18 : Responsibility to and for

"The potter is greater than the pot." Descartes thought the truth of this proposition self-evident; as did Aristotle; as do people of common sense today. It follows that God (as traditionally conceived), who is the Potter of us all and who, moreover, made the very clay he shapes, is greater in every conceivable way than his creation.[60]

When the theology of theopraxy proposes that "God is in our hands," then, does it not make human beings the potter and God the pot? What a hideous reversal! Has our theology replaced God with *ourselves?* What hubris. For if God (God forbid) should turn out to be our creation, or we believe this to be the case, then how could God (be thought to) command us to do anything? Where would obedience go? Who would stop us inventing a new God every day according to our fancy? And what happens to God's incomparable grandeur if he's "just us"?

From the perspective of conventional religious belief, theist or deist, these are real concerns. I brought them up in Chapter 1 of this Book and will return to them several times. Here let me suggest that things are not as bad as they look: the theology of theopraxy is not as dangerous as traditional believers might think it is. Or as heretical. In the matter of results, quite to the contrary. It suggests that traditional religions can and should be embraced in those forms that make the best of us. After all, when you believe that God is the good we do, it matters not very much what master narrative *exactly* brings you to bringing God into being: ones that deny this formulation are fine too. As though in reciprocal agreement, most renderings of the Biblical/Qur'anic God have God preferring good non-believers to bad believers. Did Jesus not say: by their fruits shall you know who is and who is not "of God"(Matthew 7:19ff.)?

There are three further ways to allay the worries people might have about the theology of theopraxy's mutualizing of the creation of God and humankind—three ways, that is, to explain its apparent and perhaps alarming confusion of Potter with pot.

The first comes from understanding evolution.

In biological evolution, certainly, the later, descendant species *can* be "greater" than the earlier, descended-from species. The child can be greater than the parent; the pot greater than the potter. The three components of

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60 *The potter-pot metaphor is Biblical, originating in Jeremiah 18:6.*

the biological evolutionary process—namely, reproduction-with-inheritance, random variation, and natural (or sexual) selection—repeated over and over in an increasingly complex environment, virtually guarantee that the "latest model" of a species will be greater than its earlier counterparts—"greater" meaning smarter, stronger, larger (probably), more efficient, more complexly organized, and inclusive of the earlier model's qualities. Evolution's way of *causing* things is not like simple mechanical imposition, i.e., like a fist to the chin or a hand upon clay, like a wrench to a nut or even a paintbrush to a canvas. In evolution, new phenomena, new entities, and even new laws emerge from myriad simpler ones interacting. They flower, as from seed. Wrinkles get wrinkles until a new shape appears, a new capability, a new and stable state-of-affairs that in turn constrains its constituents to being what they are.[61] Unlike craftsmanship, which involves imposition, evolution with emergence describes a path not of *de*scent in complexity, organization, and capability—potter over pot—but of *ascent:* from the inanimate to the animate, from the animate to the more animate yet, and from the "more animate yet" to the animal that can care for all animacy, for all life, to wit: the enlightened human being. In a world of growing complexity and increasing diversity, things can and do get better, more various and more particular, more particular and more coordinated. In short, in an evolving universe the Apocalypse is not assured.

By itself, the long-term uphill direction of evolution on earth (and perhaps elsewhere too) does not logically *entail* the emergence of God, although some have argued precisely this.[62] I cite evolution only to coun-

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61 *For an eloquent treatment of "emergentism" rather than reductionism as the new paradigm in physics, see Robert Laughlin (2004). For a broader view, see Harold J. Morowitz (2004). Among physicists for whom diversity and its increase are somehow the universe's intention or business, see Freeman Dyson (2004 [1989]). Not all Judeo-Christian theology is inherently anti-evolution. See, for example, John F. Haught (2001), who portrays God as actively involved in the directions that evolution takes.*

62 *For example, the Oxford philosopher Samuel Alexander (1950, [1920]) and the Jesuit paleontologist-turned-theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The driving idea is that* God did not intend the Universe; the Universe intends God. *Our theology avers: no, only humans do.*

Here is Harold J. Morowitz (op. cit., p. 195) all but agreeing: "Note that God's transcendence was not meaningful before the emergence of humans and human culture. Violation of the natural law is only meaningful to individuals capable of knowing natural law. Divine transcendence arose from immanence and emergence and coevolved with Homo Sapiens. Transcendence is an emergent property of God's immanence and rules of emergence. We Homo sapiens are the mode of action of divine transcendence."

ter the idea that causes are always "greater" than their effects.[63] But evolution and emergence as descriptions of how the world works do leave open the *possibility* that God need not have started things, or have designed them, in order to be here and deserve our ultimate respect. God can be greater than we are even though we are God's "effectors" and God is ours in the moral sphere. Already, everything seriously said and thought about the divine over the short history of philosophical theology has grown to more than any one of us can hold in one brainful. God is at the very, very least "greater" in this way than any theologian.[64]

THE SECOND way to counter worries about our theology's "heresy" is to appreciate, perhaps more fully, the power of *ideas.*

Most will agree that ideas deserve respect. Not *all* ideas deserve respect, of course, just those that convey truths about the world, or that give our lives meaning, or that promote virtuous behavior. (It goes without saying that the best ideas do all three.) Take "democracy," "freedom," "honor," "destiny," the "virtues" or "art," for example. These are ideas that people "made up." Yet we find it entirely rational, indeed supremely admirable, for people to devote themselves to realizing them in everyday life. Moreover, when we devote ourselves to realizing ideas in everyday life, and do so generation after generation, these same ideas begin to "make us up," you and me. They become part of our constitution, not just our Constitution, and we find ourselves dreaming of their perfection as ideals. This is cultural evolution at work.[65]

We might respect traditional ideas of God, then, out of admiration for their age, beauty, and importance. But we need not stop there. Respect given, we can continue to *improve* our ideas of God, which means improving their effectiveness in producing good, which whole process, according to the theology of theopraxy, is the same as God improving us. We are talking about full assent to God as God really is without full assent to God as pictured by this or that religion. God, after all, is no one

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63 *There are other counter-examples: in complex systems, the tiniest of causes—a crack, a slip, a minuscule error—can multiply into huge effects, even mechanically. Think of avalanches.*

64 *Some readers might be reminded here of St. Anselm's famous definition of God as "something greater than which nothing can be conceived." Since existing-in-fact is "greater than" existing-only-in-theory, Anselm argued, God must actually exist. This argument became known as Anselm's Proof of the existence of God.*

65 *...and alas, sometimes de-evolution at work, as when a generation of children is taught to hate certain foreigners. How can war not ensue?*

person's idea or personal friend. Nor is God any one era's privilege or any one religion's privilege to see. Realizing God is a panhuman quest, each generation handing off to the next a set of descriptions and prescriptions that needs rational justification and more: a theology that narrativizes God, that fantasizes God, and that, in so doing, amplifies the capacity we all have to recognize the good when we see it and long to do it ourselves.

Saying that God is an idea, then, is no great heresy if you have sufficient respect for ideas to start with. Still less is it a heresy if you think that God is more than a good *idea* of God, which is to say, if you think (as Anselm did with a different idea of God in mind) that God-realized is greater.

A THIRD way to worry less about the possibly bad effects of believing that humans create God (even if we believe also that God in turn creates our humanity), is to look more carefully at the creative act itself. Why? Because the creative act is often where the divine is located, not just in universal first Creation but in everyday creation too, especially artistic creation. It is here, some would say, that the Holy Spirit enters us—inspirits us, inspires us—and emerges as new beauty, new goodness, or truth.[66] Of course, when art was mostly religious in theme it was easier to say of an artist—or for artists to say of themselves—that their inspiration came from God or the gods. But an element of this claim remains in all uses of the term "inspired," aided and abetted by the fact that human creativity remains neurologically and psychologically something of a mystery.

Rather than theorize what creativity really *is,* however, I want look into creativity's social/ethical dimension.[67]

Take the concept of *responsibility.*

People are responsible for what they create. In what is perhaps the canonical case, parents create (or initiate the creation of) their children.

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66 *Indeed, there is much to be said for thinking of God as* creativity *itself, as I did in* DECLARATIONS, *and as the Harvard theologian Gordon D. Kaufman does in Kaufman (1993 and 2004). As in process theology, what Kaufman has in mind is universal, cosmic creativity, which includes, but is not limited to human creativity. The idea of theopraxy focuses on human creativity. Closer to our thinking on this score is John Wall (2005).*

67 *One theory gaining plausibility is that creativity is merely evolution speeded up and/or seen from the outside. Think of moments of creativity as pearls on a string. If we were to look inside each pearl we would see evolutionary processes at work at smaller scales and much speeded up because they are rendered at neurological and even molecular scales. Certainly, this seems true of the human mind. See Gerald Edelman (1987), Daniel Dennett (1978), William H. Calvin (1996), and Michael Benedikt (2007).*

Certainly, they are responsible for their children's very existence, and can fairly be asked "why did you have children?" They are also morally responsible for their children's health, education, and behavior, at least until the children are adults. Engineers, architects, and designers are responsible for what they create too. Professionally they have to stand behind their work, and can be sued for negligence. It is on this model that we can hold God (as traditionally conceived) causally and therefore morally responsible for the world he created.[68]

But creators are also responsible *to* what they create. In the case of progeny this is clear: we are responsible not just *for* our children, but *to* them. Our children have claims on us, and we must do right by them. Many artists feel the same way: they are responsible not just for their works but to them. What they create has certain rights: the right to be completed in a certain way, to be part of a trajectory of *oeuvre* that has its own logic, to become part of the larger, humanity-wide project called Art, and to be protected from wanton destruction even by the artist him- or herself. Art collectors, for their part, are protective of the art they own, and not just for the work's financial value (insurance can cover that), but for the preciousness of their unique "being."

Scientists often feel this way about their research projects, as do entrepreneurs who create companies, architects who design buildings, people who cultivate gardens...all truly creative people. And perhaps God, as traditionally conceived, feels this way about his creation too.

Now, the theology of theopraxy proposes that we are responsible for God. No hubris is intended by this view. Indeed, humility is the appropriate attitude precisely because our responsibility *for* God is matched by an equal—let us even say, greater—responsibility *to* God. Traditional religions insist on the responsibility-to component exclusively, this on the model of our being the eternal, dutiful child to the eternal all-wise, all-knowing parent who brought us into being. The theology of theopraxy does not want to eliminate this feeling but to add to it the feeling

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68 *Here the discussion usually veers off into the problem of evil and how or whether God can be blamed for the mess* we *make of things. When the analogy is made to parents and children, it can be claimed that humankind is no child to God anymore, but grown up, and given freedom, and therefore culpable in the way no child can be.*

69 *We realize that the statement "God is in our hands" has two slightly different meanings: (1) that God's existence depends on our actions, and (2) that we are responsible for looking after God, caring for "him," once "he" is here (as perhaps instated by other people's actions).*

that grown-up children properly feel toward their own children, namely, responsibility-for.[69]

What creates can also have been created. What has been created can also create. Responsibility is similarly twinned: there is responsibility-to *and* responsibility-for. Why would our relationship to God involve less than both?