CREATED CO-CREATOR IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHURCH AND ETHICS

by Roger A. Willer

Abstract. Philip Hefner's work on created co-creator is presented for consideration as a contemporary theological anthropology. Its reception within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America falls into three main lines, which are reviewed here because they are suggestive of its potential impact on Christian thinking. This review raises two major questions and leads to a critique. The first question is whether *created co-creator* should be replaced by another term for the sake of more clearly encapsulating the ideas represented in Hefner's work. The second question concerns the moral "payoff" of created co-creator. Such questions lead to the critique that Hefner's corpus gives insufficient attention to responsibility as integral to freedom and that it lacks a theory of obligation. I then sketch the amenability and benefit of linking created co-creator with "responsibility ethics," exemplified by the work of Hans Jonas.

Keywords: anthropology; created co-creator; creation; ethics; Philip Hefner; Hans Jonas; nature; obligation; responsibility ethics.

Humans are nature. Humans are cultural. Humans are created in the image of God. These three interpretive statements cannot be considered sheer fact, yet neither are they sheer normative proposals that prescribe what a human being should be or do. For instance, one might agree that "Yes, humans are nature essentially, and this statement accurately represents what I perceive about human beings," or "No, I don't believe we are nature essentially because human essence is non-natural, it is an immaterial soul." Philip Hefner's attempt to meld all three statements into the statement that humans are "created co-creators" is such an interpretive one. It

Roger A. Willer is an Associate in the Department for Studies of the Division for Church in Society of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631; e-mail roger.willer@comcast.net.

[*Zygon*, vol. 39, no. 4 (December 2004).]
 ISSN 0591-2385

attempts to do justice to the human being as natural and cultural and as created in the image of God. As such, it is, inter alia, a proposal that Hefner offers for public consideration. By proposal I mean that we may understand him as offering to the theological and nontheological communities a hypothesis for understanding what human beings are. Like any hypothesis, it needs testing against the data of human experience and requires debate and refinement. The objective is that it might serve as an accurate description of human self-understanding.

The nature of created co-creator as an interpretive proposal is abundantly clear in several features of Hefner's work, although he may never have put the matter in quite this way. The first is the methodology specified in *The Human Factor*, described as operating in a "context of discovery" (Hefner 1993, xiii). The second is its unfolding development over the last twenty years from the introduction of the term in 1984, to full-blown theory in 1993, to an explication as metaphor in the late 1990s, to a more recent intention to designate it as a symbol. Its constitution as a proposal is also evident in the various formulations Hefner has explicated; he proposes, for example, that there is one variation of created co-creator for the philosophical "ambiance" and another for the Christian "ambiance" (1998, 181). Clearly he is attempting to offer the different publics of church, science, and academy a proposal suited to their own languages, a proposal that he believes sets forth an accurate interpretation of human self-understanding and gives special attention to incorporating the full measure of scientific knowledge.

We may legitimately ask, then: What has been the reception of this proposal by these various publics? I here probe that question particularly for the public called *church*. What do members of the church understand by created co-creator? How is it being used? How is it evaluated as an interpretation of human self-understanding? I carry out this task in my social location as a male pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), a staff member of the churchwide institution, and a graduate student in theology. I do not claim that my analysis satisfies rigorous social-science methodology, but I believe that my perspective is reasonably representative and informed, shaped as it is by participation in discussions about the created co-creator and by knowledge of documents and dialogue pertaining to it. The ELCA is not the only church audience to which created co-creator is addressed, but close attention to reception within that institution can be suggestive, I think, of the idea's reception in the wider church public. This attention to the church as a public is consistent with the theory of the created co-creator itself, since myth and ritual play such a central role in how it understands human development. It is appropriate to ask how created co-creator is being received by the public, which gives attention explicitly to myth, ritual, and symbol. Such attention to its reception can be a helpful occasion for both reflecting on the idea and con-

sidering what further explication is needed. Toward this latter end I also append, as a theological ethicist, some friendly amendments that I believe will enhance it as a concept and also point in the direction of work that needs to be done.[1]

The Created Co-Creator Concept in the Church

The evidence indicates that created co-creator generates interest and exercises influence within the ELCA. A church staff member commented (in an e-mail message referring to an op-ed piece about the unlikely political alliances between environmentalists and conservatives against biomedical cloning and alluding to a conversation from the previous day),

> It seems to me this phenomenon [the alliance against biomedical cloning] implies that the concerns we talked about yesterday during the review of the health care statement about the implications of Hefner's theological anthropology are not any longer, if they ever were, hypothetical, armchair theologians' issues. They are quite alive, now, and begging for a theological response. And that response is urgently needed for the church's public ministry regarding genetic issues.
>
> If the model of human as a co-creator with God is a viable theological anthropology, as Hefner proposes, then what needs to be addressed is where God is in human co-creating activity, and how God's action or will is to be discerned by human co-creators. It also cries out for some specification. What does it mean as a theological anthropology to say that human beings are co-creators? What limits or direction, or ethical guidelines or rules, if any, are to be applied to how this co-creating activity affects future human beings? And on what are those limits, directions, guidelines or rules based? In other words, what do we discern about God's intention for humanity that informs how we act as co-creators in human genetic endeavors? (Duty 2002)

Several points in this comment merit attention, but the relevant point at the moment is the sheer fact that created co-creator is a topic of conversation in the day-to-day interchange of the ELCA's institutional life. Such attention can be documented throughout all the sectors of the church's life. The sector designations I use, very simple ones, are (a) institutional, (b) academic, (c) Sunday morning (sermons, worship, and education), and (d) folk theology.[2] Created co-creator is making an impact in each of these sectors even to the point of being employed at the level of folk theology, the broadest of the groupings. It is easy to document references to it in the work of ELCA theologians, in ELCA documents, educational materials, and so forth. Ralph Klein, professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, refers to the "pervasiveness of Hefner's influence in both the scientific and ecclesial communities . . . no expression has more characterized the theology of Hefner in recent years than the understanding of the human as a 'created co-creator'" (Klein 2001b, 164). My request to a few colleagues for reflections and documents related to this essay quickly generated a stack of informal and unpublished evidence as well. Created co-creator turned up in a Masters of Theological Study (MTS) project that

surveyed thirty-five ELCA members on their reactions to the concept (Welliever 2001). It also was used in a lecture to a congregational weekend forum titled "Ongoing Creation and Created Co-creators" that was twenty-eight pages long! Other reports mentioned discussions about created co-creator at board meetings, Lutheran ethicist gatherings, faith-and-science conferences, and so forth. Though a small sample, such evidence suggests that church members "out there" in all four sectors are debating, thinking about, and calling upon it. Created co-creator has made its way into the thinking of the church.

As a simple analytic device, I divide responses to the concept into three categories: (a) great idea! (b) bad idea! and (c) vital idea, but needs revision. The first category includes those who may want to clarify or expand certain of its points or accents but who offer no substantive critique and harbor no significant reservation toward the proposal. The second includes those who may find it thought-provoking, original, or even insightful but who finally reject the primary thrust as misdirected. The third category is a broad one that includes any who generally support the proposal but identify some substantive problem that needs attention. These problems range from Philip Clayton's charge that created co-creator finally fails in its worthy attempt to synthesize "the conceptual foundations for integrating naturalism and theism, hard science and the interpretative humanities, modern and postmodern categories, rationality and faith" (1995, 1) to a call for the necessity of replacing *created co-creator* with a different term like *co-creative creature*. A fundamental distinction slices through the membership of these heuristic categories and through the sectors mentioned previously, that is, the fundamental split between those who have read the "definitive documents" about created co-creator (*The Human Factor* and the essay "Biocultural Evolution and the Created Co-Creator" [Hefner 1993; 1998]) and those who have not.[3] The latter are necessarily reacting to created co-creator with, at most, a brief explanation of its meaning. It bears repeating that this distinction may be found in all three heuristic categories and all four sectors of the ELCA.

Great Idea. So how does the average layperson respond when he or she hears "created co-creator"? The good news is that a clear majority favors the notion of created co-creator. The bad news is that human procreative capacity—sexual reproduction—is the rationale most commonly justifying that affirmation! This highly unscientific and tongue-in-cheek observation is grounded in an analysis of thirty-five responses to the question "Do you agree or disagree that human beings are co-creators with God? Why or why not?" This question was asked as part of an MTS project (Welliever 2001) that investigated the operative theologies of creation among ELCA members in the state of Washington. It is not a scientific sample by any means, but conversations with dozens of others suggest

to me that we need not dismiss these answers as nonrepresentative of ELCA members across the church. I would go so far as to contend that they are representative of the kind of responses to created co-creator that one might expect in the folk-theology sector if one did a methodologically sound sampling. Several points relevant to our investigation are evident in their answers. These include the prevalence of the terms *responsibility, freedom*, and *creativity* as well as an acknowledgment of cooperation with and yet dependence on God and the understanding of creation as a making of things. Those who affirm the concept also tend to offer a positive assessment of human beings and their capacities.[4] Consistent with comments in this survey, it has been my experience that laypersons of all walks, but especially scientists and business people, tend to find the notion of created co-creator appealing as an affirmation of their interests and professional practices. This is exemplified by one scientist's comment at a church consultation: "This idea of created co-creators is like stew for the famished. I've been waiting to taste it for years, cook me up some more!"

Many scholars also express their support. Examples include Ted Peters, John Polkinghorne, Vítor Westhelle, and John Albright (Klein 2001a). However, the supportive voices are not all academic theologians. An agricultural economist says, "For most of my adult life, I have been concerned about the relationships among Christianity, academia, and the rest of society. Tonight I will attempt to tell you where I have come out under the title 'Ongoing Creation and Created Co-creators'" (Johnson 1998, 5). He goes on to say that not just scientists but all human beings belong in the category of created co-creators and points out that humans now supplement God's ongoing creative activity on earth. He obviously grasps key aspects of the term and credits that to attending lectures in the Zygon Center's "Epic of Creation" seminar. Even when stating reservations about his own limited understanding he shows how much he has grasped. He writes that humans are to be "regarded as created by God in the image of God and as part of nature. As such, man [sic] is conceived to reflect in nature (however incompletely) some of God's own character—complete freedom, intentionality (pursuit of purpose) and love. Let me note that I state this here in the fear that I may misunderstand Hefner and be oversimplifying his ideas to the point of doing more damage than good" (1998, 5).

Bad Idea. Those in the "Bad idea!" camp argue that the term advocates human hubris, places humanity on a level with the divine, or overestimates the human potential for creativity (Peters 1998, 33). In much less sophisticated form, these precise concerns are expressed in the MTS questionnaire by the fourteen who reacted negatively to the question "Do you agree or disagree that human beings are co-creators with God?" (Welliever 2001). Any resemblance of human activity to God's creative activity, limited though it may be, is rejected as suggesting a favorable comparison

with God. Two additional points jump out in their comments. The first is the passionately negative view of human beings held by some that reject the construct. Descriptive phrases include: "Humans are too destructive and too violent," "We are all disabled from the neck up," "As successive generations pass, our intelligence level drops," and so forth. Second, the most-repeated comment involves denying that humans can be considered co-creators in any way because humans cannot create out of nothing. It seems that *creation* here is equated with *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing. We might note, with some satisfaction, that this seems to indicate that ELCA folk theology holds a conscious appreciation of the Christian doctrine of *ex nihilo*. If so, it also means that any use of the term *creation* or *co-creator* must attend to that appreciation. While the average layperson has not read the definitive works on created co-creator, naturally, related concerns are still shared by some scholars who have. In his full-length review of *The Human Factor* noted scholar Langdon Gilkey—not an ELCA person—raises the red flag that created co-creator "could be viewed, in part, as a covert expression of nineteenth-century liberal beliefs in progress. In fact, human culture and freedom are more ambiguous products of both good and evil, and hence we must take more cognizance of the pervasiveness of what theology has termed sin" (Gilkey 1995, 293).

Other thinkers raise the objection that humans are stewards but not co-creators. These two terms, indeed, are used sometimes to sum up contending views about Christian anthropology (see Jersild 2000, 166, and the section on stewardship in Rollinson 1994). Rejection of created co-creator in favor of stewardship tends to follow from one of two positions. The first occurs among those who reject theological projects in principle that revise or reinterpret traditional Christian doctrines. Such views may not oppose rephrasing theology according to contemporary idiom, but any alteration to the historical content or any synthesis with modern knowledge is rejected out of hand. The second and more common position insists that the Christian understanding of humans as being in the image of God means that they cannot be co-creators, because they are simply stewards. This view often maintains close ties to the classical Western view of the human as the crown of creation in a hierarchy of being, "a little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8). It carries the stamp of tradition and has a default authority even though tied to a static worldview.[5] Those championing the stewardship model insist that humans are manipulators, not creators; servants, not co-partners, in the process of creation; and their concern is to emphasize the importance of structures and human limitations.

The difference between these two views is genuine and breaks through to the surface when probed. One instance of this occurred at an ELCA consultation on cloning in which created co-creator was discussed as a theological proposal for framing conversation about human cloning (Willer 2001, 84). Those who believed that new technological powers overstep—

in principle—human limitations rejected the construct because it deems cloning to be, in principle, a quintessential human act. Such designation of cloning as a quintessential act does not necessarily condone all cloning activity, but those who look to the time-honored notion of the steward or the manager as the model of Christian anthropology reject such principled openness.

Vital Idea, but Needs Revision. The affirmative and negative options lie alongside this third opinion. Here is affirmation of the intent of created co-creator but with significant reservations or concerns. This position is exemplified within the ELCA by theological ethicist Paul Jersild, who in his *Spirit Ethics* (2000, 167–70) affirms the testimony of created co-creator to the distinctively human capacity to give shape and form to the future. He agrees that this capacity is a matter of human destiny, yet he wants to maintain a stronger notion of structure and an emphasis on limitation that he believes is better represented by the idea of stewardship. He wants both.

We are hearing other reservations and suggested corrections in the present seminar. In that spirit I want to spotlight two sets of concerns that have been prevalent. The first centers on the term *created co-creator* and the second on the moral "payoff."

Is *Created Co-Creator* the Most Adequate Symbol?

Some question whether the theory of created co-creator might be better represented by a variation of the term. The question is not new; ethicist Franklin Sherman suggested the alternative "co-creative creatures" in the early 1990s (Simpson 2002), and Arthur Peacocke noted a preference for "co-creating creature" in his introduction to *The Human Factor* (Hefner 1993, xi). Hefner has maintained the importance of his terminology and the grammatical ordering of created co-creator, with *created* as the modifier and *co-creator* as the noun. To raise the problem here may seem like retreading old ground, but I contend that it has new urgency. I believe that a notable number of supportive individuals are troubled by the misunderstandings that *created co-creator* bears in its wake and are concerned about this for the sake of the construct itself as a successful proposal. One could say, using Hefner's classification, that they affirm the substance of created co-creator as a theory but find it problematic as metaphor or as symbol.

Those who employ created co-creator at the level of theory ought to have explored the details of the concept and should be expected to avoid the misunderstandings that we explore next. However, the same cannot be expected of those who use the term as metaphor or as symbol without knowing the theory. As a symbol, it will be used widely by many who have no awareness of its source and cannot be expected to attend to the nuances.

Because Hefner is concerned now to establish created co-creator as a symbol, this issue takes on heightened importance. This concern dovetails with the widely acknowledged need in the church for operative language that will permit the interface of faith and science. *Created co-creator* seems to be one contribution on its way to providing this for the church. For all of these reasons, it is the natural time to ask again whether this is the most adequate phrasing for the idea. In order to illustrate these concerns, I sketch some of the apparent problems by calling upon the sources we have already unearthed.

In common usage, *created* drops out. The reduction to *co-creator* is remarkably consistent within the ELCA materials examined—in every sector. In every case cited above, *co-creator* is repeatedly used alone, whether by Jersild as a scholar (2000, 168), or by the ELCA executive, or the thoughtful scientist, or in the MTS document. These individuals could be expected to know at least the basis of the created co-creator theory, but *co-creator* nonetheless receives the stress. Note the phrasing of the MTS question: "Do you agree or disagree that human beings are co-creators with God?" The list could be extended, and we can only surmise that it is and will continue to be so in popular usage, in sermons and educational conversation, and even, unfortunately, sometimes in scholarly work. In these cases, it is obviously not the conscious intent to co-partner humans with God on equal terms. Moreover, these instances are not cases in which we see overly optimistic assessments of the character of human beings. Why, then, does *created* drop off?

Perhaps it is simply linguistic. English emphasizes the noun as primary and the modifiers as secondary. Thus, it may not be surprising that the English speaker's eye goes to *co-creator*, that the tongue stresses it, and that *created* drops off in usage. Gary Simpson, theologian at Luther Seminary, builds on this fact in his observation that "the noun 'creator' seems to harbor the symbolic weight and power, and even with 'co-' prominently (and rightly) prefixed, the weight falls on 'creator.' As a symbol there's a lack of distinction with the Creator (uncreated)" (Simpson 2002). Thinking historically here, it is interesting that traditional Christian anthropology generally places the uniquely human character as a modifier, as in the "rational animal." Is there wisdom in this? Central to created co-creator, furthermore, is the insistence upon the continuity of the human being as nature, a continuity so thoroughgoing that no hint of metaphysical dualism remains. Here again the linguistic stress of the phrase necessarily falls away from the guardian of that point, that is, away from the *created*. In a culture fraught with a dualistic residue, a culture that wants to maintain a sheer distinction between the artificial and the natural, should not the emphasis on continuity register the most attention, not the least? In short, does the natural stress on *co-creator* function antithetically to several key themes of the idea?

These concerns seem strong enough to me that the question must be asked again whether the intent of created co-creator will be distorted so frequently by its phrasing that it cannot serve as the most adequate symbol. By calling upon Paul Tillich's discussion of the character of symbol (Tillich 1957, 41f.) we may express the kinds of considerations to be addressed. He delineates how symbols are distinguished by participation in "something beyond themselves" and that they open new levels of reality, levels that nonsymbolic language simply cannot designate. Is the "something beyond itself" to which created co-creator points misdirected by the phrasing *created co-creator*? Does that term most adequately designate the reality in which the symbol participates?

While it is true, as Tillich holds, that symbols cannot be produced intentionally, it is still the case that contenders can be assessed and ultimately chosen for their adequacy. So it is legitimate to ask: What is the strongest phrase that would most adequately convey and maintain the fullest intent of the created co-creator theory? In the alternative "co-creating creatures," for instance, does *creatures* as the noun strengthen the emphasis on human continuity with nature? Does it lift up more adequately the character of human life as dependent upon and as a gift of God? Would *co-creating* as the modifier more prominently promote the Creator/creature distinction without losing the salutary shock of naming humans as co-creative? An incontestable point is that this construction would never be shorn of one of its parts. Not even a casual comment would use *creatures* as a standalone description of human beings.

More could be said, and there are some evident drawbacks,[6] but the point here is simply to raise the questions. I am not advocating a specific alternative or even contending that an alternative would function more effectively. I am suggesting, however, that this irksome issue needs to be revisited in terms of the concerns just identified and because of the growing usage of the term in the church. At stake are legitimate questions about the effectiveness of created co-creator as metaphor and as symbol.

Created Co-Creator's Moral Payoff and Responsibility Ethics

The second set of concerns is devoted to what we might call the moral payoff of the idea. If created co-creator is a more or less accurate interpretation of the human being, what are the moral implications? We may recall the centrality of that question in the quotation from the churchwide executive, and it seems safe to state that moral payoff is a major concern among many who oppose the idea of created co-creator. Such concern is legitimate. Moral judgments in every instance are undergirded by a normative account that specifies what goods or values we ought to seek (i.e., an axiology) and, further, why we ought to seek them (a theory of obligation).

This normative hub of moral decision turns on the axis of fundamental beliefs about what is the character of the universe, including the question of what is the character of the human being. In short, the normative dimension of ethics—axiology and obligation—is linked to the fundamental dimension of ethics, the level at which created co-creator operates. Given the intimate connections between the normative dimension of ethics and a fundamental claim like this, it is quite legitimate to weigh its moral payoff.

Freedom is Not the Ultimate Value. This attention to moral payoff may also shed light upon a central confusion about created co-creator. Both advocates and detractors sometimes confuse the fundamental interpretive account—which it is—with a normative statement, which it is not. This misreading is evident in the materials I have presented. The confusion often centers on the central motif of human freedom. In this confusion created co-creator is read as normatively proposing that human freedom, creativity, and so forth ought to be dominant primary values, tempered a bit by wisdom, of course. This reading understands the concept as a normative proposal that might articulate its moral maxim as "Maximize the use of human freedom in all that you are and do." Some applaud this reading, while others object to it. To return to a previous illustration, recall the ELCA consultation on cloning. When created co-creator identifies cloning as a quintessential human act, many read this as a normative prescription advocating the use of all forms of cloning because this is warranted by human freedom. Some cheered this, and others objected to the term for this reason, but it factored clearly in the discussion that ensued. It is perhaps instructive that one of the written responses to Hefner's paper at the consultation—one sympathetic to the idea—emphasized the principle of caution as a necessary counterbalance to created co-creator (Crossman 2001, 32). The point is that the discussion and elaboration of the construct must stress that it is not a normative proposal but rather an interpretive one of fundamental theology and that any judgment about its merits must be made on whether it is an accurate reflection of the human situation or not. We must, for example, distinguish the affirmation of cloning as a quintessential human act from the additional moral decisions that are necessary about whether or not to proceed with human cloning, and under what conditions.

Such clarity, however, only leads us to the proper moral assessment. If created co-creator is in fact proposed as an accurate interpretation of the human situation, what then *are* the normative implications? What does the proposal that human beings are created co-creators imply about how we are to live and what we are to do? What axiology and what theory of obligation—to continue our attention to these two essential issues—does it imply or, at least, may we infer? Hefner has given some attention to these questions, but insufficiently I think, especially on two related issues.

I realize that in turning to such concerns I am shifting burdens. Up to this point I have been burdened as a churchman to analyze the reception of created co-creator. Here I shift to the task of theological ethicist whose task is to analyze conceptually in order to offer amendments to it. The link between tasks, though, is clear in that a major concern in the church's reception has to do with its moral implications. This effort to connect my two burdens may result in creating an essay as unwieldy as an overloaded trailer behind an already filled van, but I hope not. It does mean I will have to be exceedingly brief, if suggestive, in what follows.

I take as my focus several strategic passages from one of the definitive essays:

> We may summarize how the created co-creator theory interprets human existence in the following statement:
>
> *The concept of the created co-creator proposes that the purpose of human being and human culture is to be the agency for birthing the future of the nature that has birthed us—the nature which is not only our own genetic heritage, but also the entire human community and the evolutionary and ecological reality in which and to which we belong—at least the nature that constitutes planet earth*. In the final section of this essay, we will place this naturalistic statement of purpose within the ambiance of the Christian theological tradition in this form: *Homo sapiens is God's created co-creator, whose purpose is the "stretching/enabling" of the systems of nature so that they can participate in God's purposes in the mode of freedom, for which the paradigm is Jesus Christ, both in respect to his life and to his understanding of the world as God's creation*. (Hefner 1998, 181)

A careful reading of these two core statements makes clear that human freedom is not the primary value in the thought world of the created co-creator; rather, the elementary value is the furtherance of nature—that is, of the ecological nexus of earth which is inclusive of the human community but not confined to it. Freedom and transcendence are key "goods" in this, as is made clear a few pages later where Hefner summarizes created co-creator as the metaphor of the meaning of nature: "*The appearance of Homo sapiens as created co-creator signifies that nature's course is to participate in transcendence and freedom, and thereby nature enters into the condition in which it interprets its own essential nature and takes responsibility for acting in accord with that nature*" (1998, 183; emphasis in original). The fundamental value, though, remains the contribution to nature's unfolding (theologically spoken of as God's purposes unfolding in the enterprise we call creation). Nature has given testimony to what is in it—freedom and transcendence—by what it has allowed to come forth. The ultimate goal is to further that unfolding.

The Ethical Health of Created Co-creator. We have here, then, a clear axiology, but the subsequent question does not have a clear answer: What is the imperative to seek this value? Where, in this naturalistic statement, do we find the establishment of the absolute good to which an individual or the human community is bound in obligation? For example, why should

we care about the future of nature? In short, the theory of obligation appears absent. When Hefner transposes the created co-creator into his Christian key—what he calls "Christian ambiance"—an obligation appears in the Christian's response to the Christian God. There is, further, a paradigm upon which to build one's moral choices—"Jesus Christ, both in respect to his life and to his understanding of the world as God's creation" (see above). This may be instructive in the Christian theological framework, but it leaves an obvious and pernicious weakness in the development of the idea: insofar as created co-creator is a philosophical interpretation, it has an axiology without an obligation. If this is so, should we be surprised by the tendency to read *freedom* as the ultimate value?

This absence of obligation grounds the additional problem, in my view, that the work on created co-creator has given insufficient attention to the moral factor of responsibility. Hefner has given extensive attention to human freedom in his work but noticeably less attention to freedom's flip side, responsibility. In the summary statements above, freedom is highlighted several times, while responsibility is mentioned but once. The significance of responsibility can be inferred, but it is not spelled out. Such an imbalance extends throughout the body of work on the created co-creator. This may be understandable, since freedom is a widely debated theme in contemporary literature, but does not the theory of the created co-creator also cry out for careful attention to the nature of the responsibility that comes with the freedom it so carefully describes?

In summary, I have identified two related conditions troubling the ethical health of the created co-creator: (1) the lack of an evident imperative of obligation, at least in its naturalistic philosophical framework, and (2) the underdevelopment of responsibility. The proper prescription for this diagnosis, to my mind, is a hefty infusion of medicine from the contemporary sector of ethics known as "responsibility ethics," an approach generally understood as an alternative to virtue or deontological ethics. Let me briefly indicate why responsibility ethics is amenable to the created co-creator and how it would be salutary to these two conditions.

Responsibility Ethics. A wide array of thinkers, beginning in the twentieth century, may be classified as "responsibility ethicists," because in each case responsibility is the root metaphor or first principle of their ethics and the ethically decisive issue is upon what or who makes a rightful claim upon our lives. Diversity characterizes this stream of thought, as is immediately evident when we include in this camp the likes of Karl Barth, H. Richard Niebuhr, Hans Kung, and Paul Ricoeur. The centrality of responsibility is evident in each, and their ethics simply are not reducible to an ethics of virtue or duty (Schweiker 2001, 18). Some versions are not congruent with created co-creator, because the who or what that makes a claim upon the human does not include nature. Such incompatible versions of

responsibility ethics retain the modern commitment that morality is grounded within human consciousness alone. This is evident in Emanuel Levinas's sole attention to the infinitely other in another person (Levinas 1999), Karl Barth's divine command ethic (Barth 1957), and Marion Smiley's insistence that we jettison all ontological baggage and find the source of responsibility in social practices of praise and blame (Smiley 1992). Other versions of responsibility ethics, nevertheless, explicitly share the term's inclusion of nonhuman nature or at least are conducive to such. I call in particular on the work of Hans Jonas here, for reasons that will become evident.

Responsibility ethics as a whole emphasizes a view of the human being that we may call *agentic-relational*. Whereas virtue theory focuses on patterns of self formation and well-being in the human, according to the excellence (*virtu*) given by nature or in community, and Kantian-style ethics conceives of human beings (for normative purposes, at least) as solitary reason under the rubrics of duty, responsibility ethics pictures humans as dialogical creatures shaped by and existing within patterns of varied interactions (Schweiker 2001, 18). This emphasis spotlights the human as an agent, but one necessarily in continual formation through relationships. It should be immediately evident that the human being as interpreted by the idea of created co-creator is of this agentic-relational type as well.

Other convergences abound. The emphasis of created co-creator is that the context of human agency entails evolutionary continuity between the human species and the rest of nature. Hefner writes, for instance, "The fact that the created co-creator has appeared is a statement about what nature has come to, what nature is capable of, and what nature itself has produced or allowed to appear" (1998, 182). Although Jonas begins with an analysis of nature rather than an analysis of human being, note the parallel language when he refers to human self-consciousness: "Reality, or nature, is one and testifies to itself in what it allows to come forth from it. What reality is must therefore be gathered from its testimony" (Jonas 1984, 69).

We could delineate numerous points of convergence, but just one more—the place of freedom—should suffice to validate our claim. Hefner insists that any discussion of human freedom must acknowledge two facts often overlooked: (1) freedom is a corollary of determinism, and as such neither element may be abstracted from the other or from the human situation as if they enjoyed existence in and of themselves; and (2) both elements have arisen in conjunction with natural, physical, evolutionary processes. Jonas also insists on both points, though of course they are expressed in a different genre. In his essay "Evolution and Freedom" Jonas writes that freedom "must designate an objectively discernible modality of being, i.e., a manner of existing that typifies the organic realm per se and to that extent is common to all members (but to no nonmembers) of the class" (1996, 61).

Jonas's term for this modality of being is "needful freedom," a term that obviously incorporates Hefner's insistence on freedom's link with determinism and is best understood under the category of purpose. Human freedom, according to Jonas, is simply an instance of this purposiveness in nature (Schweiker 1995, 196). It is an immensely powerful instance, but the point is that human freedom does not magically appear out of sheer deterministic nature. It results from the linkage of self-conscious knowledge in the human being with the purposiveness evident throughout the biosphere. Human action requires choice, is more complex and open, and has immense power because of this linkage, but human beings share with the whole biosphere the common feature that every purpose entails an affirmation of being over nonbeing. Alternatively, as Hefner says, action "is marked in humans by conscious deliberation, decision, and taking of responsibility, and a certain autonomy" (1993, 113).

It should now be feasible to accept, at least tentatively, that responsibility ethics of this type holds natural affinities with the created co-creator. The fit is not flawless, of course, but is still quite potent.[7] What contribution, then, would responsibility ethics bring to the idea? The most obvious one is that it would rectify the insufficient attention to responsibility, especially in terms of the hallmarks of responsibility ethics: the relation of freedom and responsibility, moral identity, the centrality of power, and the need for its transvaluation in the symbol of God (Schweiker 1995, 50). In short, linkage with responsibility ethics would provide created co-creator with a clearer recognition that free creatures are inherently responsible creatures.

A Theory of Obligation. The linkage of the created co-creator with responsibility ethics also could provide the missing theory of obligation. The import should be obvious. We recur to Jonas's work, although we cannot do justice here to the sophistication of the theoretical work involved. As noted above, Jonas presents a meticulous argument for the existence of "needful freedom" within the biosphere. This claim flies in the face of most modern thought and entails a painstaking proof on his part of the existence of purpose, or ends, in all living things (Jonas 1984). The relevant point for a theory of obligation is that nature, by having aims, ends, or purposes (in this case each of these amounts to the same), also necessarily harbors and so grounds values. He points out that, with the existence of any particular purpose, its attainment becomes a good and frustration of it a loss. This fact grounds the attribution of value to all living organisms and means that nature is not value free. He admits that any particular purpose of a living being cannot be a good in itself (in this Hume and Kant are correct), but purposiveness as such *is* a good in itself (Hume and Kant overlook this possibility). Purposiveness, then, is an ontological characteristic of the biosphere, and the mere capacity to have

any purpose at all is a good in itself. Only humans can articulate this intuitive certainty, but the reality of purposiveness is characteristic of the biosphere. As Jonas puts it, "In every purpose, being declares itself for itself and against nothingness. Against this verdict of being there is no counterverdict, for even saying 'no' to being betrays an interest and a purpose. Hence, the mere fact that being is not indifferent toward itself makes its difference from nonbeing the basic value of all values, the first 'yes' in general" (1984, 81). If purposiveness is indeed something by itself, it belongs to the stock of being in general, is not dependent on an actuality of what happens to exist at a given time, and is not a sheer construct of the human mind. Axiology, then, becomes a part of ontology—contrary to modern presuppositions.

The value inherent in this basic value of being as such is therefore the maximization of purposiveness, that is, the growing wealth of goals striven for. To say it in a different way, the very presence of purposiveness in nature implies that being is better than nonbeing, and the value of its increase is a natural extension of this fact. The superiority of purposiveness over purposelessness thus provides an ontological axiom for its maximization. In this way Jonas can argue that all of nature clearly has inherent value because it is a location of purposiveness. Humanity matters deeply to nature's project as the maximal actualization of its potentiality for purposiveness —the maximal that we know of, at any rate—but purpose is not a sheer human construct. Here is the basis of obligation for a philosophical or naturalistic ethic, the problem identified above.

The natural question we must now ask is whether such an account meshes with Hefner's work. The answer must be brief but affirmative. It is well known that Jonas puts forth the argument that modern technology is an ontological event in the course of history, an argument we might enlarge, with Hefner, to "in the course of evolution." This ontological shift results from the unprecedented powers humans hold in splitting the atom, engineering genetics, impacting the entire biosphere, and so forth. These powers alter the very nature of humans as causal agents and bring unprecedented scope to human responsibility, that of responsibility for the future of nature; nature has become a human trust. The congruence here should be obvious with Hefner's statements quoted earlier (see p. 851).

An additional congruence is the fit of Jonas's "imperative of responsibility" (Jonas 1984) with Hefner's value of "stretching/enabling of the systems of nature" (Hefner 1998, 181). On the basis of the theoretical work we have just sketched, Jonas states the imperative of responsibility as: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life" (Jonas 1984, 11). He emphasizes, obviously, the danger to humankind, yet this is not anthropocentrism. The precondition that all of nature must flourish in order for genuine human life to flourish would be consistent with Jonas. Indeed, the place of Jonas' book *The Imperative*

of Responsibility as a shibboleth in the Green Movement (Wolin 2001, 108) is powerful evidence for this claim.

Just as Hefner identifies a paradigm for Christian obligation, Jonas identifies one for his imperative of responsibility. Jonas recognizes that knowledge of an imperative alone lacks the element of psychological motivation that is necessary to prompt action for the good. Such knowledge can remain entirely passive; only evidence of a feeling of responsibility that binds the actor to the object will prompt humans to act. Jonas identifies this in the face of a newborn, the face of the future. The newborn is the primordial paradigm of the coincidence of objective responsibility with the subjective feeling of the same (Jonas 1984, 130f.). Parental responsibility to the newborn is the paradigm in this theory of obligation.

Jonas's thought, then, could make several contributions to the idea of created co-creator. It could provide a theory of obligation, help specify what value lies in nature, instantiate the idea of human freedom as an instance of purposiveness, and offer criteria for guiding moral choices. His work would allow us to ask, for example, whether this or that choice seems to maximize the flourishing of purposiveness in nature. That is, does it encourage more manifold and intensive occasions of purpose, and so forth? (Jonas 1984, 81) In addition, Jonas's work contains a clear precautionary element that would benefit the concept. Jonas insists that the imperative of responsibility entails what we might call a *heuristics of precaution*.[8] In the hazards of taking action, precaution takes precedence, and the first moral duty is that of visualizing the long-range effect of a technological enterprise from general recognizable trends. Humans have an obligation to preclude those actions that cannot be demonstrated as safe for the future, that is, safe for the nature that has birthed us. The interweaving of these aspects of Jonas's work with the created co-creator would remedy weaknesses indicated in my analysis of the term including the charge that it advocates human hubris.

Conclusion

This effort to sketch the merit of interweaving responsibility ethics and created co-creator leaves the argument incomplete and has overlooked mutually critical issues that must be adjudicated. For instance, one may ask whether Jonas's philosophical work can be translated into a Christian framework. The prominent role Jonas serves in William Schweiker's *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (1995) suggests a quick affirmation, but other questions, tensions, and incompatibilities would need attention. My goal here has been simply to demonstrate the need and potential for that work. If this has been accomplished, I have achieved the somewhat unwieldy linkage of my initial concerns—questions in the ELCA about created co-creator as a symbol and about its moral payoff—with the role that

responsibility ethics may play in the further exploration of the salutary proposal that humans are created co-creators.

NOTES

A version of this essay was delivered at the Chicago Advanced Seminar in Religion and Science, "The Created Co-Creator: Interpreting Science, Technology, and Theology," organized by the Zygon Center for Religion and Science, Spring 2002.

1. Additional caveats: First, this concentration on the church public does not assume that we may draw thick black lines between the church and other publics. For instance, I consider a paper given in the academy (at the American Academy of Religion) by an ELCA member legitimate data about "reception in the church." Rather, it assumes simply that it is legitimate to distinguish various publics, or audiences, whose interests, training, and social practices distinguish them from each other. Second, I recognize that my reflections are not based on methodologically rigorous research. The ELCA is not even a sociologist's sample of the visible church. The evidence I use is not designed to meet standards of statistical sampling; the documents, conversations, e-mails, and anecdotes are far too small a sample to claim scientific rigor or the standards of the intellectual historian. Despite these methodological inadequacies, I believe that the generalizations I make from the evidence are more informed than off-the-cuff reports and will prove in time to be indicative, and perhaps even representative, of how created co-creator is being received in the ELCA and beyond.
2. The term *folk theology* here parallels the notion of folk psychology as currently used in philosophy of mind and given broad currency by the work of Patricia and Paul Churchland (Churchland 1986; Churchland 1989). *Folk psychology* indicates the web of assumptions about intention, consciousness, will, and so forth that operate as a working theory of mind in everyday interaction. Likewise, folk theology can be considered the general or commonsense ideas about God, human beings, creation, and so on that form the layperson's everyday theological framework. One ultimate goal of formal theology, whether academic, confessional, or whatever, is to influence the structure and content of this folk theology and thereby influence the actions and perspectives motivated by those beliefs.
3. Hefner designated these as definitive in a private conversation in early 2001.
4. It would be interesting to search out terms and ideas significant in Hefner's elaboration of the created co-creator, such as self-definition and overcoming dualism, that are absent from these comments, but I leave that for another essay.
5. Clearly, stewardship arose in the tradition when nature was viewed as nonevolutionary and fixed and in which every species has a telos. Whether *steward* can really be de-linked from static notions without moving to created co-creator under some designation is a debated question that I do not explore here.
6. Two quick examples of its drawbacks: "co-creating creatures" does not have the same rhetorical ring, nor is it quite as shocking to the mind, as "created co-creator."
7. I do believe that my comments illustrate, in fact, how selective forms of responsibility ethics hold better affinities with created co-creator than virtue or deontological ethical thought, but that claim is beyond my point here. It should be clear, at least, why I believe responsibility ethics offers significant promise for the science-and-theology conversation.
8. Jonas uses the term "heuristics of fear" (1984, 26), because of the threat to the future of humanity. *Fear* suggests, however, an emotional reaction of alarm and agitation caused by the expectation of harm, while *precaution* suggests a more thoughtfully considered and proactive response to potential harm. My use of *precaution* rather than *fear* seems faithful to Jonas's concern, although the evocative character of the term *fear* is mitigated, and an emotional reaction may sometimes be warranted. *Fear*, nevertheless, in my judgement, remains problematic and too open to misunderstanding.

REFERENCES

Barth, Karl. 1957. "The Command of God." In *The Doctrine of God*, ed. and trans. Edward Bromiley, *Church Dogmatics* II-2:509–764. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

Churchland, Patricia Smith. 1986. *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Churchland, Paul. 1989. *A Neurocomputational Perspective: The Nature of Mind and the Structure of Science*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Clayton, Philip. 1995. Toward a Genuine Pluralism? Philip Hefner and the Constraints on Postmodern Play. Unpublished paper given at the American Academy of Religion.

Crossman, Richard. 2001. "Cloning and Genetic Engineering: Human Mandate and Its Context." *Human Cloning: Papers from a Church Consultation*, ed. Roger A. Willer, 32–34. Chicago: Division for Church in Society, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Duty, Ron. 2002. Personal correspondence, 27 March.

Gilkey, Langdon. 1995. "Evolution, Culture, and Sin: Responding to Philip Hefner's Proposal." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 30 (June): 293–308.

Hefner, Philip. xxxx. "Biocultural Evolution and the Created Co-creator." *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 36 (3): 197–205.

———. 1993. *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture and Religion.* Minneapolis: Fortress.

———. 1998. "Biocultural Evolution and the Created Co-Creator." *Science and Theology: The New Consonance*, ed. Ted Peters, 174–88. Boulder: Westview.

Jersild, Paul. 2000. *Spirit Ethics: Scripture and the Moral Life.* Minneapolis: Fortress.

Johnson, Glenn L. 1998. "Ongoing Creation and Created Co-creators." "If This Were My Last Lecture" Series, University Lutheran Church, East Lansing, Michigan.

Jonas, Hans. 1984. *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. [Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethick fur die technologisched Zivilisation]. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

———. 1996. *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*. Ed. Lawrence Vogel. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press.

Klein, Ralph W., ed. 2001a. Philip Hefner: Created Co-Creator. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28 (June-August). Chicago: Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

————. 2001b. Editorial: "Philip Hefner: Created Co-Creator." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28 (June-August): 164–74.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1999. *Alterity and Transcendence.* New York: Columbia Univ. Press.

Peters, Ted. 1998. *Science and Theology: The New Consonance*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.

Rollinson, Andrew. 1994. *A Christian Perspective on Genetics.* Newcastle upon Tyne: The Christian Institute.

Schweiker, William. 1995. *Responsibility and Christian Ethics.* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

———. 2001. "Disputes and Trajectories in Responsibility Ethics." *Religious Studies Review* 27 (January): 18–24.

Simpson, Gary. 2002. Personal correspondence, April.

Smiley, Marion. 1992. *Moral Responsibility and the Boundaries of Community.* Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Tillich, Paul. 1957. *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper Torch Books.

Welliever, Danielle. 2001. The God that gives utterance. Unpublished manuscript, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary.

Willer, Roger A., ed. 2001. *Human Cloning: Papers from a Church Consultation.* Chicago: Division for Church in Society, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Wolin, Richard. 2001. *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Loewith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press.