

PAUL TILLICH'S REALISTIC STANCE TOWARD THE VITAL TRENDS OF NATURE

by *Eduardo R. Cruz*

Abstract. Many scientists have argued forcefully for the pointlessness of nature, something that challenges any doctrine of Creation. However, apparent design and comprehensibility are also to be found in nature; it is ambivalent. This trait is nowhere more evident than in the natural inclinations that lead to concupiscence and the “seven deadly sins” in human beings. These inclinations are dealt with as pertaining to the “pre-fallen” condition of nature and human beings. As a framework to make sense of the goodness of creation in this context, Paul Tillich’s notion of the “vital trends of nature” is called to the fore. Being at the intersection of a philosophy of religion and a philosophy of nature, this notion hints at the goodness of Creation in fragment and anticipation.

Keywords: ambivalence; creation; design; evil; goodness; life; nature; pointlessness; seven deadly sins; Paul Tillich.

That nature display signs of meaning¹ and artfulness is an undeniable fact (Barrow 1995), accepted even by those who deny any purpose in her (Dawkins 1998). On the other hand, we are reminded of the often cited statement by Steven Weinberg: “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless” (Weinberg 1977, 144). The debate around the existence or not of signs of purpose in the universe has received new vigor with recently developed ideas about “intelligent design”² or the logic of game theory (Wright 2000) coming from the realm of mathematics. For some, what is at stake is the goodness of creation, an essential

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feature of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. A premise of this paper is that there is often a confusion between categories that belong to two different logical levels, that of "creation" and that of "nature," a confusion further strengthened by the fact that "universe" is simultaneously a physical and a metaphysical category (Jaki 1993). It is the purpose of this paper to suggest, on the other hand, that Paul Tillich's concept of the "ambiguities of life" may be a suitable way to account for the simultaneous presence of designlike and nonpurposeful features that come out of contemporary descriptions of nature. This suggestion is preceded by a short defense of the validity of speaking today about "before" and "after" the Fall. Throughout the paper, I argue for the compatibility of the ambivalence of nature and the goodness of creation, reasserting traditional theological insights.

IS NATURE GOOD?

The goodness of creation was framed in the context of traditional accounts of the doctrines of Creation and Fall. In this context, the Fall (the deed of Adam's moral choice) is made completely foreign to nature, so that "natural evil" is accounted for, usually with some embarrassment, only in a short appendix. Moreover, this kind of evil is thought of only in terms of extraordinary events, such as earthquakes, plagues, volcano eruptions, and so on. Whatever evil is found in the ordinary course of nature is attributed, again, to human free choice "once upon a time." There is a surprising level of agreement on this view, with an alternative, very popular today, the environmentalist one. Here the virginal harmony of nature is disrupted by human deeds, not in a time long gone but with ever greater intensity today.

Such views have some degree of implausibility from the side of the sciences, and quite a few scientists indulge themselves in ridiculing their contradictions.³ A realistic view (that is, one that is in accordance with both the theory and the facts of evolution) seems to require a suitable balance between "creation" and "nature" to avoid either the separation or a conflation of both. Much has been done in terms of the development of a credible doctrine of Creation (and a theology of nature, for that matter), and it is beyond the scope of this paper either to summarize or to criticize these efforts.⁴ My aim is just to give a clue to the most intractable of the problems involved in a doctrine of Creation: to account for the ruthlessness of nature (humankind included) even before resorting to the notion of the Fall. In a nutshell, the problem boils down to how we can reconcile the goodness of creation with the apparent pointlessness and cruelty of nature.

We cannot deny or place at a secondary level many gruesome features of nature. Nor would it be acceptable to completely separate the goodness of creation from the processes of nature, as if the latter were unimportant for the history of salvation. Indeed, an important principle should be maintained: Even though they are not the last word about creation, facts and

explanations that can be derived from the scientific account of nature are surely relevant, even fundamental, to understand what creation is all about. However, this account (which we know is incomplete and changeable) is raw data, which must then be interpreted so as to translate properly the traditional doctrine of Creation. The issue we must address, in qualitative terms, is what kind of “evil” is to be regarded as pertaining to the goodness of Creation and what kind of evil (this time without quotation marks) is a consequence of the Fall.

A good example, albeit ill-explored in the literature, is that of the seven deadly sins. Today we have a reasonably substantiated scientific description of them.⁵ See, for example, the whole set of essays discussing them in *New Scientist*, 28 March 1998. The essay on “envy” ends with the following assertion: “It is hard, empirically, to escape the conclusion that sociological Darwinism—and the mathematical modeling based on its assumptions—offers a better explanation for the evolutionary useful, so-called deadly sin, envy, than do religion or the traditional humanities” (Kealey 1998, 27). Two conclusions can be drawn from it: first, if envy is “evolutionary useful,” some of the goodness of creation should be attached to it. Second, however perceptive traditional religious renderings of envy may have been, today they are not a match for evolutionary psychology.⁶ New renderings have to be sought.

It is not the task of science to ascribe what is prior to the Fall or what is its aftermath. But it is rationally possible to work out this distinction.⁷ It is based on the “Ephesian principle”: “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath” (Ephesians 4:26 KJV). What is true for wrath stands for the other sins as well.⁸ The watershed is human free will and the construction of freedom (see Hefner 1993, 125–30; 2000). Paul Tillich’s notion of “finite freedom” in the process of Creation and Fall seems to provide a suitable framework for the discussion of free will at this point (Tillich 1957a, 31–33, 36–39; cf. Rahner’s notion of finite freedom in Rahner 1961). But it is not in Tillich’s account of Creation that we may find a science-friendly description of the pre-fallen state of nature and human beings—better turn to his analysis of the ambiguities of life (Tillich 1963, 11–110).

THE AMBIVALENCE OF NATURE AND THE GOODNESS OF CREATION

“Life” here has some resemblance to what scientists call “nature,” as I have discussed elsewhere (Cruz 1995; 1996; 1997). Briefly stated, “life” first encompasses several dimensions, including the inorganic. Tillich chooses “dimensions” instead of “levels,” in order to underline the continuity of being and to point out the perennial danger of philosophy and theology, that of thinking in terms of dualisms and a hierarchy of being. The danger

stemming from the sciences is the opposite one, that of reducing the organic to inorganic processes. Second, it has a dialectical character, indicating that all life processes involve a movement from self-identity to self-alteration and a return to one's self in such a way that three functions may be recognized in them: self-integration, self-creation, and self-transcendence (Tillich 1963, 331).

With this brief summary of Tillich's analysis of life and its ambiguities,⁹ I now move on to outline some elements that may clarify the issues at stake. First, any sophisticated description recognizes the ambivalence of the evolutionary process that has led to humankind. Kealey comments: "Human societies have therefore evolved to contain some very mixed emotions; men must both compete and cooperate with other men, and so must women with women" (Kealey 1998, 26). Hundreds of other examples could also be noted.

But this ambivalence is not restricted to human societies; it is more generally found in the tension between designlike and nonanthropomorphic (usually related to "disorder") traits in all evolutionary processes—see, for example, the excellent account given by Holmes Rolston, III (1987, 286–93).¹⁰ We do not think that science will ever be able to resolve this dilemma to full satisfaction, despite (or even because of) its commitment to univocacy. A metascientific reasoning should be helpful at this point, at the crossroads of a philosophy of nature and a philosophy of religion, such as the one unfolded by Tillich (1957b).¹¹ We may also take advantage of a contradiction within the system of Paul Tillich: his account of the transition from essence to existence, as a philosophical tool to account for Creation and Fall, is not fully compatible with his description of the structure and development of life and its dimensions, which apparently does not require a Fall. A notion within the framework of the latter description, which is located at this crossroads between two philosophies, is the one of "vital trends of nature."

Tillich does not often resort to this notion, but it seems to us that it summarizes nicely his description of the ambiguities of life. The following passage is pivotal:

At the same time the psychoanalytic movement in all its branches has destroyed the ideologies of Christian and humanist moralism. It has shown how deeply even the most sublime functions of the spirit are rooted in the vital trends of human nature. Further, the doctrine of the multidimensional unity of life in man requires the rejection of any attempt to suppress vitality for the sake of spirit and its functions. . . .

. . . He who admits the vital dynamics in man as a necessary element in all his self-expressions (his passions or his *eros*) must know that he has accepted life in its divine-demonic ambiguity and that it is the triumph of the Spiritual Presence to draw these depths of human nature into its sphere. . . .

. . . He who tries to avoid the demonic side of the holy also misses its divine side and gains but a deceptive security between them. The image of perfection is the

man who, on the battlefield between the divine and the demonic, prevails against the demonic, though fragmentarily and in anticipation. (Tillich 1963, 240, 241)

A few remarks are in order. First, because of the “multidimensional unity of life,”¹² what is valid for human beings is also valid, *mutatis mutandis*, for prehuman nature. Second, the ambivalence of the vital trends in nature is correlated with the dynamics of the holy itself, in all its divine-demonic ambiguity, which Tillich discusses in many of his works (see note 11). Simplifying the imagery, we may say that the divine is the element of order and the demonic the element of disorder (cf. Tillich 1989, 66–68), with the proviso of their ambiguity in mind.

This ambiguity has the same structure of Tillich’s analysis of the dynamics integration-disintegration in nature (Tillich 1963, 34 ff.). “Life grows by suppressing or removing or consuming other life. Life lives on life,” says Tillich (1963, 53), a simple truth that everybody knows by negating it.¹³ Commenting on those who place all their bets on a designlike universe, Rolston also explores neatly the ambivalence of nature:

There was naiveté in the divine-blueprint model that was so upset by Darwin’s discovery of nature red in tooth and claw. (This is still true, whatever one makes of the “fine-tuned” universe of which cosmologists speak.) It was a bad religious model, really, as well as a nonscientific one, for it knew nothing of the constructive uses of suffering. It knew nothing of the wisdom of conflict. There are sorts of creation that cannot occur without death, and these include the highest created goods. Death can be meaningfully put into the biological processes as a necessary counterpart to the advancing of life. . . .

. . . Life needs death, if there is to be more life. Anything that would give the individual organism immortality would destroy the evolution of species. The individual life comes to a stop, but the evolutionary sequence? Whether it will ever stop we do not know. It seems to thrive on the tragic accidents that slay all the successive individuals. (Rolston 1987, 289)

This correlation between the dynamics of nature and the dynamics of the holy seems to be a suitable point of contact between a scientific description of nature and a theological description of the goodness of creation that does not shy away from the elements of chaos, disorder, and even cruelty in nature.

In order to accept this assertion, we need to give a suitable interpretation of the “fragmentarily” and “in anticipation” in the passage cited earlier (Tillich 1963, 241). Creation may be said to be good only if the ambivalence of nature (remember that nature is not a finished business) is not the last word about it. “Fragmentarily” means, first, that ordered, good, and beautiful traits, both in nature and in human action, can be recognized and rationally described. It also accounts for human desire, hope, and longing for (wishful thinking notwithstanding) another state of affairs. “Anticipation” then ensues. It is the strength of contemporary renderings of the doctrine of Creation to interpret the latter in eschatological terms (see, e.g., Pannenberg 1994, 136–74). As a consequence,

“goodness of creation” encompasses both (1) ambivalence and contradiction as we read current processes of nature and (2) what kind of goodness we may devise from our rational abilities in expectation and anticipation.¹⁴ This is also Tillich’s understanding, especially in the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*, when correlating scientifically testable “ambiguities of Life” with powerful eschatological symbols such as “Spiritual Presence,” “Kingdom of God,” and “Eternal Life.”

CONCLUSION

Saying that nature is ambivalent means that, when described by reliable and coherent theories, nature shows to us, with greater strength and depth than a naked-eye observation of the empirical world, simultaneously order and disorder, bounty and scarcity, “nicety” and “cruelty,” designlike and nonanthropomorphic traits. Instead of engaging in an either/or task, scientists and theologians may assume this ambivalence as compatible (although in a fragmentary and anticipatory way) with the goodness of creation, as portrayed in the liturgies, art, devotion, and theologies of most religions, as well as by moral reasoning. In sum, Tillich’s depiction of the “vital trends of nature,” in the framework of the correlation between the ambiguities of life and the symbols of their overcoming, provides us with a suitable basis for asserting both the pointlessness of nature, as it shocks us in the limits of our understanding and yet leaves us in awe in face of its majestic and artful character, and the goodness of creation, in its full, albeit fragmentary, realization.

NOTES

1. “Meaning,” here, not in the teleological sense of “being meaningful to us” but in the more technical denotation of “displaying order and comprehensibility.” For a recent discussion of teleological language in evolutionary theory, see Ruse 2000.

2. For the alleged “theory of intelligent design,” see Dembski 1999. For a pertinent criticism, see the review by Howard Van Till of William Dembski’s *The Design Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), published in *Zygon* (Van Till 1999).

3. Richard Dawkins, in particular, became a specialist in finding examples of the ruthlessness of nature. See, for example, chap. 4 of Dawkins 1995. For a discussion of different persuasions of scientists towards the “kindness” and “goals” of nature, see Ruse 1999.

4. Just to cite four recent works that are germane to our discussion, see Edwards 1999, Haight 2000, Korsmeyer 1998, and Tracy 1998.

5. If it is possible to have a good description of *The Origins of Virtue* (Ridley 1998; see also Wright 1994), by the same token we have an even better description of the origin of vices, the “seven deadly sins” being paramount among them.

6. This assertion, however, must come with a proviso: many of these scientific descriptions fail to do justice to the profound truths that underlie theological renderings of these “sins.” The essay on “pride” in the same issue of *New Scientist*, for example, misses the old perception that pride (*hubris*) is the seminal sin, out of which all others come, by not distinguishing between pride as a virtue and pride as a sin (Webb 1998, 34–35).

7. I do not pretend to be original at this point. Even within the Thomistic framework, theologians speculated about this “before” and “after” the Fall without appealing to Adam’s deed. In a seminal paper from the early forties, Karl Rahner had already introduced several distinctions in

the notion of “concupiscence” (closely related to the “seven deadly sins”) that can be further illuminated today by new approaches from science and theology. The following paragraph is suggestive: “What we have said so far in regard to this ‘nature’ [in distinction to the ‘supernatural’] is that concupiscencia is the inertia and impenetrability, in itself *bivalent*, of that ‘nature’ (in the earlier sense [something opposed to *person*]) which precedes the person’s free decision, which inertia does not permit the person as freedom totally to integrate this ‘nature’ into his deeds” (Rahner 1961, 375). “Bivalent” is meant here in the sense of capability of taking on a tendency to good as well to evil—cf. the ensuing discussion on the ambivalence of nature in this paper.

8. Certainly lust is the first one that comes to mind. Had not Adam and Eve and their predecessors been very sexually active, the human species would not have dominated the whole planet, as it happened and still happens with greater intensity. This hedonistic society of ours does not recognize, however, the dark side of pre-fallen lust—addiction, for example (Concar 1998).

9. Another useful account can be found in Dreisbach 1993, 103–25.

10. Many theologians have had difficulty understanding the full extent of this ambivalence of nature, including some who resort to the thought of Paul Tillich. See, for example, Gilkey 1993 and the essays contained in Hummel 1994.

11. “Where nature is not related to the events of the history of salvation its status remains ambiguous. It is only through a relation to the history of salvation that it is liberated from its demonic elements and thus made eligible for a sacrament” (Tillich 1957b, 110). The concept of the “demonic” is pivotal in Tillich’s philosophical outlook. For two places where it is neatly summarized, see Tillich 1957b, xvi, and Hefner 1993, 137.

12. This notion is well developed in Tillich [1959] 1990.

13. A recent poll in the *Science & Spirit* magazine Web site indicated a near tie between those who do not approve techniques to extend the life span of individuals and those who do.

14. “Anticipation” and “expectation,” for example, set the tone both of the moral admonitions and portrayal of the cosmic drama in the book of Revelation.

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