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Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility
John Wall

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Moral Creativity

Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility

JOHN WALL

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The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky,—
No higher than the soul is high.
The heart can push the sea and land
Farther away on either hand;
The soul can split the sky in two,
And let the face of God shine through.
But East and West will pinch the heart
That cannot keep them pushed apart;
And he whose soul is flat—the sky
Will cave in on him by and by.

—Edna St. Vincent Millay, from "Renascence"

Preface

This book argues that moral life is inherently creative. It claims that creativity is element in not just the expression of moral sentiments, the application of moral principles, or the formation of moral cultures, but also the very activity of living morally itself. This argument is made in large part through an examination and critique of the moral thought of the French hermeneutical phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur, especially in relation to his philosophical and religious poetics of the will. But it also enters into a wide range of both historical and contemporary conversations about the relation of ethics to poetics and the possibilities for human moral transformation. In the process, the book draws new connections between ethics and creativity, evil and tragedy, philosophy and religion, and moral thought and mythology. If moral life is creative at its core, this proposition challenges such oppositions and demands a fundamental rethinking of the nature and meaning of moral life itself.

The present work continues a line of inquiry already begun and to be further extended in the future. This book establishes a meta-ethical or justificatory groundwork for conceiving of moral life as creative in the first place. This means that it does *not* propose a complete normative ethics: it does not lay out guidelines for making moral decisions in practice. It is a book about the *kind* of activity that moral practice is, not the activities themselves that might therefore be morally right. Any detailed normative implications of the present inquiry are left to future works. First it is necessary, given a long quarrel in Western thought between the ethicists and the poets, to show what it could mean for moral life to involve a creative capability at all, a capability so much more readily acknowledged in other areas of human thought and practice.

This book's own creation was far from a solitary undertaking, so I would like to thank the many teachers, colleagues, and friends who have contributed toward its long gestation. Foremost among these are Don Browning, who first introduced me to Ricoeur's work and had faith in this project from the beginning, and William Schweiker, who challenged me to go further throughout. Encouragement and insights were also offered along the way by David Tracy, Chris Gamwell, Mark Wallace, Gaëlle Fiasse, David Klemm, Richard Kearney, Derek Jeffries, Linda MacCammon, David Hall, Lisa Boccia, Ian Evison, David Clairmont, Michael Johnson, Kevin Jung, Mathew Condon, Roger Willer, Dan Wall, Rebecca Winterer, and Denise Shephard. I benefited from informal and formal remarks from Paul Ricoeur at a conference in 1999 at the University of Chicago. At Rutgers University, where I have taught since 2000, I have enjoyed remarkable support from colleagues both within and outside my department, including my chairs Stuart Charmé and Charlie Jarrett and my dean Margaret Marsh. I owe deep thanks to Jim Wetzel, editor of the Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion Series in which this book appears, and to Cynthia Read at Oxford University Press, for seeing this book's possibilities. Finally, words stop short at the gratitude I feel toward my parents, first teachers in creativity, and most of all Clare, my partner in life's poetic journey, and Isabel, its joyful promise.

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Creation of Adam, detail of the Sistine ceiling, Michelangelo (1475–1564). Sistine Chapel, Vatican Palace, Vatican State. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, New York.

Introduction

The Possibility for Moral Creativity

Images

Michelangelo's painting "The Creation of Adam," on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican, portrays humanity and God as almost mirror images of one another. God floats through the clouds with a host of angels at his side and stretches out his finger to meet the half-raised finger of a reclined and naked Adam on earth. The two gaze into each other's eyes almost as if at their own shining reflections. Possibly Adam is not fully aware of the gift he is about to receive (or just has?). His face is somewhat empty, and his body is relaxed and unmoving. But God himself (let us return later to the question of gender) is highly anthropomorphic, not only in his appearance and dress but also in his apparent anxiety and desire to bring this divine-human encounter about. Not only is Adam a reflection of his Creator, but the Creator itself is also a reflection in some sense of Adam, so that the two share a certain mirrored likeness.

Michelangelo is of course depicting the line from Genesis 1:27: "God created humankind [*adam*] in his image, in the image of God he created them."[1] This line itself, through its internal repetition, also has a mirrored structure. God appears twice: as the subject who creates humankind, and then as the object in the image of which he does so. At the same time, humanity appears twice: as the generalized *adam* and then as the pluralized "them" (literally: "him") clarified in the next phrase to mean both "male and female." The creation of humankind involves a mirrored imaging in which God makes images of himself which, in turn, serve as God's multiple images on earth.

The term "image" here (Hebrew *tselem*) contrasts sharply with the usual *graven* "images" (using a variety of Hebrew words) of the later prophets and writings. Graven images arise from humanity's *dissimilarity* from God: its inability to picture God, and its turning away from God. However, while human objects might fall short of imagining God, in Genesis 1 humanity itself as a *subject* is claimed, at least primordially, to be something of its own Creator's likeness. This sense is confirmed in Genesis 5:3, where *tselem* goes on to describe Seth as an "image" of his father Adam, explicitly drawing an analogy between the relation of son and father and that of the father (Adam) and God (as Father?). As children are to parents, so also are human beings generally—at least from a mythological point of view—both mirrored in, and themselves mirrors of, their original Creator.

Michelangelo's painting could be said to invite us, finally, to go even one step further. The painting itself is an "image" as well. It is not just a passive reflection of this possible divine-human likeness, as if merely retelling a story; it is also itself gloriously and self-consciously *creative*. It not only depicts (or documents) but also illustrates humanity's—in this case Michelangelo's—capability for creating images of itself in the image of its Creator. The same can be said for the creative work of oral and written culture that originally produced Genesis 1. In both cases, the suggestion can be made that if humanity is created in the image of its own Creator—and, of course, this is a big "if"—then humanity may be defined (at least in part, and in a primordial sense) by its unique capability for creativity of its own: whether in painting, writing, culture, or what have you.

In this case, the painting (and Genesis 1) is not just a single but a double image: an image of human creativity as an image of its original Creator. It is, if you like, a double mirror: a mirror held up to our own humanity that affirms that this humanity is really, ultimately, a mirror of its Creator. Through the mirror of our own creativity we may glimpse also a reflection of the Creator—as if in a glass darkly. A Creator shines through from the other side of the mirror, an invisible image appearing through the visible image of ourselves—and, in the process, revealing to ourselves our own invisible depths. If Michelangelo as the artist, and indeed you and I as his interpreters, can create new images of humanity—of ourselves—then do we not in that very act reflect some kind of primordial and mysterious Creation, so that we are not just passively creat*ed* by God but also, in God's likeness, in some sense actively creat*ive*? Does this not tell us something about the depths of our own very humanity?

Such a notion of human creativity is found broadly in many religious and secular stories and writings around the world. It is not uncommon to define the human being in part by its unique capability to make, invent, and imagine itself and its world in art, technology, and culture. The Genesis 1 mythology itself has been used by Jewish and Christian thought to compare God's creativity to human *pro*creativity: in reproductive fruitfulness and multiplication. The Latin phrase *imago Dei* likewise suggests a certain divine-human creative likeness in the ambiguous meaning of "imago." *Imago* can signify not only reproduction, copy, shadow—as in the more obvious interpretation of Genesis 1—but also imitation, likeness, similitude. In the latter case, humanity's imaging of its Creator can also represent, on a different level, its imaging of its own most primordial possibilities. To "be fruitful and multiply" in the image of a Creator could imply that human beings are ultimately capable, like the gods but in limited and fallen ways, of forming order out of chaos, land amidst the waters, and, as literally in a painting, light out of darkness.

This book argues that some such primordial human capability for creativity is ultimately presupposed in moral life. Moral practice and reflection may seem far removed from creative activity, but in fact, I claim, it is both possible and absolutely necessary that human beings create, on the basis of what has already been created in history, new and hitherto unimagined social relations and worlds. One source of evil in the world is the human propensity to deny its original creative capability by clinging to narrow or fixed historical worldviews from the past, acquiescing in distorted systems of power in the present, or failing to engage with others in the formation of a more genuinely human and inclusive future. Part of our moral responsibility under such fallen conditions is the ever more perfect realization of our own primordially creative possibilities, both in how we act in the world and in how we think about how to act. To be created in the image of a Creator is one way of saying, in part, that we are perpetually responsible for fashioning new moral worlds within the multiplicity, disorder, complexity, and tragedy of human life.

In this I oppose a long separation of the meanings of moral and poetic practice going all the way back at least to Plato. Plato censors the poets in his ideal republic because he thinks they undermine the rationality of the moral order. The poets are morally suspect. They create imaginative fantasies instead of true depictions of reality. They form idiosyncratic "images" of moral truth instead of permanent "ideas" of moral truth itself. Plato's student Aristotle, as we will see, shares such a view in part. Less starkly, he separates practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) as acting well in society from poetics (*poiêsis*) as making objects (such as chairs and buildings) or imitating actions (as in poems and stories). Ethics is about internal human goods like courage and justice; poetics is about external goods like crafts and plays.

This separation was taken up forcefully again in modernity, although along rather different lines. As we will see, Kant's second and third critiques deal with what in his view are the distinct human capacities for moral freedom on the one hand, guided by universal law, and aesthetic freedom on the other, guided by subjective taste. (This separation, however, is not complete.) The Romantics, after Kant, deepen the creative act to the pure expression of subjective genius. This is generally opposed to moral action understood as rigidly objective. And Nietzsche eventually goes perhaps the furthest through his aesthetic transvaluation of values. For him, "every creative deed ... issues from one's most authentic, innermost, nethermost regions," which oppose stultifying social mores by moving humankind at last "beyond good and evil."[2] If Nietzsche inverts Plato's prioritization of ethics over poetics, he still accepts Plato's distinction between them.

This long history has given rise to the widespread assumption today, often hardly acknowledged, that human "creativity" may have certain moral consequences—such as those from pornographic art, nuclear weapons, or biotechnology—but in and of itself it is an utterly different kind of practice from that found in morality. The one is subjective, private, and essentially inner; the other is intersubjective, public, and essentially social. It is all very well for the arts and literature, and even the sciences and technology, to invent and discover, but morality somehow stands apart as static, formal, and written in stone like the ten commandments. The task of moral practice and inquiry, on this view, is not to invent moral practices but to recover past virtues or values or to uncover and live by moral standards that are fixed and unmoving. It is not to transform, open up, innovate, or instigate, but to repeat, ground, or bring closure. Moral discourse on these assumptions does not fundamentally create anything new; it is not engaged in social transformation of an essential or necessary kind.

A different tradition with which my account contends is a certain set of assumptions that arise out of the Bible. Western religious thought has a tendency, which is very much alive today, to interpret the biblical notion of "image" in its negative sense, originating in Sinai and the prophets, of *graven* images—that is: idols. As Jean-Luc Marion has said, an idol is something human beings create to represent God in the image of themselves, as opposed to an "icon" that breaks through human images as God's own Wholly Other face.[3] This opposition of morality and idolatry is not restricted to postmodern ethicists like Marion and Emmanuel Levinas. As we will see, it runs as a deep current throughout biblically inspired moral thought both historically and today. It has the powerful historical effect of implying that moral life may be somehow *given* to us whole and pure, without our having also to give it to ourselves by forming its meaning and possibilities.

My claim, in response to this assumption, is that prior to the kind of evil of idolatry to which humanity is indeed all too prone, there nevertheless exists a *still more primordial* human capability for creating our moral worlds as images of our Creator. Such a capability can be affirmed through a kind of moral faith in humanity, yet it is also in a way presupposed in the capability for idolatry itself. Creating idols of the Creator betrays the still more original moral purposes for which human creativity may have been created. The objects we create may become idolic images of God, but we are even more fundamentally subjects capable of creativity as images of God. This is a mythological rather than a merely historical or empirical claim. A "third way" is required between, on the one hand, actual human moral creativity, which indeed proves all too inevitably idolatrous and reductionistic, and, on the other hand, the removal of any likeness between humans and their Creator at all. Such a primordial symbolism may open our imaginations up to moral practice and reflection as capable of creating ever greater, if never complete, love for one another and hope for social renewal.

In contrast with these secular and religious divisions of ethics from poetics, the concept of moral creativity that I develop in this book refashions a number of ideas and suggestions in contemporary moral thought on which it is partly based. These recent developments do not fully describe moral creativity as such, but they do indicate some of its important dimensions and possibilities. They begin to suggest lines along which moral activity may make something new and moral thought may instigate transformation. They also help us reinterpret some ancient indications of the poetics of moral life that have gradually been covered over through the course of Western ethical thought, for both good reasons and bad.

For example, some contemporary Kantians allow for a certain kind of transformative social practice in the formation of shared moral worlds. Kant, after all, demanded that freedom take responsibility for perfecting itself: that it not merely accept goodness from without but *make* itself morally worthy. Others, more inspired by Aristotle and Hegel, have recently claimed an important sense in which human beings develop and re-create their contexts of moral tradition and history. There is a certain kind of creativity involved in the fashioning of the very historical world by which moral practice is oriented. Hegel in particular called this *Bildung*, or cultivation. Still others of a more postmodern persuasion speak of the deconstructive inventiveness of the free play and dissemination of moral "otherness." The "other" calls me to an imaginative self-disruption that creatively undoes, as it were, my own settled moral assumptions and calls me toward the unknown. Yet again, in a more political vein, some liberationists have spoken of the need to oppose historical oppression by radical social transformation, creating new systems of social order ever closer to the kingdom of God. And much excellent work has been done, in addition, at the intersection of ethics and literary studies, to show how important to moral life is the creative moral imagination in educating moral sensibility through metaphors, symbols, and works of fiction.

My argument is that although moral creativity is evident in contemporary moral thought in a variety of practical, historical, deconstructive, and literary ways, it needs to be understood in a more profound sense: as a primordial, original, and absolutely necessary human moral *capability*. Moral creativity needs to be grasped (or re-grasped) as a dimension of our very moral humanity. It is not just a means to larger moral ends, an artistic tool, or even a way of describing moral ends themselves, but part of the very nature and composition of being moral and reflecting on morality in the first place. We members of the contemporary world do not generally have trouble acknowledging a unique and fundamental creative human capability in areas like art, culture, technology, and science. But we do not know how to speak of creativity when it comes to moral life. In this we miss something fundamental about our moral task and our possibilities for moral humanity.

Possibilities

In this introductory chapter, I sketch in broad strokes what such a morally creative capability might look like. And I distinguish it, preliminarily, from

some possible alternatives. Most obviously, perhaps, to be morally creative here does not mean simply to express one's own inner subjective feelings in one's practices in the world. Ethical aestheticism does not address the real moral problems of intersubjectivity, otherness, historicity, and power. Neither is moral creativity reduced in the following pages to transforming a present fragmented moral world back toward some traditional Golden Age. The repetition of a historical past, however different from the present, cannot capture the full dignity of the eternal human capability for creating its moral world for itself. Neither is it sufficient to limit moral creativity to the process of applying universal moral principles to particular situations. However original and universal the human creative capability may itself turn out to be, it is something that points, as it were, beyond itself—in excess of itself—to concretely actualized moral worlds that are always yet to be imagined and formed. Nor, finally, does moral creativity consist in a Hegelian march of history toward some eventual historical synthesis or reconciliation. Genuine moral creativity must admit the absolute "alterity" of creative persons in and of themselves and the endless irreducibility of the creation of moral life to any one particular historical expression.

Moral creativity is developed in this book as a primordial human capability that inevitably, at least in part, *fails* in actual human history. I defend this negative side of my thesis on the basis of what Kant calls "radical evil." One of the more unique features of the following chapters is that they seek to throw new bridges between Jerusalem and Athens—between biblical and ancient Greek resources—that differ in part from Augustine's mediations of Paul and Plato and Aquinas's mediations of Christianity and Aristotle. Moral evil from a poetic point of view is best understood as involving a dimension of moral tragedy. As forcefully developed in ancient Greece, and as indicated in part by Aristotle, tragedy is the height of the possibility for poetic moral catharsis. I believe that evil in a biblical sense and tragedy from the Greeks, while quite different, can also be usefully related. A more tragic conception of human evil will allow us to understand moral life in some of its most important poetic dimensions. This means that I join a growing effort in postmodernity—all the way from Friedrich Nietzsche to Gabriel Marcel and Luce Irigaray—to reach more deeply into ancient Greek moral culture than in the more rationalized philosophical orders of Plato and Aristotle, and to discover therein some of moral life's more profoundly tragic mystery.

This does not mean, however, that I simply adopt tragedy as the moral problem itself. This strategy is undertaken in different ways by a number of German idealists of the nineteenth century and some philosophical postmodernists today. This has proven a temptation especially for self-consciously "post-religious" thinkers of the relation of ethics to poetics that in the end, I argue, cannot be sustained. Rather, I use the strange poetic intractability implied in Greek notions of tragedy to *qualify*—in a distinctly poetic way—an essentially Jewish and Christian understanding of "radical evil" as having to do with a fundamental failure of human freedom. A poetics of moral evil is best articulated by marrying a tragic sensibility concerning human finitude

with a biblical insistence on human freedom's inscrutable defeat of itself. Western moral thought from Augustine to Kant has long associated moral life with human freedom: an absolutely original and irreducible freedom to choose responsibly or not. I do not defend this broad assumption in this book. Nor do I think it is absent from the ancient Greek tragic worldview. But I argue that moral freedom is itself best understood, at least from a poetic point of view, as deeply conditioned by its relation to the tragically finite historical realities within which it must seek realization.

The poetic moral problem consists, in the end, in the problem of an irreducible *tension* between original freedom and historical finitude. It is not in either pole alone but in their tension with one another that I locate the poetics of radical evil. The term "tension" is one of the central themes of this book. It stands primordially as the created condition for the possibility of moral creativity itself. Creativity is inherently tensional, and tension is to be affirmed as originally good. Both moral practice and ethical reflection must deal in some way with the "tensionality" of human life. However, a productive moral tension is witnessed to and realized, in this world, only by passing through tension in its felt sense of actual moral failure. Pure moral creativity is never itself directly and fully experienced—only its breakdown and our subsequent yearning to bring it about. Moral tension is actually experienced in this world as freedom's inscrutable self-defeat. It lies at the root of moral meaninglessness, violence, and distortion.

This failure or evil is "radical" because, as Kant says, it involves freedom's inexplicable defeat of its own possibilities for freedom, or, in more classical terms, freedom's own self-enslavement. From a poetic point of view, the problem is that human freedom fails to perfect itself in living tension with its world. It fails to render its inherent tension with historical finitude productive and creative of new meaning. This failure can take many forms: hubristic domination over the world, acquiescence in distorted structures of power, violence toward the stranger, acceptance of loss of selfhood, and so on. But in each case the fundamental "poetic" problem is the diminishment of the primordial possibility for creative tension between human freedom and its larger finite world. Human moral freedom is caught up in the worldly tragedies of fate, passivity, suffering, and destruction, and so itself stands in need of ongoing radical poetic catharsis in order truly to be free—or ever more free—in the world.

The response this book develops to such a moral problem—and hence the positive and central side of its thesis—is that moral creativity is the *still more radical* poetic capability for the human transformation and renewal of its social world. The term "radical"—like other terms I use in this book such as "hyperbole," "excess," and "transcendence"—is meant in this positive way in the sense of transgressing already self-imposed and historically imposed moral limits. It points to a kind of poetic moral freedom that is more mysterious and primordial than the actual moral freedom each of us in fact realizes in our lives. Moral creativity is still more radical than radical evil. The creative freedom to render human tensions productive of greater human

meaning can be affirmed as still more primordial than the freedom to defeat this tension by submitting ourselves to self-enslavement. This affirmation is "religious"—and inherently so—in the sense of witnessing to humanity's own most original, even if paradoxically lost and inexplicable, possibilities for radical self-renewal.

One consequence of this proposal is that I examine the notion of God or gods only insofar as it sheds light on the experience of being human. This does not mean I do not make certain assumptions about God that others may not share: specifically, that it is meaningful to speak of "God" at all, that this God is in part a Creator, and that he or she has a unique (though not exclusive) relation to humanity. When I speak of humanity as a "likeness to" its Creator, it is understood, from a long tradition of religious thought, that this is not the same as speaking of "identity with." To imagine the divine as reflecting the human is not the same as imagining the divine *as* the human. But this book is not a theological treatise. My argument does not start from a conception of the Creator and from there deduce insights into the nature of human morality. Rather, in a more phenomenological way illustrated by the likes of Marcel, Levinas, and Marion, I start from the effort to describe and give meaning to concrete human experience. If this description takes us into our primordial human depths as mirroring Creativity as such, this is only because the human is ultimately and unavoidably mysterious to itself. In particular, the capability for self-creation is something for which no final explanation can be "created" by selves who possess it; it can only be the object of a radically original human affirmation.

The word "radical" in this book is, as a result, not meant in the sense of "radical orthodoxy" but, rather, reflects the different kind of meaning it receives in contemporary Continental phenomenology. Moral creativity neither is nor ever has been—nor ever will be, so far as anyone could tell—completed in human thought or practice. But it can become more or less excessively, hyperbolically, radically realized. It can undo existing horizons of meaning even as it reconstitutes them into new ones. The inner aim or perfection of moral creativity, insofar as we can experience it, lies by its very nature *beyond*. It is excessive of any actually created product—excessive, therefore, of any past, present, or even conceivable future social history. The task of moral creativity involves precisely *transforming* the historical world: making a new world that at once remains this existing world but also, and at the same time, is something more and previously unimagined. It does not lie in the finite historical world alone but, rather, in the ineffable tension by which humanity freely lives in relation to it. This tension is our responsibility. To create history is to exercise a mysterious human capability for exceeding history itself, not just in this particular moment of historical time but in relation to historical time as such.

I describe moral creativity in the following pages with the strange both biblical and postmodern language of "impossible possibility." This, to me, means that moral creativity must be regrasped (*religare*) in its fullest possible paradoxicality and primordial mystery. And this can be done, finally, only in

the language of mythology. The following pages are not themselves mythology, but they rely on mythological origins and horizons for generating critical moral meaning. The capability in question is for the transformation of an already inscrutably self-defeated world. It is for a radical new perfection that must appear to us disordered creatures historically and ethically impossible. It recalls us to ourselves as fallen "children of *adam*" nevertheless capable ultimately, even if only in limited ways, of reenacting our own covered-over creative depths. The impossible possibility that we are "fallen" from ourselves is a useful mythology or symbolism precisely for describing humanity's covering over of its own creative potentialities even as they remain nevertheless primordial to humanity itself. An investigation into moral creativity must take on these kinds of poetic human paradoxes.

What, in the end, should moral creativity produce? The answer I develop throughout the following chapters is that human beings are called to produce ever more radically inclusive moral worlds with one another. This language of "inclusivity" does not describe a complete moral norm but, rather, moral life's inner poetic perfection or possibility. It is not meant in the Hegelian sense of historical synthesis, unifying sameness, totality. Rather, it indicates an impossible possibility, or, as one might call it, a transcendental ideal or horizon. From a poetic point of view, inclusivity is never closed but inherently open-ended. What is to be included are not just historical realities but also historical freedoms, and precisely the freedoms of creative selves who are capable of creating history for themselves. Radical inclusivity means inclusion of "the other" in the sense of the singular, the irreducible, the nonsubstitutable—the other as itself also a primordial and mysterious creator. Moral creativity faces the ultimate fact that selves are other both to themselves and to one another. Historical experience is not one of gradually unfolding unity but, rather, one of multiplicity, irreducibility, and open and hidden tension. The possibility for greater social inclusiveness within history is a possibility for ever more radical openness rather than closure, a possibility for the fuller multiplicity of human relations as images of a Creator.

The aim of inclusivity is the aim of rendering the inscrutable moral tensions within ourselves and with one another ever more profoundly productive of moral meaning. A meaningful social inclusivity is itself radical and excessive. It is both incapable of creation by limited selves alone and yet required of all limited selves. Moral creativity could not find its inner perfection in the application of universal principles or the return to a past historical coherency. It aims beyond what any one of us alone could ever actually imagine, beyond to a dark abyss and an always still-unfolding new history or "new creation." Somewhat as in art and science, this history can involve a sense of direction and meaning while still refusing absolute closure. For moral life, perhaps even more radically, the aim consists in the always excessive creation of social meaning that is created simultaneously with one another. Such an aim always exceeds history itself. But it can also provide the tensions of our historical lives with genuine senses of greater transformative promise and direction.

This book does not produce a full or complete ethics. Its purpose is not to lay out normative guidelines for moral decision-making in practice. Rather, it is an exercise in meta-ethics, an inquiry into the nature and meaning of moral life as such. While I investigate a range of normative terms like narrative unity, respect, love, nonviolence, and hope, I do so only to illuminate creativity itself as a primordial human moral capability. I range widely across established distinctions in contemporary moral thought such as between Aristotelians and Kantians, modernists and postmodernists, and philosophers and religionists. The point of ranging so widely is not to produce any sort of grand meta-ethical synthesis. Rather, it is to investigate multiple pathways toward the same underlying possibility: the possibility that moral practice and reflection are somehow, at least in part, creative at their very core.

My argument, then, is that while there is much more to moral life than creativity, nevertheless making, inventing, transforming, and renewing human relations is primordially necessary to it. Living a morally good life involves immersion in the messy discordancies and tragedies of our actual historical present and embracing the task of forming together a radically uncertain future. Pursuing ethical study likewise involves innovative critique, provocation, and transformation. Moral life requires us to render the moral incommensurabilities and violence in which we always already find ourselves into previously unimagined social meaning, to strive for more complex and dynamic forms of moral relationality, and to transform even our conceptions of humanity in the direction of their ever deeper human possibilities. Human beings are primordially capable of responding to the moral tensions of their lives by rendering them productive of ever more radically inclusive moral meaning, even if such a task is endless and fraught with dark alleys and deceptions. It is in our nature to create, perhaps even more radically in moral life than in any other kind of human practice. Moral life may thereby discover that it is called to mirror, in however limited a way, the Creation of humanity itself.

Beginnings

Although it is a certain kind of *beginning* at which I propose eventually to arrive—in human primordial creativity—let me suggest up front the different kind of historical beginnings that orient this endeavor. I use these resources and orientations creatively, illustrating on a hermeneutical level the moral argument itself. That is, I engage quite a wide range of historical and contemporary moral voices, but I do so in a hermeneutically creative way: by listening to them carefully, exploring both their differences and their analogies, and in the end forming them into a new moral picture reducible to none of them alone. In moral reflection as in moral life, we find ourselves always already participants in an ongoing conversation, however much we can and must also actively respond to and transform it. So the question to begin with is precisely in what kind of conversation an investigation into moral creativity might begin?

In the broadest possible sense, moral creativity rests on a humanistic affirmation of moral capabilities. Such an affirmation has deep roots in not just modernity but also what may be called premodernity and even parts of postmodernity. The notion of human beings as endowed with particular moral possibilities (and problems) has taken on a range of secular, religious, aesthetic, ethical, and political manifestations over historical time. This does not mean that rooting moral life in features of the human is not under significant attack today. This is so from many quarters. Some associate humanism with individualism and the undermining of life in community. Others locate the origins of moral life not in the human but in the divine alone. Others attack humanism as a Western tool of colonial oppression. Although it is not my intention to defend the complex and shifting tradition of moral humanism per se, I do respond to these and other critics of originating ethics in the human as my argument unfolds.

This broad starting point means, for me, that moral creativity has to do with profound human capabilities. Just as the arts and sciences appear to be peculiarly human endeavors, or at least to reach specifically human heights, so also moral life can be viewed as realizing distinctively human capabilities for creative transformation. In speaking of moral capabilities I take significant cues from the critical thought of perhaps the most powerful humanistic ethicist ever, Immanuel Kant, even as I question his narrowing of moral thought to formal deontological law, his apparent separation of ethics from aesthetics, and the secondary role he gives in moral life to religion. There are many contemporary post-Kantians who have helped blaze this trail into a more robust and radical formulation of human moral capability, and I consider some of them in the pages that follow.

Even more specifically, I argue that the human creative capability is a religious one. It is ultimately a mystery, a paradox, a primordial origin. It cannot be explained in the same way one would explain empirical facts or even rationally founded metaphysical truths but, rather, lies *behind* thought, explanation, and action as such. Luc Ferry has called such a location of human meaning a "transcendental humanism." As will quickly become clear, this does not mean I adopt a confessional starting point, grounding ethics in a leap of faith peculiar to myself or to a particular traditional framework. In fact, those who believe religious ethics can be performed only once one has signed on to a particular traditional worldview will come under significant criticism in the following pages. As I argue in chapter 1, no merely historical starting point can comprehend the necessity of history's own radical moral transformation. There is no way to speak of historical human moral creativity—as the following pages endeavor to do—without running into humanity's ultimate religious origins and limits. I therefore use admittedly historical symbols and languages to risk speaking, always inadequately, of primordial humanity as such. This is the only language we have for speaking of ourselves in this way. My initial defense for doing so is that, despite their real historical differences, all human beings in some way "create" historical interpretations of their lives.

In ethical terms, the difference between humanity as actually experienced in history and humanity in its primordial possibilities can be named "radical evil." To affirm human moral creative capabilities is to affirm "the human" not in its actual historical appearance but in its still more radical historical possibilities. I develop this approach as something of a middle way between the hermeneutics of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich—similar to mediations proposed by Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy, Richard Kearney, and others—in which humanity itself can be shown to have its own original moral dimensions revealed to it only through religious mythology and symbolism. This does not mean I do not make certain broad assumptions about moral life that arise specifically out of the Western background to which I unavoidably belong. The most basic assumption of my argument, which I presuppose without defending, is the importance and necessity to moral life of human freedom. To be capable of making evil choices—and hence also to be capable of making good ones—is to be capable of acting freely. This assumption has its hermeneutical roots in biblical, Greek, medieval, scholastic, and modern thought, and it is not shared among all possible moral orientations. But my purpose, rather than arguing for moral freedom as such, is to inquire into its specifically poetic and creative meaning.

While I therefore begin, Kant-like, in a kind of a priori reflection, it soon becomes apparent that such reflection returns us to ordinary moral understanding with radicalized religious and symbolic sensibilities. Human moral creativity must constantly appear to us as undermined and distorted by our very own freedom, as indeed Kant himself recognized in his famous antinomies. Yet our very recognition of this problem will suggest, beyond Kant, a more primordial human poetic capability for faith in the freedom to enact genuine moral transformation in our world. Such belongs to human moral life's both mysterious origins and ultimate destiny, however unrealized in history itself and unimaginable in existing historical practice. And it remains the case quite apart from the question of *what* in fact history should be transformed into—a question which, as already noted, is not central to this "meta-ethical" book, even if we find some directions toward it. The point is that we *must* create our moral world, even if we wish we didn't have to.

To connect religious ethics with religious symbolism and mythology will require significant hermeneutical defense. I provide this, in chapter 1, by showing how the phenomenological tradition of the past century in Europe helps us grasp religious moral meaning's own strange and paradoxical voice. The following pages make significant use of religious, and especially biblical, resources. They do not do so as an exercise in biblical studies or biblical exegesis, for which I can claim no special competency. They do so from a strictly philosophical point of view. The point is to listen to what religious myths and symbols may tell us about the meaning of human moral creativity. This indirect approach is compelled by the nature of our object: a human moral capability for making meaning itself. My claims should be judged chiefly on such philosophical and ethical grounds: how these profoundly

influential texts in Western culture may help us interpret our own creative human possibilities.

If my argument is correct that there exists a creative human capability akin to that of whatever created it, the myths that could be used to describe it are inherently variable and potentially found in many religious traditions. The theological limitations of this investigation consist primarily in assuming (without defending it) that there is some sense in speaking of the world we experience as being something primordially "created." Of course, we are not speaking of a Creator creating at any specific point in time, for it is historical time itself that is supposed as capable of being created by us in its image. The theological assumption is that only a Creator could have created humankind's radically mysterious creative capability. Certainly, at least, humankind could not have created this itself, for the creative capability would in this case already have existed. What is more, the notion of a human "likeness" to its Creator ("in the image of God") does not imply—as a long tradition of Jewish and Christian theology has made clear—humanity's "identity" with God. But these theological questions are beyond the limitations of this book. Here, we are simply interested in the human phenomenological experience of moral "creativity" itself and its radically mysterious and original nature. The symbolism and mythology of a Creator is approached from this experiential, paradoxical, phenomenological point of view.

This procedure specifically helps us to hear moral hyperbole, to become uncomfortable and disrupted in our settled moral horizons, to be opened further to that which speaks to us at our own very limits, and to experience radical moral tension. This means, among other things, that unlike many today who are using the methods of phenomenology, I view ancient religious texts as holding meaningful possibilities for contemporary moral practice. Religion speaks to us in the rich and multivalent symbolic language of a mystery that is Wholly Other and yet that constantly disrupts and reorients our own moral self-understanding. Religion tells us something about radical self- and world-transformation. We are driven to religious symbolism by ordinary moral thought, but this symbolism in turn speaks back to and changes us. Religious language is not accidental but necessary to our inquiry.

If creativity itself is not fixed but endless—if, at least, its destiny remains for each of us radically unknown—its religious dimensions reveal this endlessness as excessive, unavoidable, irreducible, necessary. Richard Kearney calls this view of religion "the *juste milieu* where a valid sense of selfhood and strangeness may coexist."[4] Religion in this sense is not a classic liberal religion that says the same thing as can be known philosophically but in different words (i.e., "love your enemies" is just another phrasing for the categorical imperative). But neither does it fall into a more recent tribalism in which religious traditions provide their own moral authority (i.e., you should love your enemies because scriptural traditions say so). Rather, religious mythology speaks *at the limits of* ordinary human understanding, pressing it always further toward its own radical inner impossible possibilities. Moral creativity

is both human and divine in this sense, calling each of us toward our own ever more primordial humanity.

The thinker on whom the following argument relies the most is the contemporary French hermeneutical phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur. While this book is not a study *in* Ricoeur, it uses Ricoeur's writings extensively both to describe the human moral creative capability and to work out some of its key ethical meanings. Except for the conclusion, Ricoeur's voice figures centrally in each of the following chapters. Chapter 1 explores Ricoeur in the most depth of all, especially his concepts of moral capability, freedom, selfhood, and poetics. Here I argue that Ricoeur's "poetics of the will," in its various philosophical and religious meanings, provides a unique perspective on human creativity that takes us beyond many contemporary distortions (and negations) of moral selfhood. Chapters 2 to 4 use Ricoeur as a mediating figure between a number of traditional understandings of the relation of ethics to poetics—such as in Aristotle, Kant, postmodernism, and contemporary feminism—and my own post-Ricoeurian conclusions. These three chapters begin with larger understandings of the relation of ethics to poetics, interrogate these understandings using perspectives from Ricoeur, and then develop out of this conversation my own constructive proposals concerning the creativity of moral life. In this way, I tie together and critique various strands of Ricoeur's often far-flung writings to advance the specific project of thinking through moral life poetically.

My account of moral creativity may be termed "Ricoeurian" in the limited sense that Ricoeur provides the central philosophical inspiration for it. It is also through Ricoeur's eyes that I read a number of the other thinkers used to advance my argument. (For example, Kant is read from the Ricoeurian point of view—by no means the only point of view possible—of the connection between moral freedom and radical evil.) At the same time, however, Ricoeur himself does not make the argument that moral life is inherently poetic or creative. The "and" in this book's subtitle is to be taken in its strong sense. Ricoeur links morality and creativity, but nowhere does he argue that moral life is creative at its core. Nor does he make this argument in as directly religious-symbolic terms as do I. His writings on ethics and creativity are in fact for the most part quite separate, and he finally still shares in a longstanding Platonic prejudice—which this book seeks to unravel—that ethics remains ultimately a relatively fixed and suprapoetic activity. These assumptions are challenged through a range of dialogues with other ethical thinkers, both ancient and contemporary. What is more, a number of ethicists are employed to criticize aspects of Ricoeur and in the process to open up vistas of moral creativity that Ricoeur's own work closes off. Nevertheless, no other major contemporary thinker, in my view, comes closer than Ricoeur to suggesting how a theory of moral creativity may begin to take shape, and so in many ways it is with Ricoeur that we may fruitfully begin to make inroads into existing moral thought.

Specifically, Ricoeur makes three key contributions to my argument. (1) His vision of phenomenological hermeneutics, even if poetically incomplete, still usefully relates ordinary moral life and religious symbolism. It is Ricoeur who stands in the background—sometimes explicitly, sometimes critiqued—of a

range of contemporary efforts in the French- and English-speaking academic worlds to join, without reducing to one another, ordinary philosophical and radical religious discourse. With Levinas, Ricoeur is the chief architect of what is sometimes critically described as phenomenology's late-twentieth-century "theological turn." In the following pages, I make extensive use of Ricoeur's hermeneutical method (even if not always his substantive conclusions) of reading biblical symbolism and mythology to "give rise to thought"—to give rise, that is, through tension and transformation, to greater philosophical understanding. (2) Ricoeur imagines a moral world of large and generous proportions that helps us move beyond some of the hardened divisions today between Anglo-American and Continental ethics, as well as between Kantianism, Aristotelianism, postmodernism, and Judaism/Christianity—divisions under which moral creativity tends, I will argue, to become obscured. Although I agree in several important respects with Ricoeur's ethical critics, I also appreciate and make use of the unparalleled breathing space he opens up for connecting teleology, deontology, and social discourse. (3) But most important, I believe Ricoeur's broad project of a poetics of the will—begun in the 1950s and still very much alive in Ricoeur's most recent work—suggests new grounds upon which ethics and poetics are no longer sharply separable but mutually implied. The possibility that we are morally creative beings, defined by human capability, depends on whether one can defend this kind of poetic moral anthropology. It is through a careful and critical reading of Ricoeur that we will be able to develop the crucial nexus—at the center of this book—of religion, poetics, and ethics.

These beginnings—humanistic, religious-mythological, and Ricoeurian—allow us to form a notion of moral creativity in dialogue with a range of historical and contemporary moral perspectives and as a unique angle on moral life in its own right. My contribution mirrors hermeneutically what I seek to establish ethically: that from within the always already constituted history of languages and meanings of which each of us is a part, we are faced with the demand to create meaning of an ever new and more inclusive kind. I do not pretend somehow to step outside and view from above the humanistic and hermeneutical history to which I belong. But I do wish to refigure this history in significant ways so as to include its deeper poetic moral possibilities. It is paradoxically possible—indeed, required—to press at the limits of one's own received historicity to create a broadened moral world. It is this gesture, both hermeneutical and substantive, whose depths this book seeks to plumb. My argument rests, ultimately, on whether, as in Michelangelo's painting, we can reimagine—however imperfectly—human creativity itself, but now in a moral register.

Tensions

I make this argument by taking several key traditional historical understandings of the relation (or lack thereof) of ethics to poetics and exploring in

each case how in fact moral life presupposes a core creative capability. Only in the concluding chapter do I sound the ways in which these various excavations meet up. In this way, the book is organized around four important human moral tensions—each the basis of a new dimension of moral creativity, and each the subject of its own chapter. These four tensions become progressively more complex as the book unfolds, but none is reducible to the others. The history of the separation of ethics from poetics is so entrenched that it must be deconstructed and then refigured from a number of different points of view. One might think of the four following chapters as like different perspectives from which to view a human statue: its mysterious inner beauty revealing itself only as we move around it from many different angles. In our case, however, this statue is alive, and we seek not only to see but also to hear, smell, and touch. In this indirect way, a multidimensional picture of the tensions constituting human moral creativity (including also the tensions *between* these various tensions) may emerge with its appropriate dynamism, energy, and promise.

The four tensions we explore are broadly speaking as follows: (1) between the human self and its moral history, (2) within oneself (as a historical and social being), (3) in relation to the other as irreducibly other, and (4) across systems of social power. These can be described schematically (loosely following distinctions in Ricoeur) as ontological, teleological, deontological, and practical. In order for moral life's creative dimensions to surface fully, these distinctions must ultimately be overcome. No statue is fully appreciated from the single angle of a photograph, even if it cannot be viewed simultaneously from all angles at once. Sticking to any one perspective with too much passion—whether Aristotelian, Kantian, postmodern, or otherwise—only perpetuates ethics and poetics' deep historical separation. Each of these traditional approaches to moral reflection contains within itself, however hidden, its own unique poetic tensions that provide an important perspective on the poetic whole. The general movement *within* each of the following chapters is from (1) a major traditional conception of the difference of ethics from poetics, to (2) a mediating intervention using Ricoeur, to (3) my own conclusions about the radical primordiality of creativity in this particular dimension of moral life. As these inquiries build upon one another, we then are able, in the concluding chapter, to describe in a meaningful and rounded way the underlying dynamics of human moral creativity itself.

Here let me briefly highlight the differences between these four dimensions of moral creativity in order to preclude any misunderstanding of my position as reducible to one dimension over the others. Like Ricoeur and others, I am more interested in transgressing than in defending the boundaries between such perspectives on moral life. I am more interested in using them creatively than in demonstrating one's superiority over the others. Of course, this does not mean I lack basic orientations of my own, as have already been suggested and will unfold more fully in what follows. But the important prize on which I wish to fix our attention is the underlying—and ultimately shared—human capability for moral creativeness itself. All other considerations

are strictly secondary, even if still important. What is more, these dimensions should be understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive. One further angle of vision on moral creativity that would be well worth investigation, for example, and which I all too briefly touch upon in the conclusion, is the creative tension between human creativity and "creation" in the sense of the natural environment, perhaps one of the profoundest tensions of freedom and finitude one could imagine.

Chapter 1 explores the "ontological" question of the human "being" (*onto*) as a creative self in history. This chapter relies more extensively than any of the others on the phenomenological hermeneutics of Ricoeur, whose chief contribution to moral thought is widely recognized to consist in his long-developed moral anthropology (description of the moral self). My argument is that, contrary to an array of contemporary proclamations of the death of the moral self, the human being can be reconceptualized—especially beyond the modernist autonomous ego—as existing in the tension between history and innovation, finitude and freedom, passivity and agency: its received social conditions and its capability for their radical transformation. The best place to begin an investigation into moral creativity is the phenomenological overcoming of the Cartesian separation of self and world, but in such a way as still to articulate their fallen human tension.

My argument here is that humanity finds itself simultaneously *created by* an already given history, culture, biology, and set of traditions, communities, and social relations, which, nevertheless, it is also capable of *creating*, in limited ways, into new meaning specifically and singularly for itself. This tension of human passivity and agency lies, as Ricoeur shows, at the very heart of human moral fallibility and evil. It is somehow original and mysterious. Yet it is also the grounds for the uniquely human possibility for self-transformative renewal. The poetic self is ultimately a paradox and mystery to itself. It cannot form an understanding of how it forms understanding as such. Knowledge, explanation, and even skepticism and deconstruction presuppose a prior capability for *making* meaning of one's world—constructive or destructive—a capability that is itself irreducible to any such meaning. For this reason, the following pages are not "theology" in the classic sense of "reasoning about God" (not that such reasoning may not in some ways be presupposed) but, rather, in a more limited and perhaps also more profound way, the interpretation of religious symbols for the sake of regrasping the mysteries of being morally human. It becomes necessary in the end to speak of the poetic self mythologically, in the mode of radically indecipherable origins.

The notion of selfhood as primordial tension is not altogether alien to contemporary moral thought, but it is greatly obscured. One could think, for example, of the Freudian tension of the ego with the id and the superego, tensions within and between cultural forms, or the political tension of oppressed persons and an oppressing class. But generally speaking, many of the battle lines in contemporary moral reflection are drawn around whether one accepts or rejects the free individual of modernity. On the one hand are those who take it as fundamental that human beings are free self-legislators

(Kant), to be protected in their liberty (Mill), or even needing to strive to rise above the herd (Sartre). On the other hand are those who believe moral life is situated instead in a fundamental human passivity: of traditions, of history, of power, of the Wholly Other, or even before alterity. Without necessarily making judgments about these diverse moral projects in themselves, I argue that this contemporary framing of the debate has made it difficult to understand moral life's tensional, creative dimensions. The multiple ways in which moral selves are indeed passively constituted from without does not preclude—indeed, it demands—their capability for creating, on the very basis of these conditions, their own free sense of meaning in the world. At the same time, moral freedom itself lacks meaning altogether apart from its given constituting conditions. It is this poetic tension of freedom and finitude, agency and passivity—and not one pole of it or the other—that I identify as the moral "self" as such, a self indeed mysterious, tragic, paradoxical, and originary.

Chapter 2 then asks the "teleological" question—at our simplest level of specifically moral inquiry—of what it means to create human goods, ends, or purposes (*teloi*). Here I argue that selves are always already constituted by a wide array of possible goods—historical, biological, psychological, social, and so forth—but that these gain teleological meaning only insofar as the self *narrates* them for itself and in relation to others. Narration here is meant in the sense, not just of following moral stories, but more profoundly of creating them. To have a narrative is implicitly—as least for human beings—also to make, form, and refigure it. And this making capability cannot be reduced to any particular narrative as such, but lies at narration's radically primordial origins.

Here I examine the ways in which ethics and poetics are distinguished and related in both Aristotle and contemporary Aristotelianism, critique these by means of Ricoeur's theories of narrative, and then argue for a tensional relation between *being narrated by* one's social conditions and *narrating* them for oneself. A teleological narrative is not just something one incorporates or adopts, but also something one must create and re-create for oneself, as part of one's very identity as a human being. This poetic teleological capability involves the self in the always fallible formation of its own good, a formation that ultimately depends on a paradoxical human "gift" for creative self-narration and renewal. Insofar as goods are human, they are never just carved into nature or history but always also impossibly possible projects of narrative self-formation.

Consider, for example, the situation of a cancer patient whose health insurance does not cover a promising but expensive new treatment. Apart from a host of other moral issues that may be raised, one is a disproportion between the patient's freedom to pursue a range of options and the personal and social conditions within which these options may find expression. Such conditions might include the needs and desires of her family, the economic constraints placed upon her by her health insurance company, the current state of medical technology, the larger availability of health resources in her society, mores and practices within the medical community, and social and

cultural attitudes toward illness. To a large extent, such a person faces tragic moral tensions. She may not be able to afford the treatments without economically destroying her family; she may be ready to die but not ready to leave her children; she may face issues of social identity and usefulness and balancing comfort and suffering. Still, she must make some choice. And any choice she makes (including the choice not to choose) will inevitably fall short of resolving all the pressing tensions of her situation. She is forced back, in a particularly dramatic way, upon her own root capability for creating a new narrative of her own life, a narrative that is neither independent of her given social historicity nor utterly determined by it, but instead must be invented to some degree as a radically new way forward.

Such impossible situations face each of us, to one extent or another, in every area of our lives. Any pursuit of teleological goods—from humble day-to-day activities to grand life plans and social projects—is not just a matter of yoking freedom to certain goods over others. Nor can it be divorced from its given situation. The constitution of human aims is on the one hand inherently social, historical, traditional, cultural, and biological, and yet on the other the particular and singular responsibility of each self. The good is always already pre-constituted or pre-created by one's larger situation, and yet each self is called to the unique responsibility of creating this situation anew. Furthermore, ethicists who reflect on goods are called likewise to create new senses of teleological possibility. Goods are at once objective and subjective, exterior and interior, involuntary and voluntary. And it is within this tension, not on one side of it or the other, that the good finds meaning and purpose.

The ultimate creative imperative in this teleological dimension (we have not yet moved to the more complex considerations of otherness and power) is to embrace as far as possible the multiple tensions of one's historical life and create new senses of narrative inclusivity among them. The poetic good can be described as a narrative unity of life, not in the sense of cohesion with an already established tradition of goods, but in the more primordial and radical sense of the self's weaving together the fullest possible dimensions of its existence. In fact, each of us falls short of this human good by anxiously clinging to partial goods, sticking with aims with which we have grown comfortable, glossing over self-alienation and fragmentation, following paths of least resistance, losing touch with situated conditions, and generally failing to include in our narrative identities parts of our historical world that are nevertheless importantly constitutive of it. Creation mythology holds out the impossible possibility of a human capability for coherent self-narration as such, in its affirmation of humankind as having primordially been created in the likeness of an all-inclusive Creator. But for us, such an ideal can serve only as an always excessive horizon—an impossible possibility—in tension with which our own fragmented efforts may find ever more vital renewal.

Chapter 3 raises the stakes by asking about what can be called "deontological" responsibilities and obligations (*deon*) toward others in their irreducible otherness. Here moral creativity becomes more complex. I follow certain strands of contemporary Continental ethics to distinguish "the other"

as merely another self following different teleological ends (as, for example, in the Anglo-American deontological ethics of John Rawls) from "the other" in the more radical and genuine sense of irreducibility, alterity, singularity, *différance*, nonsubstitutability. Such an other—the other in its "otherness"—is irreducible to any narrative I may make of it. He or she can appear to me only as exceeding and disrupting any meaning I may give to them as such.

By going back and deconstructing Kant's original deontological reasons for separating ethics from poetics, however, this chapter argues that the demand from others not to be reduced to selfhood does in fact imply a different kind of poetic tension and creativity. The tension is now more complex than that discussed above because it lies not within self-understanding but between self-understanding and the responsibility owed to otherness. Ricoeur can and should be criticized from the point of view of the ethics of alterity, as indeed he is, but he also helps us see that, however other the other may be, the other nevertheless commands a response specifically from the self. This response, I argue, is paradoxically never complete but still required. It can be made only in the mode of open tensionality. This is a different kind of tensionality than that involved in self-narration. It demands from the poetic moral self what I call a "negative" type of creative self-transformation that unravels the self's implicit violence toward otherness. The moral tension here is centrifugal, demanding a creative self-undoing of selfhood and its world in ever more hyperbolic responsiveness to alterity.

Consider what remains perhaps *the* paradigm for the moral problem in Continental moral thought: death camps like Auschwitz. Of the great many ways one may formulate the questions raised by these most horrific of events, one is to follow the Jewish moral thinker Emmanuel Levinas to say that they suggests a violation of the absolute command not to do violence to others *qua* other. What is revealed here is the invisible "face" of the other as absolutely irreducible to any kind of narrative or history whatsoever. My own claim is that here we find a kind of tragic evil: that humanity paradoxically destroys humanity itself. One can identify a profound poetic tension between the demand from (in this case) the Jewish other and the necessity of a response from all selves involved (most of all the Nazis, of course, but also the Allied leaders who had the power to step in, as well as we who live afterward). This tension with alterity is unbreakable, but it is also a call to act, and to act in new and previously unimagined ways. Those who tried to undermine the Nazi program were not simply knocked out of orbit by these others as other; they also made creative human responses to them that were different from the easy lack of responsiveness of those around them. The ordinariness and "banality" of evil, as Hannah Arendt describes it,[5] is met by the extraordinary, the radical, the original, the transformative.

The norm of inclusivity here is of a different kind than the teleological inclusion of historical goods, although, as above, it is also ultimately impossible. It is negative rather than positive. Inclusion of otherness—a paradoxical phrase—means the creative refashioning of one's own world so that the other is *no longer excluded*. Such is ultimately impossible to complete. Nevertheless, creativity is just as much a part of undoing moral meaning as it is of building it up. It is also just as much, if not more, excessive and unending. The tension of other with self requires producing a radically new self. It requires a hyperbolic challenge to accepted understandings and worldviews. This command from the neighbor, the stranger, even the enemy is described in the following pages as a command to love, not in a sentimental or categorical sense, but in the poetic sense of a love for others *qua* other that changes who I am in response to them. This kind of love is eternal, not in being always already present or available, but in calling us to a form of self-renewal that is endless and insatiable. It can be symbolized in the Wholly Other as not only Judge of human violence but also, and even more primordially, Creator of a nonviolent, unalienated world.

Chapter 4 finally takes us to what in my view is the still more complex ethical question of what it means to create social practices in common. Here I explore not individual or relational tensions but social-systemic or ideological tensions between oppressors and oppressed. Here we find some of the most explicit contemporary language of ethical creativity from feminism, discourse ethics, and liberationism, where social marginalization is frequently described as a call for world transformation. Power is such an all-pervasive shaper of our moral lives that it is necessary to imagine transcending social practices and ideals that may offer hope for a better world.

Ricoeur helps us see that this hope for social transformation is fundamentally also a question of the shape and meaning of a society's shared social imagination. Ideology, on Ricoeur's account, is not the raw exercise of power but the inherited horizons of meaning that make society possible in the first place, and as such it requires not overturning so much as constant and radical renewal from the perspectives of alternative possible visions of utopia—"no-places" from which the places we are actually situated may be subject to genuine critical transformation. My own argument is that a more just social order rests at least in part on a new level of human capability for creating its own entrenched world anew. This capability includes both positive and negative (teleological and deontological) elements in the mutual creation of shared life by others with one another. Historical tensions of power may become rendered ever more "inclusive" in the new sense of participated in by absolutely all. As poetic beings, we can hope for the impossible possibility of the "new creation" of our distorted social systems in the direction of human reconciliation of an ever more radical and excessive form.

Take the example of severely poor children, whom we find everywhere from the urban and rural areas of developed countries to vast regions of the southern hemisphere. Thirty-five thousand such children currently die every day from easily preventable diseases and malnutrition. Poor children certainly face teleological issues of narrative self-coherency and deontological problems of being done violence as singular others. But they also suffer from a different kind of tragic breakdown of entire systems of social order, systems precisely on which they cannot help but depend. Child poverty is so widespread in our world today because children cannot compete in the global capitalistic

economy, do not generally have a clear voice in political power, are not always treated as fully "human," and are systematically alienated by growing cultures of individualism and rationalism that obscure their special vulnerability. The evil or broken tension here is that this group depends on the very social systems that in fact oppress and marginalize them. Human beings are social animals and yet inevitably develop social systems that exclude genuine participation by all. Children will continue in this state insofar as each of us fails radically to re-create not just ourselves but also the collective social practices and imaginary spaces in which each of us participates.

This dimension of moral creativity is so poetically complex because it involves both a positive and a negative component at once. Positively, a new social order demands endlessly to be formed. There is no way to live in the world without taking part, from birth onward, in systems of shared language, culture, power, and economics, and these systems are shaped between us no matter how "other" from each other we are. Negatively, however, this social world must constantly be deconstructed from the point of view of those groups it subjects to marginalization. There is an endless need for liberation from social oppression. The result is that moral creativity must be practiced, in this case, by oppressors and oppressed alike, but in different ways. Those who wield power need to see how their own primordial humanity calls them to ever more negatively self-disruptive creative inclusion of social participation by others. Those who are marginalized need to find greater poetic empowerment in the affirmation of a positive original capability for social creativity in themselves. Both are called to a poetics of hope, the impossible possibility for the shared creation of a reconciled human world together. Humanity as an "image" of God can be taken up finally into the mythology of a "kingdom" of God that projects before society its own ultimate possibilities and promise.

A complex and truly meaningful phenomenology of moral creativity is developed only insofar as such diverse dimensions have been plumbed one after the other. The concluding chapter takes up the larger thematic resonances between these preceding inquiries by exploring in detail their three most centrally shared components: tension, capability, and inclusivity. These terms collectively describe moral creativity as a primordial human possibility. Through its multiple tensions of moral finitude and freedom, humanity is ultimately capable of creating its own ever more radically inclusive humanity. The impossible possibility of moral life, from a poetic point of view, is that we may live together as images of our own Creator. That human beings must create is absolutely "original." The ancient quarrel of the ethicists and the poets needs to be challenged so that moral practice and reflection may be revealed and imagined as creative at their core. As suggested by Michelangelo's painting, such a poetic possibility can be reflected in the tension and the gap between ourselves and our own imaged origins. Nothing less, in moral life, is demanded of our very humanity.

I

Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Moral Self

Hamlet comes to the crisis point in Shakespeare's great tragedy when he must decide whether or not to confront his uncle with the crime of regicide, thereby setting himself on a path that risks his own life too. His cry is familiar: "To be, or not to be—that is the question; whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?" He has a choice: to suffer in silence the fortune he has been dealt by his uncle's apparent crime (and in the bargain to lose his future kingship and become alienated from his mother, now his uncle's wife), or to act and expose himself to an unknown and dangerous outcome. The problem is not just the hand that fate has dealt him. The problem is how to respond to it. What is dramatic and tragic is that Hamlet must decide what is to be his own identity: someone who cowers before the injustice of his "outrageous fortune" or someone who opposes it even at the possibility of death.

This chapter asks what it means for the self to be caught up in a finite, unchosen, and often distorted world—which is true in one way or another for all of us—while at the same time also having the capability, in limited ways, to transform this world creatively into a meaningful world for itself. Such a self must risk "not being" as part of the effort "to be." The embrace of what is yet to be formed—what presently *is not*—is part of gaining the possibility for meaning and identity. This embrace includes even the meaning of one's own death. The self is not just "being" as it already exists or as it is thrown into the world, but also the "not being" of the possibilities it may construct. No one escapes *this* fate, the fate of having to embrace non-being in one's effort to be. To be or not to be is not just a question of particular crises but of the strange fragility, density, and dynamics of being human.