

## Chapter 7

# Created to Be a Cocreator

## *The Cosmic Meaning of Being Human*

Ted Peters

*The human being is created by God to be a cocreator in the creation that God has brought into being and for which God has purposes.<sup>1</sup>*

"I like new things," said my mother on one occasion while patting the red couch. Yes, it was a new purchase. But, that's not what she meant. She meant that she liked new styles. Our living room furniture did not look at all like that in my grandmother's house: antiques snow-covered with lace doilies.

My father was an automotive engineer. Each morning he would put on his necktie and drive to his office at General Motors to invent something new, something that hitherto had never existed in the history of the world. When he retired, his name appeared on twenty-two patents. My father thought he was just earning a living. But, he, in fact, was contributing to the creative advance of the universe, as Alfred North Whitehead might put it.

When I met Phil Hefner, first as a professor while I was a graduate student and then some years later as a colleague working together in the field of Theology and Science, it was clear he was as inventive in theology as my father was in engineering. When Phil introduced his interpretation of the *imago Dei* as the created cocreator, I responded immediately with the equivalent of an intellectual fist pump, "yes!"<sup>2</sup>

So, I ask: is it meaningful to think of ourselves as creative, influentially creative in an ontological sense? Yes, I believe it is. Yet, I wish to ask as well: is it meaningful to thank evolution for bequeathing us with this creative capacity? No, I do not believe it is. Evolution, scientifically speaking, is meaningless. It would be just as meaningless to thank evolution for our inheritance as to ask evolution for a GPS to map our future direction.

Standard evolutionary theory expunges from our biological story any directionality, purpose, or meaning. On strictly scientific terms, human creativity adds nothing, contributes nothing, fulfills nothing. In short, defining the human being as the created cocreator strictly within an evolutionary framework does not speak to the question of human meaning.

In what follows, I wish to raise the question of existential meaning and answer it with a theology of history. Human self-understanding depends utterly on recognizing our place under the umbrella of historical time, between our past and our future. On the penumbra of our consciousness shines a dim yet indispensable light within which we see our self as a protagonist within the cosmic story. To be merely plopped in time and space by biological evolution does not in itself provide a cosmic story that is meaningful. Only a history replete with a fulfilling future can specify our role in the story and stress the importance of our creative contribution to that story.

### I. CREATED COCREATOR AS *IMAGO DEI*

To ask the human race to bear the image of God (צֶלֶם [*tselem*], εἰκών [*imago*]) through history is the Bible's way of making us feel important to creation. Whether we think of the biblical *imago Dei* as a divine trait or a relationship or moral potential, creativity is a quality built in to human definition. We copy God in this regard, says the Vatican: "Human activity reflects the divine creativity which is its model."<sup>3</sup>

For Philip Hefner creativity marks an indispensable trait we share with God:

Human beings are God's created co-creators whose purpose is to be the agency, acting in freedom, to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us—the nature that 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. Exercising this agency is said to be God's will for humans.<sup>4</sup>

Hasty critics accuse Hefner of apotheosizing the human; he allegedly places the human on the divine level. Hefner defends himself effectively by reiterating a key distinction: only the *a se* God can create *ex nihilo*, out of nothing; whereas human creativity consists of transformative activity in the ongoing *creatio continua*. "Clearly, the cocreator has no equality with God the creator."<sup>5</sup>

Hefner's term *created cocreator*

does a number of things. Because we are *created*, we are reminded that we are dependent creatures. We depend for our existence on our cosmic and biological prehistory; we depend on the creative grace of God. Yet, we are also *creators*, using our cultural freedom and power to alter the course of historical events and perhaps even evolutionary events. We participate with God in the ongoing creative process.<sup>6</sup>

Our capacity for creativity begins with our self-awareness combined with our ability to make assessments in light of values and purposes, criticize those assessments, make decisions, and then act on those decisions. We can conceive of actions and then carry them out. We are *Homo faber*. We make things. And the ability to make things compounds from generation to generation so that the products of our creative design carry us farther and farther into a technological world we have created and into more complex relationships with the natural environment. Creativity and its resultant culture constitute an expression of our inherited freedom.

Yet, we must stress again, this freedom to create does not make us independent. As *Homo sapiens*, we are as dependent upon the health of the ecosystem as are all other forms of life. We constantly interact with it. No matter how masterful we judge the products of our creative hand, we have but transformed the basic resources that we found around us. We create nothing *de novo*, nothing that is totally new. *Creatio ex nihilo* is still solely God's province.<sup>7</sup>

Defining the *imago Dei* in terms of the created cocreator has secular as well as ecclesial value. On the secular hand, we are dependent on evolution. On the theological hand, we are dependent on God. Hefner has contributed to public theology here, to theology though conceived in the church makes a contribution to the wider public outside of the church. "The idea of the created co-creator is both theological and secular simultaneously," avers Hefner; the theological and secular "ought to be understood stereoscopically—two perspectives brought together as one vision."<sup>8</sup> To dub the human being the created cocreator makes sense whether we are dependent on evolution or on God. Or, stereoscopically, both.

Within the frame of evolution, we picture God's creation of creative creatures as taking time, a long time. The earth had been pregnant with its creative progeny for nearly four billion years before giving birth to us.<sup>9</sup> As Mother Earth continues to nourish us, what does she tell us? To go out and play? Or to build? How should our human creativity carry on the family legacy? Might the answer lie in the biblical notion of the *imago Dei*?

## II. FROM CREATION TO NEW CREATION

The *imago Dei* (εἰκὼν τὸ θεοῦ) in the New Testament is found not in Adam and Eve but rather in Jesus Christ, especially the Easter Christ. The true human being is the resurrected one, the transformed one, the eschatological one. Resurrection belongs to the very definition of what it means to be Christ and what it means to be truly human. It means to participate in the coming new creation. “Christians are Easter people living from and toward that Easter experience of a new creation,” declares Hans Schwarz.<sup>10</sup>

Human identity is at this point in the ongoing history of God’s creation not yet established, not yet determined. We will be who we are only in the resurrection, only in the new creation. Our destiny determines our definition. Wolfhart Pannenberg helps make this clear by capitalizing on the multivalent German term, *Bestimmung*, with its many meanings: “destiny,” “destination,” “determination,” and “definition.”<sup>11</sup> Only in the eschatological new creation will we be who God has destined us to be.

Hence the *imago Dei* is essentially future. Yet, it has a retroactive and proleptic quality as well. Our created humanity is our eschatological humanity. Who we are is retroactively determined by who we will be. To think of ourselves as created in the image of God is to think backward from the fulfillment to the present, from the final creation to the present process of creating. To the extent that the *imago Dei* is present now, it is present proleptically—that is, it is an anticipation of a reality yet to be fully realized. It is present as spirit, as the Holy Spirit—and therefore stands in some tension with present reality. The *imago Dei* is the divine call forward, a call we hear now and respond to now but a call that is drawing us toward transformation into a future reality.

To get from the present creation to the transformed new creation, however, will require an increased dose of creativity.<sup>12</sup> Today’s reality is not tomorrow’s reality. Or, more precisely, tomorrow’s reality retroactively defines today as on-the-way, as becoming something new. Only creativity will bridge the present with the future. What lies in that future is redemption, a redemption that includes the resurrection of the dead.

To raise the dead, of course, will require the same divine power exerted by God when creating all things *ex nihilo*. Only the God who created the world out of nothing in the beginning is capable of raising the dead in the future. “The eschatological future reaches back and is revealed in the event of the resurrection of Jesus [. . .] both creation and New Creation are part of a single divine act of creation *ex nihilo*,” is the way Robert John Russell puts it.<sup>13</sup> We are not yet fully created, therefore, much creativity lies between us today and who we will be eschatologically.

Theistic evolutionist Ilia Delio stresses the continuity between the eschatological future and the historical present. “The resurrection of Jesus

is the beginning within history of a process whose fulfillment lies beyond history, in which the destiny of humanity and the destiny of the universe together find their fulfillment in a liberation from decay and futility."<sup>14</sup>

Resurrection will not happen apart from an act of divine grace. Yet, it is *we* who are destined for resurrection. It is *our* created world destined for transformation, redemption, salvation.

What role will human and creaturely creativity play in this cosmic drama?

### III. FROM EVOLUTION TO FREEDOM TO MEANING

All that we have just said about human destiny would be nullified, however, if the history of evolution is interpreted only scientifically.

Evolution, whether cosmic or biological, is meaningless. Evolution has no built-in direction, purpose, *telos*, or goal. The now iconic words of Nobel Prize winner Steven Weinberg still ring ominously: "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless."<sup>15</sup>

This pointlessness derives first and foremost from the method of research, which expunges meaning at the level of presupposition. Evolutionary biologist Francisco J. Ayala reiterates how the scientist voluntarily blinds himself or herself to meaning, purpose, and value:

The scope of science is the world of nature, the reality that is observed, directly or indirectly, by our senses. [. . .] Outside that world, science has no authority, no statements to make, no business whatsoever taking one position or another. Science has nothing decisive to say about values, whether economic, aesthetic, or moral; nothing to say about the meaning of life or its purposes; nothing to say about religious beliefs. [. . .] Science is *methodologically* materialistic or, better, methodologically *naturalistic*.<sup>16</sup>

University of Chicago biologist Jerry Coyne makes the same point with more belligerence than Ayala. "Meaning and purpose are human constructs, products of intelligent minds, and 'purpose' implies forethought of such minds, either human or divine. These are teleological ideas that are not part of science."<sup>17</sup> Before we even get to the subject matter of evolutionary science, meaning has been expunged. That's the nature of science, not the nature of nature.

Teilhard de Chardin differs from this consensus. "*Evolution has a direction*," he declares.<sup>18</sup> But, does this directionality arise naturally from the science of evolution? Or, from Teilhard's prior theological commitments?

Hefner objects to the bleakness of evolution as a meaningless or directionless process of random chance. Evolution is in fact directional and meaningful because it is "the work of God to allow for the emergence of

that which is necessary for the fulfillment of God's intentions."<sup>19</sup> The long history of physical and biological processes determined that the human central nervous system would evolve; and the central nervous system in turn determined that *Homo sapiens* would enjoy freedom. And freedom produces culture. And culture redounds to influence the further evolution of the central nervous system.

*The conditioning matrix that has produced the human being—the evolutionary process—is God's process of bringing into being a creature who represents a more complex phase of creation's zone of freedom and who therefore is crucial for the emergence of a free creation.*<sup>20</sup>

Theologically, the development of human freedom signals that the creation has evolved to a stage of freedom that enables voluntary participation in God's purposes.

Regardless of what a Nobel Prize-winning scientist might say, Hefner says the universe is not pointless. But, in order to say this, Hefner must add religion and metaphysics to the otherwise reductionist methods of science. "Large frameworks of meaning, like those proposed by religion and metaphysics, are unavoidable and required if the human quest for meaning is to be fulfilled."<sup>21</sup> In short, Hefner relies on a *theology of nature* to affirm that our evolutionary history gives evidence of direction, purpose, and meaning.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV. MEANING AND TIME

Meaning in the present requires anticipation of the future. Martin Heidegger draws this phenomenological insight. "*Meaning is the 'upon-which' of a projection in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something; it gets its structure from a fore-having [Vorhabe], a fore-sight [Vorsicht], and a fore-conception [Vorgriff]. . . . Hence, only Dasein can be meaningful [sinnvoll] or meaningless [sinnlos].*"<sup>23</sup>

The post-Heidegger hermeneutical tradition went on to emphasize that human meaning is historical, contextual, and linguistic. The past lives in the present not only as memory but as a pre-condition for meaningfully engaging expectation and hope. For this reason, theologians such as John Polkinghorne remind us of the decisive role played by eschatology. "The essence of Christian eschatology is the belief that through God and God's purposes and God's fulfillment of the divine purposes the world makes total sense. Not just now, but always."<sup>24</sup>

Evolutionary biologist Jeffrey Wicken analyzes the problem of meaninglessness.

The people have spoken. They don't like evolution. Why should they? Evolutionary metaphysics tell them steadily that the realm of spirit is reducible to the realm of matter. We should take pains to tell them otherwise. [. . .] Evolution is our age's rejected religion, and we scientists have only ourselves to blame for this folly.<sup>25</sup>

In Wicken's analysis of the question of meaning, he acknowledges the whole-part dialectic. "There is no whole without participatory parts. There are no parts without evaluative wholes. That, simply stated, is the broad message of Darwinism."<sup>26</sup> Positively speaking, the meaning of our evolutionary history cannot be determined without an implicit or explicit grasp of the whole of history. We "wish to understand history as a whole, in order to understand ourselves," contends philosopher of history, Karl Jaspers.<sup>27</sup>

The context for human meaning is the story of the universe; it is cosmic history. "The universe is a story still being told," John Haught insightfully observes.<sup>28</sup> The meaning of the created cocreator is determined by where our present chapter fits within this cosmic story yet to be finished.

Implicitly yet necessarily, avers Pannenberg, each experience of human meaning relies upon a pre-understanding of the whole of history. And history cannot become a whole without presupposing its future end, an end understood as both *finis* (completion) and *telos* (purpose). Or, to say it another way, the meaning of the past and present requires an eschatological future.

Pannenberg's version of a theology of nature relies on this phenomenal trait of human consciousness, theologically interpreted.

The meaning of history as a whole is determined only from the perspective of this future end. [. . .] This beginning of the end of history in Jesus' activity and fate established Jesus' significance as God's final revelation to [us]. The result of this is that the destiny of each individual [person] is determined by his [or her] relationship to Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

Jesus, the eschatological *imago Dei*, represents who we will be proleptically. The meaning of the present moment is retroactively determined by the future, by God's final future.

God's future is still the creative origin of all things in the contingency of their existence even as it is also the final horizon of the definitive meaning and therefore of the nature of all things and all events. On the path of their history in time objects and people exist only in anticipation of that which they will be in the light of their final future, the advent of God.<sup>30</sup>

Theistic evolutionist Celia Deane-Drummond similarly relies on a strong eschatology to determine the meaning and direction of our biological history. "God's purpose in evolution and in human history is really clear only in

retrospect. [. . .] A Christian has one foot in history and nature and one in the hoped-for-future."<sup>31</sup>

The implication here is that we cannot find meaning exclusively by looking backward at our evolutionary past. Rather, meaning requires anticipation of what will happen in the future. Faith in the God of the future contributes significantly to the theologian's interpretation of our evolutionary heritage. Perhaps with a bit less exuberance, Hefner would agree with Pannenberg on this point. "The eschatological dimension is linked closely with human culture and the brains that generate behavior and culture."<sup>32</sup>

What the theologian contributes that adds to what the scientist contributes is a vision of the whole of cosmic history. Even though the final contours of that wholeness are still shrouded in the midst of possibilities, the wholeness of the complete story provides the necessary context for the meaningfulness of our present creativity as well as our evolutionary inheritance.

## V. CONCLUSION

The God of the Bible is one who makes new things. Recognizing that the human race has been blessed with a portion of the divine image, we need to ask: could the capacity for creative and transformative activity count as an expression of this divine image? Philip Hefner has answered in the affirmative: we human beings are God's created cocreators.

So far, so good. Yet, the question of meaning or purpose remains. Christopher Southgate and Andrew Robinson challenge the theologian: "If the creator is not also the redeemer, if some connection cannot be conceived between God's purposes as creator and God's purposes as redeemer, then the theodist must admit defeat."<sup>33</sup>

The theologian cannot accept a cosmos without purpose, even if such purpose is invisible to the scientific gaze. Evolution is directed and purposeful, contends the theologian, whether scientists can or cannot see it through their naturalistic lenses. Hefner is confident that the purpose in nature is God's purpose, but he draws this confidence from theology not from science.

Evolutionary virologist Martinez Hewlett and I, when confronting this question of meaning, elected this formulation: "*God has a purpose for nature that scientists cannot see within nature.*"<sup>34</sup> We should not expect the laboratory scientist looking through the lenses of random variation in inheritance acted on by natural selection to perceive a grand design or a built-in entelechy. Yet, as Hefner claims, the long evolutionary story is guided by purpose, by God's purpose. We, as God's created cocreators, have an inkling that our lives are meaningful because they are tied to God's cosmic plan.

## NOTES

1. Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 35; italics original.
2. Ted Peters, "Techno-Secularism, Religion, and the Created Co-Creator," *Zygon* 40:1 (December 2005): 845–62.
3. Vatican, International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God," (2005), 22; [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040723\\_communion-stewardship\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html).
4. Hefner, *Human Factor*, 264.
5. *Ibid.*, 39.
6. Philip Hefner, "The Evolution of the Created Co-Creator," in *Cosmos as Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance*, ed. Ted Peters (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), 225–26.
7. Catherine Keller registers reluctance to accept the classic concept of *ex nihilo*, giving primordial status to the *tehom*, the stuff of creative potential. "But I wonder whether precisely the Genesis *tehom*—which implies neither pure evil nor total victimization but something more like the matrix of possibilities in which liberation struggles unfold—would not serve the current context better than the orthodox *ex nihilo*." Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 21. In effect, Keller's position would erase the distinction preserved in "created co-creator," because God and humanity would both be relegated to the status of transformers of something previously given. Both divine and human would be equally dependent on a yet prior giver of existence itself.
8. Philip Hefner, "Can the Created Co-Creator Be Lutheran?" *Dialog* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 185–87, at 186.
9. During this lengthy pregnancy that gave birth to countless species, theistic evolutionist Joshua Moritz posits that God selected the human species to represent the divine on Earth. "The *imago Dei* stands for God's historical *election* or choosing of human beings from among the animals and setting them apart as God's representatives for the sake and fulfillment and setting them apart as God's representatives for the sake of fulfillment of God's purposes." Joshua M. Moritz, *Science and Religion: Beyond Warfare and Toward Understanding* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2016), 203.
10. Hans Schwarz, *The Human Being* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013), 385.
11. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, tr., Duane A. Priebe (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1962), vii.
12. "The act of creation had an origin such that it continues to the eschatological finale, itself an act of new creation. Creation is history, natural history." Paul R. Hinlicky, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015) 751.
13. Robert John Russell, *Time in Eternity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 15.

14. Ilija Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 156.
15. Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 154. “Weinberg’s lament, and the expectation that science can find some meaning for the creation of the universe, is essentially a category error. Science can no more explain its existence—in the sense of first causes—than theology can explain electromagnetism or gravitation. But if the sole reliable method of gaining knowledge is through the autonomy of reason and the methods of the natural sciences, where does that leave us?” Gerald E. Marsh, “Weinberg’s Lament: Science and Religion,” *Science, Culture, and Religion* 3:1 (2016): 49–54, at 53. doi: 10.17582/journal.src/2016/3.1.49.54.
16. Francisco J. Ayala, *Darwin’s Gift to Science and Religion* (Washington, DC: Joseph Henry, 2007), 172.
17. Jerry A. Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible* (New York: Viking, 2015), 228.
18. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, intro. by Julian Huxley (New York: Harper, 1959), 146, emphasis in original.
19. Hefner, *Human Factor*, 45. Hefner is not an interventionist. God acts in, with, and under natural processes. “God’s creative activity is then at work, so to speak, from inside the organism. . . . Hence, there is no special divine intervention in the cosmic process so as to create the human soul as a strictly immaterial reality. Metaphysical dualism is thereby avoided, and emergent monism instead affirmed.” Joseph Bracken, S.J., “Emergent Monism and the Classic Doctrine of the Soul,” *Interactive World, Interactive God: The Basic Reality of Creative Interaction*, eds., Carol Rausch Albright, John R. Albright, and Mladen Turk (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 191–206, at 201.
20. Hefner, *Human Factor*, 42, emphasis in original. The dialectic of biological and cultural evolution includes the influence of culture on biology. Karl Rahner would agree. “In so far as [humanity] is not *only* the spiritual *observer* of nature—since he is part of it and must precisely continue its history too—his history is not only a history of culture . . . but also an active alteration of this material world itself.” Karl Rahner, “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” *Theological Investigations*, 22 Volumes (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1961–1976; New York: Seabury, 1974–1976; New York: Crossroad, 1976–1988), V: 157–192, at 168.
21. Hefner, *Human Factor*, 8.
22. A theology of nature “must take the findings of science into account when it considers the relation of God and [humanity] to nature, even though it derives its fundamental ideas elsewhere.” Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (New York: Prentice Hall and Harper, 1966), 415.
23. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 193, emphasis in original.
24. John Polkinghorne with Patrick Miles, *What Can We Hope for?* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 5.
25. Jeffrey S. Wicken, “Toward an Evolutionary Ecology of Meaning,” in *Beginning with the End: God, Science, and Wolfhart Pannenberg*, eds., Carol Rausch Albright and Joel Haugen (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 256–88, at 258–59.

26. Ibid., 261.
27. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London: Routledge, 2010 [1953]), 231.
28. John F. Haught, *The New Cosmic Story: Inside Our Awakening Universe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 1.
29. Pannenberg, *What is Man?* 145–46. Such a vision of the whole of history conditioning the meaning of each part has its critics, such as philosopher Eric Voegelin. “There is no *eidos* of history. . . . The problem of an *eidos* of history . . . arises only when Christian transcendental fulfillment becomes immanentized. Such an immanentist hypostasis of the eschaton, however, is a theoretical fallacy. Things are not things, nor do they have essences, by arbitrary declaration. The course of history as a whole is no object of experience; history has no *eidos*, because the course of history extends into the unknown future. The meaning of history, thus, is an illusion.” Eric Voegelin, “The New Science of Politics” (1952), *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 34 Volumes (Baton Rouge, LA and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990–1995), 5:75–241 (185). Voegelin prefers to see the meaning of history in the dialectic between transcendent eternity and imminent temporality, not in eschatological fulfillment.
30. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, tr. by Geoffrey W. Bromily, 3 Volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991–1998), 3:531.
31. Celia Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution: Wonder and Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 284.
32. Hefner, *Human Factor*, 47.
33. Christopher Southgate and Andrew Robinson, “Varieties of Theodicy: An Exploration of Responses to the Problem of Evil Based on a Typology of Good-Harm Analyses,” in *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Evil*, eds. Nancy Murphy, Robert J. Russell, and William R. Stoeger, SJ (Berkeley and Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory and Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 2007), 67–90, at 83.
34. Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett, *Theological and Scientific Commentary on Darwin’s Origin of Species* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008), 77.