reason is that Ward wants to keep a very close analogy between the human and the divine so that God can be rendered even at the fundamental metaphysical level as a person, thus maintaining a commonsense continuity with biblical talk of God as a person.

But the problem with arguments about God from analogy is that in order to know what to deny you need to know something positive and probably non-analogical, for instance Thomas' claim that God is simple and admits of no potentiality. What is the positive ground for saying that

²² Professor Ward and I are in complete agreement on the importance of Christian theology being able to make sense of the anthropomorphic symbols of God as found in Christian scriptures, liturgies, and so forth, which is one of the motives of his position. We are also in agreement that such symbols are only symbolic in some sense and that God's nature transcends the finite application of those symbols to human choosers and makers. But we disagree on the weight to be given the anthropomorphic conceptions and their place in the development of conceptions of God.

God, like human beings, needs antecedent knowledge of possibilities, potential to choose creatively, and standards of choice, rather than that God creates all those things? The Thomistic tradition, of course, says that God contains all human powers and virtues eminently, without finite limitation.

Perhaps on the contrary the human need for antecedent knowledge, power, and criteria is not a virtue derivative from God but rather the fault of finitude and precisely what is without analogue in God. The point is, whenever analogy about God has an argumentative force so as to deny a contrary view, as is the case here, rather than a merely rhetorical or explicative force, it has an arbitrary moment in every instance when it decides what is analogous and what dis-analogous. The technical way of saying this is that neither a three-termed analogy of proportion nor a four-termed analogy of proper proportionality can have non-arbitrary argumentative force because in neither is the determinate distance between God and the finite world knowable – in fact that distance is not finite.²³

In conceptions of God drawn from analogy there is arbitrariness and special pleading for every analogy. Of course we do not want to say that God is the Big Guy in the Sky. But the analogical approach so often turns out to say God is just like the Big Guy in the Sky except somehow mysteriously transcendent in the places where that conception is embarrassing. The conception of God as personal on the analogy of human beings then is attended with a patchwork cover of qualifications, each designed to avoid the embarrassment of saying that God is just a Big Guy in the Sky but arbitrary from the standpoint of the analogy.

Only if we think God has to be a substance with properties, as Ward assumes, such that divine action is understandable in terms of those properties, would we think that God has a nature apart from and in any sense prior to creation. But we do not have to think that, because there is an alternative metaphysical hypothesis, that of creation *ex nihilo*. The following arguments go toward showing why the radical creation idea of God is preferable and serve to summarize and recapitulate what has been put forward so far concerning God the Father.

The *first* argument is to show its religious and Christian relevance. That God is creator of each and every determinate thing, with its determinate connections, means that each thing in its connections has an

²³ See my technical analysis of the analogy of proportion and that of proper proportionality in *God the Creator*, pp. 14–22. On the difference between argumentative analogy and rhetorical or explicative analogy, see pp. 138–40.

ontological contingency in addition to its cosmological contingency upon causal connections.²⁴ The sense of ontological contingency on God as creator pervades Christian teachings about the nature of the world and human beings. That God is the creative act upon which determinate things depend means that Christians can find God in and give thanks for everything when attention is called to that creativity. That God is the source of the created world underlies the dialectic of the mystics who contemplatively go beyond the world, beyond the dynamic act of its creation, to the fecund Abyss of non-being. The notion of the Abyss is paradoxical, as Tillich would say. First it says that God is nothing, nothing, nothing, not the Big Guy in the Sky. Then it says that the first point would be wholly unintelligible if there were no determinate creation out of the Abyss. The mystical paths all presuppose determinate characters of the world or some hierarchy of being in order to make the point of transcendence to the indeterminate. The three terms of the Creator-God – source, creative act, created world – thus coordinate many religious conceptual and experiential projects.²⁵

A *second* argument for the hypothesis is that creative novelty is found in ordinary human experience and this gives rise to a different conception of God as personal from the supernaturalist one. To select only the fact that human experience always has antecedents and takes these into account in temporal process is arbitrary for understanding God. True, human beings always have antecedently formed character, act on prior knowledge of possibilities, and have canons of judgment in play as they act. Nevertheless, any creative human action always adds something to those antecedent resources, and that addition is novel, not to be found in the resources, and hence with respect to origin, *ex nihilo*. It is in respect of the novelty that finite persons are like God. In most human actions the novelty is wee. Where it is significant, the novelty might seem wild, out of character. Still, a person forms personal character and identity precisely by the novelty. People's responsible moral identity is formed by what they do creatively with the conditions of their lives, what they add to what they inherit, not merely by the given conditions of their existence.²⁶ God's creation of everything out of nothing is like what people do every day, with the exception that God has nothing given to deal with and creates only novelty.

²⁴ See chapter 1 of my *Religion in Late Modernity*, and on the experience of contingency see *God the Creator*, chapter 8.

²⁵ Many of these are detailed in illustrative fashion in *God the Creator*, part 2.

²⁶ See my arguments in *The Cosmology of Freedom*, part 2, and *Normative Cultures*, chapter 6.

A *third* argument for the hypothesis of creation *ex nihilo* is that its claim that creation is of everything that is determinate, including the determinations making up the divine nature, allows science and all other cognitive endeavors to find the world to be what it is, without any predisposition to infer from the nature of God that the world has to be anything in particular. This point is a tremendous relief in the religion and science discussions. Whatever any inquiry finds the world to be is compatible in principle with the concept of God as Creator *ex nihilo*. Empirical study of the world can reveal something about God in the sense that God is the creator of what is discovered. But nothing in the conception of a divine nature would require that the world be a certain way, for instance all good, devoted to the human, or completely orderly. The world has just the determinate character it has.

A *fourth* point is that the values of things can be conceived to be created, not derivative from divine goodness. There are different kinds and degrees of value, but it can be argued that nothing determinate is without some value.²⁷ If something is a disvalue from the standpoint of something else, as an exquisitely complex and self-defended virus is a pain to its host, still it has some intrinsic value. Therefore, the justification of the creative act is in the collective value of its product, not any antecedent motive. As Genesis 1 says, God looked at what he had created and saw that it was good. Similarly with human justification for choice: the act itself elevates some one among the several alternative possible motives to be the reason for the action. Moreover, nearly every human choice discovers that there are more value-laden elements in its outcome than anticipated in imaginative consideration of possible motives – we will more than we know in advance and create our characters in that existential leap.

Consider the traditional claim by Ward and others that God is a being of supreme value. On Ward's hypothesis, supreme goodness is part of God's given nature. But then there are the traditional difficulties in explaining how a good God can create a world with evil, suffering, and woes in it. The qualifications by finitist theologians that God might be limited in power, or purely temporal and thus at a loss to know and control the future, or that God creates free people with enough rope to hang themselves, are burdensome. To say that God is the source of all goodness in the world including standards for free beings, and that God

²⁷ This point was argued carefully in my *Cosmology of Freedom*, chapter 3, and in *Recovery of the Measure*, part 2.

is the collective goodness of the world in the sense that determinate things are the termini or results of the divine creative act, is far more convincing. Thus God can be acknowledged to be the source of the values in both the virus and its human host, one flourishing and the other threatened, intimate to both. There is no need to apply human moral criteria to a supposed antecedent divine plan, which trips on theodicy. Rather we acknowledge the multifarious values achieved in the particular, tilted, asymmetrical Creator God.

Consider the question of what makes something valuable. Ward argues that "value must consist in appreciation by some consciousness."²⁸ He grounds goods in their being appreciated by the divine consciousness. But when it is necessary to say *why* goods legitimately are appreciated, his argument becomes very complicated and in the divine case the final claim seems to be that they are appreciated because they are or might be created. Is it not simpler to say that there are some characteristics of things that make them valuable, for instance their harmonic determinate natures, and that God has created a world where everything determinate is of such a character?²⁹ From this hypothesis it is straightforward to understand how consciousnesses sometimes might be mistaken about and other times alert to what is valuable.

A *fifth* point in defense of the creation *ex nihilo* hypothesis is that it suggests a truly holy wildness in God. Holy wildness is obscured by conceptions of an antecedently good divine nature whose actions must be understood in the human analogates of what a good agent does. Human moral identity is defined in part by the fact that we have some control over the outcomes of our behavior that differ in value, and we are by definition better in moral identity when we behave better, and worse when we behave worse.³⁰ The criteria for human purposes are set by what is better and worse in our enormously complex fields of action. As the book of Job indicated, God the creator operates within no defining fields of action but creates completely. The divine purpose has no antecedent object but is the making of things with the values they in fact embody. The vast cosmos of expanding gases has values that are almost unrecognizable from the human sphere, and often

²⁸ Ward, *Religion and Creation*, p. 183.

²⁹ That value is to be understood in terms of harmony I have argued in *The Cosmology of Freedom*, chapter 3, and *Recovery of the Measure*, chapter 7. That human consciousness or judgment recognizes or discerns value in things, rather than projects value onto them (though it can do that too), is the argument of my *Axiology of Thinking*, the plan of which is explained in *Reconstruction of Thinking*, part 1.

³⁰ For arguments for this approach to moral identity, see my *Eternity and Time's Flow*, part 1.

inimical to human welfare. Part of the apprehension of the holiness of God is the recognition that divine purpose has very little that can be scaled to what is meaningful for human life, though within the human sphere the excellence of human life is its achievement of good moral identity.

In no metaphysical sense can the Creator be conceived to have an interior subjectivity, for instance to plot the success of the Israelites against the Egyptians, Canaanites, and Philistines, or to make the world safe for democracy. God's "purpose" is nothing more than creating the world created, with whatever values it has, and this is an unusual sense of purpose in light of the denial of antecedent reflection. But by the same token, what is interesting about human purpose is not so much the inherited motives clamoring for attention but the creative initiation of actions that nearly always bear more value or disvalue than anticipated – we too are wilder than would be expected by our commonsense Aristotelian myth of deliberating about the means but not the ends.

The result of this discussion is a conception of God as creative act that produces a particular world. The divine nature itself is singular and particular, resulting from the work of creation. To call this God wild is to acknowledge the freedom and particularity of creation, a condition called for in the previous section. That the wild, particular, God creates a particular universe means that science and other forms of inquiry are needed to find out what the universe is, without prior commitment from a conception of the divine nature. The lopsidedness of our world, its unfairness from the standpoint of human moral judgment, its chanciness to put us on our small planet with our strange evolution, is what one would expect from a willful God.

A bonus of the discussion is that it has yielded suggestions for an unusual conception of human choice and creativity, one that emphasizes freedom and human wildness, though limited by the given materials of environment and antecedents. This too will be important in subsequent chapters when we inquire how we might relate to Jesus.

The conception of God as Creator *ex nihilo* has been defended piecemeal against the more traditional metaphysical alternative of a supernatural being. The strength of that alternative, however, is that it seems to accord easily with the images of God in biblical religion, images to which Jesus and his followers appealed. I still need to show how those images are better justified in reference to the conception of God as Creator *ex nihilo*, the point of the following section. The biblical symbols