

Made for Self-Giving Love of Creation: Implications of *Kenosis* and *Imago Dei* for Natural Theodicy and Christian Ecological Ethics¹

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Introduction

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the humming-
bird—
Equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue
plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.
Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half
perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning
to be
astonished.

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The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the in-
gredients are here,
which is gratitude, to be given a mind and
a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy
dug-up clam,
telling them all over and over, how it is
that we live forever.
— "Messenger," by Mary Oliver²

Discerning the essence of Christian voca-
tion has long led theologians on a path of
ever-unfolding questions: questions about
the nature of humanity, the nature of God,
the nature of creation as a whole, and the
relationships among them all. It is a daunt-
ing endeavor. Poet Mary Oliver states the
task of being human with elegant simplicity
by naming a center around which all other
questions about our calling can be framed.
"My work is loving the world," she says. She

2. Mary Oliver, "Messenger," *Thirst: Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 1.

treats the sunflower, clam, and delphinium as friends in rejoicing, companions on life's journey, whom she can tell "over and over, how it is/that we live forever."

Yet, in this era of ecological consciousness, of recognition that humanity lives as a part of an astonishingly complex and profoundly suffering system of unfolding life, Christians face anew the question of how to understand God and eternal life in light of pain and evil, suffered not only by humans but by non-human creation, as well. To come to an understanding of humanity's role in alleviating that suffering, the careful theologian must also consider how humanity's role relates to God's role—which leads to considerations of God's power and love.

This paper will attempt to integrate reflection on divine power and love in relation to all of creation with considerations of how humans participate uniquely in that power and love by virtue of being made in God's image. In light of these reflections, it will then attempt to address the following questions: What is the appropriate human response to the suffering of creation? Does it vary depending on whether or not the suffering is caused by humans or is a natural part of the ecological system?

I propose that humanity does have a particular role in the redemption of the suffering of creation, one that can be most clearly understood through pairing the concepts of *kenosis* and the *imago dei*. I argue that, just as God's act of creation is one of self-limiting, self-emptying love for the sake of the freedom and flourishing of all creation, so should humanity's love of creation be kenotic, participating in God's image by this manner of loving so that creation might be freed for flourishing.

The Problem of Suffering Creation

To propose that humanity bears some responsibility to alleviate or redeem suffering in non-human creation, it is important to identify two primary categories of suffering in creation. The first and most obvious form of suffering in creation is that caused by human action—the loss of habitat due to deforestation, the extinctions that are resulting and will result from anthropogenic global climate change, the death and damage caused by watersheds polluted by industrial waste, etc. The other category of suffering is that which is an intrinsic part of the very system of evolution. Patterns of predation and other innocent suffering resultant from the processes of natural selection are the most prominent examples of this kind of suffering.³ While almost all theologians would argue in favor of an ethical imperative to respond to and redeem the former category of suffering, there is a variety of thought about the latter. These differences, it will become clear, often relate to divergent opinions or lack of clarity around the concepts of divine power, the nature of the *imago dei*, and the explanations for innocent suffering.

Bracketing anthropogenic suffering in non-human creation, the question of natural theodicy comes to the fore. Based on the premise that God calls all creation "good" and desires its flourishing, why must it be so full of innocent pain? An often cited illustration of this pain is the white pelican's "insurance chick," which is expelled from the nest by its mother and left to starve as soon as it is clear that the preferred offspring is likely to survive.⁴ This suffering is part

3. Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 2.

4. This example is notably used by

of a process that helps ensure the survival of a species, but what of those individual members of the species who suffer and die?

Based on the insights of biological science, it seems most appropriate to reject the claim that humanity's original sin is somehow responsible for the suffering or "fallen-ness" of non-human creation.⁵ However, it is important to acknowledge that in so doing, one rejects an argument that has been made through much of church history. Martin Luther, for example, clearly subscribed to this view of fallen-ness:

The earth itself feels the curse...it does not bring for the good things it would have produced if man had not fallen... it produces many harmful plants...All these were brought in through sin. I have no doubt that before sin the air was purer and more healthful, and the water more prolific; yes, even the sun's light was more beautiful and clearer.⁶

What, then, can we now understand as the reason for this suffering? Is it redeemed?⁷

Holmes Rolston III in his chapter "Kenosis and Nature," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001) and was made iconic in Jay B. McDaniel's text, *Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989).

5. Per Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 40 and Holmes Rolston III, "Does Nature Need to Be Redeemed?" *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 29, no. 2 (June 1994): 207.

6. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works I* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5, 204.

7. The term "redemption" is complex and problematic, especially in terms of its moral connotations. For this paper, in relation to non-human creation, I use it as Rolston does, as being "rescued from harm," to be "released" or "bought back." (Rolston,

How? By whom? There are three distinct options to consider:

First, some will argue that the suffering is redeemed by virtue of its role in perpetuating the continued existence and evolution of the species. Biochemist and theologian Christopher Southgate cites Andrew Elphinstone in *Freedom, Suffering and Love* and Rolston's views of redemption in these terms, which he characterizes as a "harm as a by-product of a good process" argument.⁸ We will see that Rolston's position does not satisfy Southgate (even with

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the eschatological emphasis that Rolston includes in the argument). It is worth noting that Southgate's underlying assumption about the necessity of redeeming each "individual" experience of suffering presupposes a post-Enlightenment understanding of the "individual" and values "individual" over "corporate" redemption. It is an assumption that would be interesting to explore in the context of pre-Enlightenment theology and contemporary scientific understanding,

"Does Nature Need to Be Redeemed?" 211. See also, Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 45).

8. Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 35 and 46.

especially genetics (which will grant primacy to the gene, which lives in replicated form within a multiplicity of “individuals” simultaneously, as the unit of life/selection/survival).⁹ Regardless, Southgate rejects the first argument for redemption through furthering a greater good.

A second position is taken by others for whom the first explanation is not true redemption, and they bring an eschatological emphasis into the picture.¹⁰ These lives will be gathered into Christ in the new creation, at the eschaton, when pain and suffering will be banished forever—for “all things.”¹¹

Third, for yet others, even this eschatological vision remains insufficient, and redemption is necessary for each individual life both in the “now” and the “not yet.”¹² Inasmuch as each particular instance of suffering is seen to participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is not enough to postpone redemption to the eschaton. For, “transformation has already been effected in Christ (e.g., Rom 5:18–19; 2 Cor 5:17), but generally it is clear that this is a *process*, decisively begun yet still to be worked out through suffering and struggle (e.g., Phil 3:12–14; Col 1:24).”¹³ In this view, the work of redemption is present and ongoing in the present and will come to ultimate completion in the eschaton.

9. Ibid. See also, Note 14.

10. Jürgen Moltmann and Holmes Rolston III both seem to propose such an eschatological hope. See Jürgen Moltmann, “...And Thou Renewest the Face of the Earth,” *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), esp. 114 and Rolston, “Does Nature Need to Be Redeemed?” 227–228.

11. See Col 1:15–20.

12. Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 45.

13. Ibid., 94.

In his book *The Groaning of Creation*, Southgate takes the final stance. He bases his position primarily on two arguments. First, each individual instance of suffering requires redemption, and the argument that “the suffering of individual organisms, even [if] it promotes the flourishing of others” is insufficient because it takes an instrumental (or “developmental”) approach to redemption that devalues the individual.¹⁴ Second, because “the Cross and Resurrection inaugurate a great era of redemption of the non-human creation leading to the eschaton,” the redemption of suffering must begin here and now.¹⁵ Southgate goes on to argue for a strong human role in enacting that redemption, even to a moral imperative to save all species from extinction when possible (even those whose extinctions are not caused by undue human interference and abuse).¹⁶

While Southgate may stretch his argument so far as to overestimate the appropriate role of humanity within creation, his assertion that instrumentality does not grant sufficient dignity to creation is well taken. In light of the previous consideration of individual versus corporate redemption, one possible response to this claim is the position taken by Vitor Westhelle in his article “The Weeping Mask: Ecological Crisis and the View of Nature,” where he suggests that the idea of the “individual” whose suffering needs particular redemption, is in fact an unhelpful and false construct. Based on scientific considerations, there may be a sense in which identity may be granted to a species as a whole rather than its constituent members. To do so may be argued to grant sufficient dignity and worth to the suffering of the members for

14. Ibid., 45.

15. Ibid., 76.

16. Ibid., 125.

the sake of the whole.¹⁷

Regardless, Southgate's realized/realizing eschatology in which all of creation takes part—grounded in God's present and ongoing work of redemption initiated in the Christ-event—sits well within the framework of other contemporary theologians' considerations of ecology in light of cosmic Christology. Where his argument lacks clarity is in failing to outline the proper distinction between the roles of humanity and God in relation to creation and its redemption.

The nature of the *imago dei* is somewhat unclear in Southgate's thought. As such, it will now be helpful in addressing the question of how humanity participates in God's nature and power (and the ethical implications thereof) to make a somewhat extensive consideration of theological claims about the nature and power of God as relates to theodicy and creation.

Divine Power and Creation

As has been mentioned, the traditional formulation of theodicy pits the assertion of divine omnipotence (power) and omnibenevolence (love) against the reality of suffering (both human and non-human). Over time, theologians have taken a variety of approaches to resolving this tension, and the recent move of process theology to assert a God with much more limited power than has been previously proposed raises some challenging, but potentially helpful possibilities for theodicy, even for those whose theological systems cannot countenance such a limited God.

Catherine Keller makes the very fair argument from a process theology

framework that even the most traditional formulations of God's omnipotence must take into account the limitation on God's power that is necessitated in the very act of creation. She states, "Most theists don't actually believe in an absolute omnipotence. They presume some back-and-forth of genuine relationship with God."¹⁸ In other words, to be relational, God's power must be limited—whether by God's own choosing or not. Keller goes on to use the text of Genesis 1 and chaos theory as a basis for arguing that the pre-existing chaos at creation undermines the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and that current scientific understanding affirms that emergence of order out of chaos is, in fact, a fundamental reality of the universe.¹⁹ Based on this assertion, Keller's system can encompass suffering as a possibility that emerges from the chaos, not formed by God's desired and benevolent purposes. In this system, the possibility of suffering and pain is present but can be held outside of God's responsibility.

For those who wish to retain divine omnipotence (or more of it than process theologians often do, at least), the claim of God's self-limitation becomes key.²⁰ God's power becomes limited for the sake of allowing creation freedom, but that limitation is initiated from within God's-self. The ultimate example of this is, clearly, the cross of Christ. God limits God's power for the sake of the work of redemption.

Yet, God also pours God's-self into creation in the incarnation. This *kenosis*, this self-pouring love, has also now been inter-

17. Vitor Westhelle, "The Weeping Mask: Ecological Crisis and the View of Nature," *Concern for Creation: Voices on the Theology of Creation*, ed. Viggo Mortensen, (Sweden: Svenska kyrkan. Forskningsrad, 1995), 113–114.

18. Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 83.

19. *Ibid.*, 48–52.

20. Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 58–59. Here Southgate explores divine self-giving love from a framework that presupposes God's omnipotence and omnipresence.

preted as part of the very act of creation.²¹ This pairing of actions: self-limitation and self-giving define the dance of God with God's beloved creation. As we move on to consider humanity's relationship to the rest of creation and to God, this mode of relationality on the part of God will become significant for understanding the *imago dei* and the ethical implications it presents for human relationship with the rest of creation.

***Imago Dei* and Humanity's Niche in Nature**

It has been an important insight of recent theologians (informed by biological science) that humankind is deeply a part of the creation that it has long treated as "other" and as instrument. The extent of the interdependence of all aspects of the created world, humanity included, has never been cast in a starker light than that of Earth's current ecological crises. Yet, Christian theology also asserts the uniqueness of humanity within creation. Made in the image of God, humankind occupies a unique location within creation, but one that must now be understood in light of what we know about how much we are truly a product and part of the rest of creation. How to embrace and live out this separate togetherness is the paradoxical concern that is finally most important for this paper.

21. "Divine omnipotence is widely questioned today for five reasons: (1) the integrity of nature in science and theology; (2) the problem of evil and suffering; (3) the reality of human freedom; (4) the Christian understanding of the cross; and (5) feminist critiques of patriarchal models for God. Such considerations have led many contemporary theologians to speak of God's voluntary self-limitation (or kenosis) in creating a world." John Polkinghorne, ed. *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 1.

In light of considerations of God's power and love, what does it mean to be created in the *imago dei*? In the age of ecological crisis, we can no longer claim that it means having full freedom to use and manipulate the rest of the created world with primarily human advancement in mind. In describing the human relationship to creation, the terms *dominion* and *stewardship* have become encumbered by so much baggage of misuse and abuse as to be almost entirely unhelpful.

Based on the scriptural witness and the insights of science, Lutheran theologian Philip Hefner has proposed the provocative term "created co-creator" to describe the human role in the world and manner of participating in the image of God.²² This term is born out of the claim that human creativity and ability to not only respond to the environment but also to shape it is what distinguishes us from the rest of creation. This assertion is supported by the theory of natural selection, inasmuch as humanity is the only species that seems to be able to "transcend"²³ the self-actualizing pinnacle of this process in order to transform reality.

Beginning with this argument, Southgate stretches Hefner's terminology and claims the human as "created co-redeemer," based on the "conviction that human ingenuity, with the power it gives us to modify

22. Phil Hefner, "Beyond Exploitation and Sentimentality: Challenges to a Theology of Nature," *Concern for Creation: Voices on the Theology of Creation*, ed. Viggo Mortensen (Sweden: Svenska kyrkan. Forskningsrad, 1995), 73–74.

23. Here I am using Southgate's language for participation in that which moves beyond the self-serving system of natural selection, though he is perhaps willing to grant a greater extent of participation in this "self-transcendence" on the part of non-human creation than I. Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 66–68.

plant species and domesticate animals, to reshape environments... is a God-given part of our nature," and he claims that "part of humanity's transformation will be the discovery of the right uses of humans' gifts in respect of the non-human world."²⁴ It is on this point that he builds his argument for the responsibility of humanity to participate in the redemption of creation—particularly through what he calls "eschatological vegetarianism" and through the effort to end the extinction of species.²⁵ It is Southgate's position that humanity should interact with the rest of nature with the express goal of participating in the realization of an eschatological vision that includes the end of all suffering, even that which is a part of the created order of this world. We are to behave in a way that continues the process of redemption initiated in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

It is at this point that one must pause and discuss to what extent redemption is in God's hands and to what extent it can be in human hands, as well. While Hefner's terminology of "created co-creator" is well grounded in a scientific understanding of human uniqueness, as well as in Scripture, Southgate's adoption of the term "created co-redeemer" moves into a greyer area. Are we humans redeemers? If so, to what extent? Is that part of what it means to participate in God's image?

I would assert that the proper way to identify one's responsibility for redemption is to see it as corollary to one's power.²⁶

24. Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 104–105.

25. *Ibid.*, 116–127.

26. This would also be my response to the feminist critique of using kenotic love as a standard or model for ethical human behavior. While this perspective deserves much more detailed attention in considering *kenosis* and the *imago dei*, for the purposes of this paper, I shall simply assert that the

Inasmuch as God's power is ultimate, ultimate redemption belongs in the hands of God. Human power, however great, is not ultimate and thus we can only participate in redemption in a limited way. In other words, we can only redeem that over which we have power. Thus, we can be responsible for redeeming the suffering in nature for

Are we humans redeemers? If so, to what extent? Is that part of what it means to participate in God's image?

which we are responsible but not that which is part of the structure of the system itself, which we cannot change.

I would argue that redemption from extinction, like redemption from predation or the innocent suffering built into the processes of natural selection, is a part of the eschatological hope that remains purely within the purview of God's action and intervention in the created order. For humanity to attempt to prevent natural (as opposed to anthropogenic) extinction would be as foolish and hubristic as trying to prevent predation, and would likely necessitate the expenditure of resources that would exert undue and inappropriate stress on other parts of the natural system. This

critique is noted and partially answered by proposing the limitation of responsibility to participate in redemption and kenotic love in proportion to one's power.

could, in fact, be argued to be as disrespectful of non-human creation as exploitative and anthropocentric-instrumental-relational models of humanity. Both presume a degree of human authority that extends beyond a theologically and scientifically grounded understanding of our power and that thus contains the potential for great harm.

Humanity is, indeed, responsible for redeeming creation's suffering, but not all of it. Natural theodicy remains. Innocent suffering exists in nature, and human action cannot and will not eradicate it. Humanity can and should, however, work to redeem creation's suffering in light of participation in the *imago dei*. Specifically, humanity's proper relationship to creation can be seen in light of its participation in God's kenotic love.

As has been discussed, God's self-emptying love for all of creation is of the essence to God's relationship with it. As unique beings among God's creatures, humanity is also capable of such love. God limits and gives of God's-self to allow for the freedom and flourishing of creation. As beings made in God's image, humans should limit and give of themselves to allow for the freedom and flourishing of all creation, as well.

Again, this kenotic love can only be proportional to the agency and power of the individual. We cannot be God or Christ, but we can participate in the work of redemption to a degree.²⁷

27. In fact, creation can also be said to participate to its own degree; for, it is seen by many (if not all) of the theologians here cited to be cruciform. Based on the understanding of the *imago dei* presented here, however, humanity's capacity for participation in this love is much greater based on the unique nature of human freedom.

Conclusion

My work is loving the world...
the moth and the wren...the sleepy dug-
up clam,
telling them all over and over, how it is
that we live forever.²⁸

Theologians and poets, biologists and climatologists, farmers and computer scientists—all contemplate how our species is to live and move within this complex world. Pain seems present everywhere, built into the systems of life and overwhelmingly pervasive. What are we to do?

Knowing that alleviating some suffering is within our power (and is, in fact, our responsibility), we also know that our power is limited. We participate in God's work in unique ways, yet some work is solely God's.

Finally, we are to love. Made in God's image, we are uniquely capable of a degree of participation in divine love that prompts us to tell our brothers and sisters, the moths and wrens and clams, "how it is/that we live forever." As we wait in hope with all of creation for the ultimate redemption that only God brings, we seek to live and love in a way that allows all of God's good and beloved creation to flourish.

28. Oliver, *Thirst*, 1.



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