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Thoughts on Creation

Perhaps in so far as myths of creation tell of special events, they do so almost reflexively. This speaking, this uttering, this primordial thinking of the coming into being of things and of man, this placing of all that is in world: is not this speaking, this uttering, this thinking a participation in the coming to pass of that of which such myths tell? So construed, at any rate, myths of creation tend to disclose that of which they speak; the mists and emerging grandeur of the morning of creation play in this very speech. Here speech itself seems to find its origin and meaning, bursting forth decisively. It is not that there is, or once was, creation and subsequently a telling of it, by means of speech imported for the occasion and of an origin extraneous to the occasion told. No; primordial speaking and thinking cannot disavow the origin they would acknowledge in myth of creation. They reflect upon that which they bear witness to, realize, and fulfill. Yet the speaker, for all his part in this, remains anonymous, even though man may appear as in some way central in creation as told.

In narrating a story, myths of creation seem to have to do with events in time, with coming to pass. We have begun by recognizing how they may tell of special events. Yet what seems to be special about these events is that they are world events. In them world is coming to pass, and coming into being is coming to pass. The events narrated seem to yield an appreciation of being in time and of all things implicated in temporal existence. And the point seems to be that

being in time somehow "has an origin"--that all things implicated in temporal existence derivatively enjoy such being as may be theirs. The being of beings in time is somehow bestowed upon them, and the bestowal of being here in question seems indissolubly linked with the coming to pass of world. World and the being of beings in time thus appear alike as of one and the same origin.

Before turning to the element of origin invoked in myths of creation, let us consider how world is suggested in them. The suggestion, as I venture to read it, is that world essentially can be only in coming to pass; it cannot be conjured with as extant. World is, if you will, always in the building, being forged, to be done; it cannot lapse from dawning and formation. It appears as that which dawns and is in dawning. So world does appear as world-without-end, and creation with respect to world is continuous creation. Hence the feel of creation is one of fluency and constancy, one of opening out and opening up, one of gathering up and growing together of things and events to enter into this ongoing ever-forming of world. Thus, to be in and of the world would be to be in and of continuous creation, and to abide in the world would be to abide in no fixed abode.

Turning now to the element of origin invoked in myths of creation, we have every reason to be especially careful. For what is being invoked is invoked as divine, as birthless and deathless, as the ever-so, the self-same, the fundamental and ordaining power. Here, if I were to say that we are hard put to it to know what is in question, I would think it very reasonable of you to smile--providing you don't smile too sardonically. Yet, is the point that the divine is very, very difficult to know and such that only very, very few come to know what is in question--if, indeed, the invocation of divine origin of creation is not what we speak of today as merely mythical? Or is it the very tone of primordial speech of creation that must instruct us in listening to its imagery? Is not the divine more like what is to be discovered in this very act of speech, responsively

echoed in the hearing of our hearts? The divine is there, animating that speaking, and to be marked, if at all, in a ring of authenticity and a tone over which simplicity itself presides. That is the divine, inexhaustible in power: unutterably simple, presiding, gathering, disposing, revealing Presence--calling forth the very speech, imparting the very gift of speech, in which the being of beings is consummated, acknowledged, confirmed. Then things are the things of the world that is coming to pass and address the hearing heart as divine speech.

Creation is indeed a story to be told, and in the telling of it, it is with reason that divine power is extolled. Myths of creation reflect the fact in the primordial doing of the deed. Where this sort of telling occurs, the reason for it appears in and with the telling. In myths of creation, creation seems to be claiming speech as its own proper and revealing dominion.

But how may things stand with us nowadays in thinking and speaking of creation?

Sometimes it seems to me that to bespeak creation comes so naturally and spontaneously that it is what all naturalness and spontaneity do: Whenever and wherever they occur, they bespeak creation. As we put it, there is something creative about them, whether wittingly so or not. And it is, above all, of actions and of people in action that we have come to think when we think of creation. There is even a tendency to think of creation preeminently, though not altogether exclusively, in connection with those actions we typify as artistic. Not too many for whom the meaning of creation has been thus focalized wend their way back--or on--to a renewed or new appreciation of the primordial themes of creation: coming into being, coming to pass of world, and divine origin. I will not attempt here to follow up at all the direction indicated by Whitehead through reflection on "aesthetic experience" to reinterpretation of reality. Nor will I attempt to discuss those great essays of Heidegger's which seem to me

to go so far in opening up this direction of thought.

What I wish to do now is to suggest that it is our part in creation which presently calls for reflection and that we may come at this task by reconsidering the possible meaning of creatio ex nihilo. What I believe is that we become selves--truly ourselves--in willing participation in creation; that in so doing we discover the meaning of our responsibility in relationship with others; and that we cannot conceive of creation in terms apart from our participation in it. But if this is the story of creation that is ours to tell, we must distinguish the possible sense in which it is a story of creatio ex nihilo. It is the nihil that establishes this story as essentially pertaining to ourselves, as well as all things, and in a way peculiar to ourselves.

The way to willing participation in creation seems to be a dialectical one. It is not at all a matter of destination and linear movement toward it. Whatever we distinguish as pertaining to this way is likely to be implicitly involved with contraries. What has appeared thus, now appears so, and thinking does not necessarily stabilize the shape-shifting countenance that appearance wears. But I will speak of nothingness in three distinguishable senses which seem pertinent to the theme of creatio ex nihilo; without suggesting, I hope, that I mean to describe "something having a nature," with fixed and discrete properties to be elicited and recognized as such.

First, there is the nothingness known as such, say, in dread and despair--such as Kierkegaard deals with so carefully. Second, there is the nothingness known to renunciation, so central in Buddhist thought and there called sunyata. And third, there is the nothingness of being, in the sense that being is not a being at all, as Heidegger makes the point--so central in his thinking.

Now in entering upon a development of these three senses in which creation seems to involve "nothingness," I believe we must be explicit about the standpoint from which we must think and speak and the language in terms of which our thought

can move. There can be no talk, no proper thought, in this matter that does not presuppose the standpoint of care and move in the language of care. Nothing and being obtain for care, and it is essentially being of which care stands in need; and being comes to care as calling upon it. Our lives are in essence vocational, however long we may be in realizing it. Perhaps I could say that it is quite impossible to speak without interpreting at least implicitly what is called for and what it is to be called upon. "Philosophically stated," one cannot help begging the question, and explicitly, when it comes to talking of being and nothing. One can only hope to beg it appropriately. This, I confess, I have no assurance of doing, yet I will do my best, tending to folly my master, Eckhart, in the way the question is begged. That is, I shall speak of creatures and of creaturely being in a way that presupposes that decisive mode of care in which renunciation, or "disinterestedness," is pivotal. Implied in this presupposition is the impossibility of forcing it upon anyone, for care only is in this mode willingly, by utterly free consent, and not otherwise. As the Tao Te Ching suggests, reasoning in this mode of care, however firm it may be, cannot contend.

As in Hindu and Buddhist thought, it must be an early part of our story to take account of the great illusion into which our senses, intellect, desire, and will are likely to plunge: It consists in taking the ten thousand things as if they were in and of themselves. Now of creatures thus construed Meister Eckhart seems to be talking when he says that creatures of themselves are mere nothings. Their really being something, their "suchness," is in their being taken as creatures; I would almost say, in their being permitted to be, in being as creatures. Thus the irony of the illusion to which I refer is that in tending to treat things as if they were beingful in and of themselves, we reduce them to nothings. In a way this is equivalent to washing our hands of them--treating them as if they had being and could well enough go their own way without us.

But what is this way of construing being implicit in taking things as if they were in and of themselves? Is it not that being and care are in utterly contingent, accidental relationship? Being is independent of care. If so, in what way can care work out the equation of its relation with things whose being appears in the guise of inherent independence of care? It would seem that care must alternate between two correlative positions with respect to things and others: Either it can assert itself and seek to impose itself or it can acquiesce in what may be imposed upon it. Care then takes itself to be free and independent in so far as it has its way with things, and any possible dependence in which it may stand must seem to it a threat to its freedom and independence. And death entering the life of care to qualify it as mortal is all that is needed to lock care in an utter impasse, in that it must come to feel itself as bound to fail. Being must seem to tolerate care and ultimately reject it with inscrutable indifference. Dread anticipates the crisis of futility, when nothingness seizes the heart, and care comes consciously to despair.

But through precisely such happening, and not otherwise, is selfhood potentiated, as Kierkegaard says. And precisely through such happening we are cast out of illusory proximity with things and put in relationship with what-is as a whole, or better, in toto. A pall of nothingness falls between us and everything; it is our relationship with everything that is radically in question. Only in so far as this happens can we really come to put the shoe on our own foot, as it were, and come to realize that our being is somehow pivotally in question with the being of all things. "At this point" care is got ready for an examined life, when it feels itself essentially in question even as it questions and lives in question. Care awakens to itself as somehow responsible for its way of taking things and may well be imbued with suspicion that as it takes things, so it has them, yet precisely not in the sense that it can at will confer on things the fundamental aspect which they assume for it. Thus everything about the situation

of care tends to a dialectic and irony on which tragedy and comedy alike may thrive. And what do the most trenchant tragic and comic dramas tend to show? Is it not that we are somehow responsible for the way in which things appear to us without being able to determine how things appear at will? Do not these dramas study appearance in intimacy with modes of care? And do they not tend to suggest that care cannot absolve itself of the way things appear to it, so that if appearances come to wear an illusory aspect, as in disillusionment with them, then care must acknowledge its part in illusion and know that part as delusion?

At this phase of our story the situation of care seems to be something like this: The being of things can no longer be dissociated from their appearing and the way in which care discovers them. Care and being have essentially to do with one another. Being is no longer that to which care may take itself to be accidentally abandoned. The questionableness of being is now also the questionableness of care. The meaning of being becomes care's own undertaking. We may say that the stake in the venture is both the self and the world. Thus, as Tillich points out, in so far as self-loss may attend the venture, this is also at the same time world-loss. But in the course of speaking of creation and the story that may be ours to tell of it, we have already said as much: Namely, that the coming to pass of world and our coming to be as selves are essentially related; we participate in this as selves and only as selves. World, in turn, seems to come to pass only through our participation in it as selves, and this is ultimately a matter of free consent on our part, while coming to pass through us.

Can we now say what the situation of care implicitly is, with respect to being? I think we must try, in that the very predicament of the self must implicitly foster whatever, by way of resolution, may answer to it. I would say the situation is implicitly this: Care and being are "promised" to one another. In consonance with being alone can care be confirmed in its being. We become authentically ourselves in the image of the divine and on the strength of the divine.

This implies that we come to know ourselves in being ourselves and I think in a very precise sense: We are strictly as nothing in and of ourselves. Of all creatures, we must know our creatureliness and accept it in order to be as the creatures we really are. Our true dignity consists in our ability to acknowledge that considered in and of ourselves we are as nothing. Now this means two things: It means that considered in and of ourselves we are of no account and impotent. It also means that we are able to be in the image of being, which is no thing at all. The free consent to be as nothing in both these senses is what I understand by renunciation. And what is it that renunciation is renunciation of? Simply of the claim, I think, to be in one's own right. Care cannot entitle itself to be nor can it issue the title of anything to be, no matter how benevolently disposed by inclination care may be. In renunciation, so construed, care is not being "heroic" but essentially matter-of-fact. In so far as care is prepared to give itself up, then it is prepared to receive all things. In doing so, it makes room for things to come into being and does not block the mutual access, so to speak, of things and being, consummated through one's willing participation in this. In thus receiving all things into itself, care recognizes them as divine gifts, for so they are in creation.

If these gifts are not to be disavowed, care must be willing to part with them; they cannot be owned; they cannot be claimed; they cannot be clung to; and when departed, they cannot be sought. The continuity of participation in creation is in uninhibited restraint, forbearance, a continuing receptivity, an evenness in arrival and departure, way beneath the fluctuating surface of events. Otherwise stated, we may say: Receiving is parting, and parting is receiving; renunciation is the receptivity of care--receptivity, that is, on the part of care. Such is the Valley Spirit of Tao and the poverty of spirit

of which Eckhart speaks. There is nothing in all creation to which care may make fast; but in so far as care will agree to this it embraces all creatures as creatures, participates in all creation, and abides in no abode.

There is one parting pertinent to the possibility of participation in creation in our own time, especially here in what we may still call Christendom, and I see it as a parting of special historical relevance to us, nowhere more clearly indicated than in a remark of Meister Eckhart's in which he explicitly speaks of a parting that is last and highest:

Man's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of god. St. Paul took leave of god for God's sake and gave up all that he might get from god, as well as all he might give--together with every idea of god. In parting with these, he parted with god for God's sake and yet God remained to him as God is in his own nature--not as he is conceived by anyone to be--nor yet as something yet to be achieved--but more as an "is-ness," as God really is.
(Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation, R. B. Blakney, New York and London, Harper & Brothers, 1941, p. 204.)

The story of creation is an ontological one; indeed, the ontological one. But we may surmise what the discovery, the disclosure of being may presuppose. It presupposes radical and willing acceptance of creatureliness on our part. It demands no less and no more of us than ourselves. Perhaps the blessing of mortality consists in this, that as mortality grows upon us it strengthens in us the intimation of what is demanded of us--no more and no less than ourselves. Perhaps this is the one thing we need to know; somehow, unmistakably, unerringly conveyed with the possibility of being as a self, and it must be conveyed as a demand as inescapable as it is incomprehensible and beyond our capacity to bear. Then, in so far as--in spite of ourselves, very likely--we are led, trapped, surprised into moments of unconditional assent and free consent in a mortal existence, we begin to discover the meaning of creation and of coming into the world as men; and the possibility of our part in this, as agents of creation, dialectically insinuates itself into the human will. Now one lives in question: Who is he, really? Does he really will what, somehow, he knows he must will?

Namely, as Kierkegaard suggests: one thing. But what would one will in willing one thing? We might say, with Kierkegaard, the Good; or, with Buber, whatever in fact one is able to will unconditionally and with the whole soul, by way of contrast with double-minded, equivocal, and only seemingly decisive, namely, insistent willing. But what is it one wills in so far as he wills univocally and decisively? It must be something unutterably simple that one wills in willing one thing, so simple, perhaps, as to seem like willing nothing at all; and that is just being. To will one thing is being patient of creation, to be willing to be with all creatures as creatures, even as the most creaturely of creatures oneself.

One really does not know what is happening, or what he is doing, or where it all will lead. But perhaps it is not necessary to know, any more than it is necessary for us to live forever. What is really necessary is what really comes to pass. And it will come to pass, whether we are willing or no, but not in a sense that we can make out independently of care. For care is what we are, and creation uniquely involves us as agents of creation in what necessarily comes to pass. If, as Thoreau says, we may learn to love the darkness no less than the light, we shall know that we do not live in vain and that what is necessary is not imposed on us as a fate. It is simply and eternally to be done.