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The Participation of Making

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Gregory of Nyssa's treatise *On the Making of Man* is organized around a radical central claim, an analogy of such scope and implication as to be altogether unimaginable to the ancient pagan world. In a passage reflecting on the "counsel" or "wisdom" of creation, Gregory draws a remarkable line of comparison between what he describes as the "royal" character of the human soul and the free decision of God to create. The soul, writes Gregory, possesses an "exalted character," consisting of nothing less than a capacity for self-governance—an autocratic power to "make" according to one's will—that is itself the communicated image of the absolute freedom exercised by God in the creation of the world.

In a post-Christian cultural context, the scandal and radicality of Gregory's claim is easy to overlook. Particularly to a modern Western reader, Gregory's emphasis on the freedom of human persons to forge their own purpose and destiny could appear as but an early, primitive expression of what we today celebrate as an individual's freedom of choice. However, this would decidedly nullify the paradox that Gregory's thought introduces and lessen our sensitivity to the degree to which Gregory's claim runs counter to common human experience. Something often glossed over today, but a fact well known to Gregory, is that human beings cannot *create*. Whereas divine freedom knows no such limitation, our liberty is constrained by the parameters and limitations of the existing order in which we find ourselves, an order in which we can only *make*. Gregory himself acknowledges this restraint in his next paragraph, when he clarifies that while human persons possess the "image" of eternal kingship, they do so only when circumscribed to the demands of "virtue," which is to say, only when observant of a more fundamental order of substantive goodness. Over this primary order, human beings hold no authorial capabilities. But is Gregory being inconsistent then when he insists that human persons possess the quality and dignity of a *creator*?

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between the idea of God's bestowing upon human persons his perfect image and that image manifesting and taking on life in such a way as to be properly set apart in an integral order that lives in a manner drastically unlike God's own manner of being.

For us today, the idea of our freedom being at once unlimited in its exercise and yet circumscribed by a more fundamental order is a contradiction. But in Gregory's more theologically informed view, both the obscure origins of the universe itself and the inscrutable mystery of God's self-abasement in the Incarnation, demand an intersection between human and divine freedom that arises at the very moment of their irreconcilable and absolute inequality. Inexplicably, for Gregory, the human soul enjoys its inviolable "likeness" to God only when it abides in a condition of limitation radically unlike the experience of its eternal source.

This apparent contradiction between the eternal image of divine freedom and its confinement to an inhibited finite mode is nowhere more obviously expressed than in the ancient theological distinction between making and creating. Amongst the ancient and medieval Church Fathers, there is near universal agreement that there lies an unequivocal, qualitative difference between the relatively free productive activities of human beings and the primordial act of God in creating the world. Irenaeus, for example, writes that "men and women cannot make anything out of nothing, only out of matter that exists," and that God therefore is "far superior" because only he "invents the matter of his work." Augustine similarly argues that "nobody can form and create corporeal beings but God alone" because human beings are always restricted to the reordering of already existing material substances. Thomas goes so far as to call it "absurd" to think that human beings can create, for "creating" is only properly predicated of "the first and most universal Cause," which is God.

The ancient Church Fathers were motivated to make this distinction primarily for theological reasons, as a way of safeguarding the essential notion of the world's deriving its existence from God alone. Even so, writers like Gregory, Augustine, and Thomas were not unaware of its practical, anthropological import. In this case, just as Gregory speaks of the human soul possessing a "regal" authority, Augustine accords human beings with a "great power" to "affect" and "change" their material world. Thomas similarly promotes the notion of the world's rightful autonomy based on an integrity that belongs to creatures "properly," which is to say, in accordance with their intelligible natures. In this way, these ancient writers employed an insistence on the absolute priority of divine over human action as a means of securing the intelligibility and significance of the latter, despite an ontological difference that is *absolute*. Indeed, for these writers, it is only because all things derive their existence from God alone, that the order of human making can be credited with an inalienable dignity, derived from the capacity—or, indeed, the privilege—of making *well*, that is, in a manner wholly conformed to the content and form of eternal wisdom.

Even still, it is possible to highlight an obvious blind spot in this ancient teaching. This is evidenced by the fact that while most contemporary thinkers could likely provide a long list of commendable aspects of human constructive freedom, there is a noted lack of specificity in thinkers like Gregory, Augustine, and Thomas as to what exactly constitutes the "good" of human making. Today, for example, we might express our esteem for such things as inventiveness, material progress, and the artistic or technical accomplishment of manufactured goods. Additionally, we might highlight other personalist considerations, such

as the use of our imagination or the experiences of novelty, delight, and surprise that contribute to our sense of individuality and self-integrity. We moderns are poignantly, even at times painfully, aware of just how much of our spiritual aspirations are tied to the fortunes and history of our material world. While not unknown to the ancient world, such reflections on the implications of our embeddedness in matter was often not a primary concern. At the very least, there is a tendency in ancient and medieval thinkers to portray the absolute priority of God over the created world as reason for diminishing the idea of anything *new* arising from its natural productive activities, or of human agency ever achieving anything substantial in the mundane, toilsome re-arranging of "things" in our historical, material existence.

One notable, contemporary thinker who strives to address this potential denigration of human making is the English, Anglican theologian John Milbank. Much of Milbank's work is directed by concerns first addressed in his masterwork, *Theology and Social Theory*, in which (amongst other considerations) he attributes the rise of secular modernity to a latent theological and philosophical prejudice that so prioritizes an elevated, "pure" order of created reality that it calls into question the integrity and reality of the derived order of human production. Milbank's argument in the book is compelling and is supported by a certain intuitive logic, that the more one underscores the dissimilarity and inequality between human making and divine creating the more one exposes the former to the possibility of secular appropriation, manipulation, and control. This is the central, animating claim behind Milbank's theological corpus, that the site of modernity's "desacralization" occurs foremost in the sphere of human making and that this arises as a result of our own pre-judgements as to the non-participatory character of our creative, imaginary acts and the artificial things we produce. What Milbank helpfully highlights as being stereotypically modern, is the idea that in our unique, creative agencies and the "things" we produce, we encounter no other voice but our own.

Unlike many critics of modernity, Milbank is not so much concerned with the idea that human persons actively construct and determine the meaning of their own self-contrived realities. Instead, he is concerned with the unfounded evaluation that such artificiality is excluded from any real participation in God. Milbank is here directly challenging the extremity of the ancient distinction between making and creating, suggesting that a properly participatory understanding of human persons must accord them with a capacity to *create* their reality, even as this is not in the same absolutely originary sense as God. For support, Milbank draws upon the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as a way of emphasizing the comprehensiveness of the world's participation in the divine. Creaturely participation in God can only be real and complete, according to Milbank, if it encompasses the things that finite beings produce and the faculties of sense and imagination that work to produce them. In turn, this premise allows Milbank to make an even more radical and speculative claim, since God's emanative presence in creaturely "*ars*" can only be asserted on the basis of an eternal "*Ars*," the divine Son, who for Milbank serves as the perfect image of the Father only as an infinite "work" forever open to the creative interpretations of the equally divine Spirit. Here, Milbank aims to provide a theological basis for a more direct, metaphorical account of the relationship between human craftsmanship and a God now reconceived after the manner of an eternal Artist.

Milbank's chosen terms for this new, participatory model of human making is that of God and man's causal "convergence" and of a "synergistic" understanding of divine-human agency in which the mundane labor of human making is inwardly reconceived as an extension of an ever-greater diffusion of the divine life. In this way, Milbank seeks to incorporate the fictitious order of human invention and artificial products within the substantive, theurgic movement of the divine creator Spirit, such that God is reconceived as being immanently present throughout the whole order of human bricolage. Equally important, for Milbank, is recognizing that the artificial things produced by human making are also substantively *real*,

and yes this extends even to the order of the imagination. One of the more provocative and fanciful conclusions drawn by Milbank is the idea that the material of our imaginations are equal participants in the world as it is eternally thought and imagined by God, such that even fantastical things like “fairies” and “genies” must, in some sense, be confirmed as *real*. This might strike some as an absurd and preposterous claim, and a dubious strategy by a thinker concerned with restoring to modern society its sense of reality. Yet it is important that we pause for a moment and reflect on the challenge that Milbank lays before us. Do we truly encounter no other voice in our interior, visionary space but our own? Does no other hand accompany ours when we set chisel to wood or press brush to canvas? Are the things that we set apart from ourselves and esteem merely empty shells, inanimate and soulless, devoid of any intrinsic destiny or significance? That such thoughts are even possibilities is, for Milbank, a sign of our nascent, cultural nihilism whose initial step is always one of disbelief that God could be so radically immanent and “given” to a world he eternally loves.

There is, nonetheless, a danger in Milbank of pivoting to the opposite extreme. Recall that a secondary motivation for the ancient distinction between creating and making was to affirm the integrity and just autonomy of the world. Such integrity is a precondition to the free assent of faith, as well as to the perception of truth and goodness that allow human persons to act and “make” decisions in a morally upright and dignified manner. The distinction also speaks to the extent to which a genuinely God-authored creation must reach a definitive endpoint in a world that is complete in itself, a given “whole” that although living is not left floundering in endless fluctuation and uncertainty. Yet, by so emphasizing the continuity between human and divine agency, Milbank risks diminishing the quality of their absolute disproportion and difference. This too is to evaluate the ancient paradox as a simple contradiction, for in this case what is excluded is the possibility of creaturely making and manufactured things being participants in God precisely in their adherence to a non-ultimate, non-originating manner of being.

What is most poignantly lost in Milbank’s alternative account of human making is the confidence that our productive activities serve an order of truth and goodness that is, at least to some extent, attainable. Milbank’s theological conclusions awkwardly lead him to reject claims of formal certainty and definitive moral judgement, since any such “static” rendering of the world would contradict the sense of our partaking of an infinite, divine creative mode. Instead, Milbank advocates for our thoroughgoing “alienation” from certifiable truth and our living lives in “total exposure to fortune,” since the proportions and significance of the world are known only by an eternally deferred—and indeed, ultimately unknowable—movement of divine self-interpretation. However much this may express something true about the mysterious nature of God and the depths of the finite condition, that Milbank’s proposal calls into question the stability and perspicuity of the natural world marks a clear and decisive departure from the ancient tradition. Writers like Gregory, Augustine, and Thomas emphasized the distinctiveness and inequality of the creature’s finite mode of making precisely so as to temper any straightforward emanative or synergistic understanding of divine and human agency. This is what allowed them to affirm the world as a distinct and discernible “whole,” an outward manifestation of divine wisdom that arises in the very instance of its remaining “other” than God. This is what the ancient prohibition against a human capacity to create serves to protect, the mystery of God’s simultaneous immanence and distance as confirmed by the miracle of creation itself and the event of the Incarnation. “What is impossible with man is possible with God” is a passage from Scripture that enabled the ancient Fathers to envision a situation in which there is no conflict between the idea of God’s bestowing upon human persons his perfect image and that image manifesting and taking on life in such a way as to be properly set apart in an integral order that lives in a manner drastically unlike God’s own manner of being.

Milbank is undoubtedly correct to emphasis how human “doing” and “making” is itself a contemplative posture, a participation in God that is much more than a vain and empty voyaging through an obscure morass of material, inanimate things. Thus, in agreement with Milbank, one might add to Gregory’s formulation by saying that it is not only in “the making of man” but also in “man’s making” that “the Maker of all draws near with circumspection, so as to prepare for man material for his formation, and to liken his form to an archetypal beauty.” However, there is a great deal at stake in preserving the radical terms set by the ancient distinction between creator and creature, not the least of which is the question of whether our fictions and artificially contrived things retain their quality and dignity only when they are understood as receiving themselves from a transcendental order that supports and surpasses them. By construing human making as somehow ultimate, as a remote “seed” of God’s divinity, Milbank unwittingly imports the decidedly modern view that treats the absolute inequality between divine creating and human making as a contradiction needing resolution. Lacking each of these constitutive poles of the ancient paradox, one endangers the sincere human desire to make things *well*, and the surprising, gratuitous joy of being endowed with *responsibility*—a power for greatness that is truly and properly *my own*.