



CONVERSATION STARTERS

Seven Theological Categories For Relating the Gospel and Academic Work

2. The Creator-Creation Relationship

Good Scholarship is 'from God' and 'to God'

Last time we considered the identity of Christ as the Son of God within the Trinity. Here we'll explore the implications of the fact that this same eternally beloved 'Word' was also the divine agent of creation. What kind of act was the act of creation? What does this mean for the nature of the reality which we inhabit and explore as scholars? What does it mean for our temptations to academic pride or to discouragement and scepticism?

Creation is not the Creator

Against the idolatry of the ancient near east, Old Testament prophets like Isaiah reiterated that while humans made inert idols from wood and stone, Yahweh had made those humans and everything else besides. As creator, his sovereign agency over creation and its history was of a qualitatively different order to anything belonging to dependent creatures (Is 44:6ff).

The Creator-creature distinction was similarly clarified in 'Christian' Europe of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, following the fresh arrival of Aristotle's works. One controversy concerned Aristotle's view that the universe had always existed eternally. For Aristotle, whatever existed *always*, existed *necessarily*. So in his paradigm the universe and its goodness were ultimate and self-standing. But biblical orthodoxy prevailed: Yahweh had created *ex nihilo*: out of nothing. God was under no necessity to create – he is self-sufficient in his Triune self-existence. His decision to create was an entirely *free decision*. The creation that resulted was therefore contingent and can be recognised as a free gift. Creaturely goods are not to be worshipped in themselves – or understood in themselves – but they are to be appreciated as having come *from God*.

Nature as Indifferent?

But what is the relationship between the Creator and his creation? If God is indeed so exalted above it, and if his decision to create this universe was entirely *free*, then surely he could have decided to make it very differently? Indeed, mightn't we celebrate the sovereignty of God's free will by describing the stuff of this universe – and its internal ordering – as indifferent, or even *arbitrary*? Why should creation be considered

as essentially 'good' at all? Put like this, it is clear how an orthodox theological impulse to re-affirm the sovereignty of God's free agency over his creation could lend momentum to philosophical *voluntarism* – where the independence of God's free will becomes a dominant programmatic category. This emphasis began to emerge in the later middle ages among those following Scotus and Ockham.

If God created freely, and could have done it differently, could God have decided just as well to designate as 'evil' for us those things which he has given to us as 'good'? Such an account of divine freedom would imply that nothing creaturely is good or evil in itself, and that the moral order, thus detached from the universe itself, is no more than what God had chosen to command. Perhaps God had merely overlaid nature's essentially neutral 'stuff' with an independently-chosen set of moral or religious rules?

Here we are only a step away from modernity. If left uninformed by other biblical truths, this apparent *exaltation* of God over his creation could become a *separation* of God from the universe. This divergence of 'things themselves' from the 'overlaid norms' decreed by an independent Will coheres very happily with modernity's dichotomy of 'facts' and 'values'. It can easily be secularised. If *God's* laws are only the product of his will, why shouldn't the same be true for *human* law-making too? This way, law in general would be seen as the expression of the will of those in power, without such 'justice' having any necessary moral content. In jurisprudence, this would be seen by the replacement of a natural law paradigm in favour of legal positivism. And if this was possible for public life, it is all the more the case for individuals: we can all choose our own right and wrong, and be whoever we want to be.

Creation as God's Self-Communication

With this context we can now turn to appreciate the significance of the New Testament's teaching that the primary divine agent in the Trinitarian act of creation was *God the Son* – the eternal 'Word'.ⁱ

The same biblical texts make clear that the *eternally begotten* Son within the Trinity has always been at the

centre of God's meaningful communication within himself. He is God's *radiance*, who is also God's *image* and *exact representation*. In John 1 and Hebrews 1 the connections are foregrounded: if the act of creation was to be given to *the Word*, then the act of creation is to be seen an act of *divine self-communication*.ⁱⁱ

Before we explore the implications of this fact, notice how such a key teaching about the doctrine of *creation* comes to us 'bundled' within the New Testament's teaching about *Christ*. The presenting question for the original readers was Jesus' identity – not just as the Jewish Messiah but also as the eternal Son of God. But such an expansion of Christology brings with it a clarification about created reality. By its linking of the incarnation with creation, and placing both under the one theme of God's self-communication through his Son, the New Testament's presentation of Christ includes within it – or in its slipstream – a significant clarification about the nature of reality. We receive a growing understanding of the world as we grow in our understanding of Christ, 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:3).

So what are some implications of the Bible's claim that God's act of creation was an act of self-communication? It means that the act of creation was more than merely the bringing of *stuff* into *being*. Certainly, as we saw above, God's self-existence and freedom means that our dependent existence as creatures can be considered as a *gift*. But now there is more. Created through the Word, creation exists as the kind of gift which *speaks of its Giver*: 'the heavens declare the glory of God' (Ps. 19:1).

We now have a framework for understanding God's creation as *good*. Our confession is of a good God, who freely chose to communicate the goodness of his own divine life, outside of himself. Creation is good, but not of and by itself, but only as it derives *from God*.

This *Christian* (and not merely theistic) view of the universe contrasts with other influential accounts. It means we do not inhabit an indifferent and value-neutral world produced by an arbitrary Will so distant that we can just as easily call it fate or random chance. Nor do we inhabit a pantheistic universe where we merely sit downstream from a mindless natural Source like the sun or a waterfall, whose automatic overflow constitutes the experience of our lives in the great procession of the Universal. We don't need to be stumped by the 'Euthyphro dilemma' of Plato's

dialogues – either relegating goodness to the arbitrary decision of God, or relegating God to the constraints of an abstract Good which exists independently of him.

'From God' and therefore 'to God'

If creation is God's self-communication, then to exist as a creature is to exist in a creaturely 'format': creation is informational, meaningful and purposeful. This means an aspect of creation's goodness is its *knowability*, as we share the same format as the world around us. Everything God made participates in this common culture of our creaturely story. Contrary to the Enlightenment's too strict subject/object divide, the 'otherness' which distinguishes us from the object of our study is not so fundamental as to alienate us from it or a true knowledge of it. Even if we don't know our own specialism exhaustively, we can be comforted that what we do know we can know truly.ⁱⁱⁱ

As it comforts us, the doctrine of creation also challenges our pride. We can only participate in scholarship because we have received our existence and location within God's meaningful creation. Further, as the object of our study is 'from God' the truest appreciation of its nature is to recognise how it exists *in relation to God*.^{iv} Not only does he continually sustain its existence 'through' the word of his power, but as all things are 'from God' they are also 'to'/'for' God (Heb. 1:3, Col. 1:15-20, Rom 11:36). If God has communicated his glory in creation, then creatures are signposts to ascribe glory back to him in praise and thanksgiving (Rom 1:19-20, 21). Each of our disciplines – in its presuppositions, history, questions and results – will somehow signal its divine origin and purpose.^v

We will see next time that the essence of sin is the *suppression* of this return, resulting in idolatry: we redirect creation's God-ward dynamic back onto itself (Rom 1:18-27). So when we get carried away, as if our scholarship is from ourselves and for ourselves, we deny – in one stroke – both true scholarship and the God who generously gave it to us. But in the gospel, God's effective self-communication redirects us to him.

Discuss

1. Are you feeling vulnerable to academic pride or discouragement? Did anything here address this?
2. How does a biblical view of the 'nature of reality' contrast with the paradigm of your faculty?

ⁱ Jn.1:3, Col. 1:16, Heb. 1:2.

ⁱⁱ "Apart from the Trinity even the act of creation becomes inconceivable. For if God cannot communicate himself, he is a darkened light, a dry spring, unable to exert himself outward to communicate himself to creatures." H Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 2004), 2:308-9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (1968) in *Complete Works* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 1:263.

^{iv} John Webster, 'Regina artium: Theology and the humanities' in *The Domain of the Word* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 171-191.

^v For Further Reading, see the classic opening sections of Calvin's *Institutes*.