

Created for an Uncreated End:

Creation, Createdness, and Transcendence in
Scripture, Plato, Traherne, and Pseudo-Dionysius

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Introduction

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. ... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.¹

Genesis 1:26-27 sets a biblical foundation for understanding God as the Creator—who “in his own image” formed man as the created—and a good one at that, for “everything that he had made ... was very good.” Man’s end is inherent within him: to image God. But by nature of being created, man’s limitations are also inherent. How can such a limited being possess such a high end? Why would a good God create man for an uncreated, eternal end while knowing man is inherently limited to his transient createdness? Plato, Thomas Traherne, and Pseudo-Dionysius offer an answer: reaching a divine, uncreated end necessitates divine, uncreated means in which created human beings ultimately transcend their createdness.

The Good, Eternal Creator and His Good, Created Universe

The first important thinker who addresses this issue of humanity’s limitations and createdness is the Greek philosopher Plato, who puts forth an understanding of creation and its creator in *Timaeus*. In the dialogue, Timaeus rhetorically asks Socrates,

“Now why did he who framed this whole universe of becoming frame it? Let us state the reason why: He was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free of jealousy, *he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible.*”²

¹ Gen. 1:26-28, 31, ESV.

² Plato, *Timaeus*, in *Plato Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 1236 (emphasis added).

Encountering the universe around him and the goodness therein, Timaeus ultimately connects such a created goodness to having its source in its Creator. Therefore, he refers the character of goodness to the uncreated framer of this created universe, with this framing Source who “wanted everything” in creation to image himself and “become as much like himself as possible.”

Timaeus envisions himself inhabiting a world that has been created, and this logically necessitates a Creator. With these connections, his conclusion closely mirrors that of Genesis 1:26-27, which records God creating mankind “in his own image, in the image of God he created him ...”³ Although the biblical account ties the image of God to mankind exclusively, Plato develops a paradigm of imaging that extends the Creator’s intentions of imaging to *all* of creation.

In Timaeus’s account of creation, the perfect Demiurge Creator derives living creation from the Living Thing itself, and—like the God of Christianity at the end of each creation day—this framer

“was well pleased, and in his delight he thought of making it more like its model still. So, as the model was itself an everlasting Living Thing, he set himself to bringing this universe to completion in such a way that it, too, would have that character *to the extent that it was possible*. Now it was the Living Thing’s nature to be eternal, but *it isn’t possible to bestow eternity fully upon anything that is begotten*.”⁴

The Creator desired to make His created universe like its model—an everlasting and eternal Living Thing. The virtue of being a created thing, however, inherently assumes limitations upon such a created universe. Therefore, this begotten universe cannot be eternal. Thus, he sets forth a framework of limitations and capacities to understand all things, such that this Creator, being eternal, has the capacity to beget a universe with eternal characteristics derived from and

³ Gen. 1:26-27, ESV.

⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, 1241 (emphasis added).

mirrored with himself, stopping short of eternity simply by virtue of its createdness. Begotten things can indeed mirror its creator, but its mirroring is limited insofar as it remains a created thing. So far, Plato has established this Demiurge as a good, perfect, and eternal Creator who delights in imaging. Plato's Demiurge creates according to his own character of goodness, perfection, and eternity, bringing all of his creation as closely to "completion" of its own goodness, perfection, and eternity as possible, despite it being a begotten, created thing.

Of all created things, Timaeus records the Demiurge instructing his immortal, albeit created, gods in the creation of mankind:

"It is you, who must turn yourselves to the task of fashioning these living things, as your nature allows. *This will assure their mortality*, and this whole universe will really be a *completed whole*. *Imitate the power I used in causing you to be*. And to the extent that it is fitting for them to possess something that shares our name of 'immortal', something described as divine and ruling within those of them who always consent to follow after justice and after you, I shall begin by sowing that seed, and then hand it over to you. The rest of the task is yours. *Weave what is mortal to what is immortal, fashion and beget living things*. Give them food, cause them to grow, and when they perish, receive them back again"⁵

Indeed, Plato establishes that created things are inherently bound to limitations, but through Timaeus, still asserts that all of creation is insufficient and incomplete without mortal man. This seems paradoxical, that a limited created being—mankind—would be necessary in completing the rest of creation. However, in Plato's account, the Demiurge speaks to the gods he has just created, and tasks them with creating humanity to dispense morality without infringing on immorality sourced from the Demiurge himself. Such mediating of creation does not inhibit the thread of imaging Plato has established since the very beginning of the universe; instead this hierarchy propagates the Demiurge's will for "everything to become as much like himself as

⁵ Plato, *Timaeus*, 1244-1245 (emphasis added).

possible.”⁶ The Demiurge begets created gods, and grants immortality to them; these gods beget mortal man out of their own immortality and createdness, therefore “[weaving] what is mortal to what is immortal.” Thus Plato finds mankind inherently designed as mortals possessing immortal souls that will return to its creator when it perishes. Compare this to the biblical creation account of Genesis. Although the LORD did not create intermediary gods as agents to indirectly create mankind, He did fashion humanity from both mortal and immortal parts—dust and soul—parts created as necessarily interdependent for life itself. While Timaeus identifies a lack within the universe without humanity, the LORD creates humans lastly, seeing everything He had made, and declaring it “very good.”⁷

His Divine, Uncreated Want for His Divine, Created Image

In a movement from Socrates’ intellectual construction of a Demiurge to the divinely revealed God of the Bible, Traherne understands man’s end in imaging God in relation to God’s needs. For “Socrates, perhaps, being an heathen, knew not that all things proceeded from God to man, and by man returned to God: but we that know it must need all things as God doth, that we may receive them with joy, and live in His image.”⁸ Truly to “live in His image” encompasses not only receiving all things that God, the source, has given, but also knowing man “must need all things as God doth.” Traherne marks God’s needs and wants, and builds a robust understanding of His wants from the logic that our wants derive from a divine source. He continues, and writes that God designed man to

... want like Gods, that like Gods we might be satisfied. The heathen Deities wanted nothing and were therefore unhappy, for they had no being.

⁶ Plato, *Timaeus*, 1236.

⁷ Gen. 1:31, ESV.

⁸ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, ed. Michael Martin (Brooklyn, New York: Angelico Press, 2020), §40.

But the Lord God of Israel the Living and True God, was from all Eternity, and from all Eternity wanted like a God. He wanted the communication of His divine essence, and persons to enjoy it. He wanted Worlds, He wanted Spectators, He wanted Joys, He wanted Treasures. He wanted, yet He wanted not, for He had them.⁹

Traherne confirms Plato's hunches that firstly, the created world would be incomplete—of want—without the creation of mankind, and secondly, God created persons in a likeness and of a wanting and satisfaction of His own kind. Traherne preserves these ideas and refines them, ascribing a divine end to the Demiurge's actions and developing a crucial understanding of wanting, especially God's wanting. He understands man's creation as an extension and articulation of God Himself, in magnification and glorification of the Creator. That the creation of mankind essentially completed a want in creation causes Traherne to remark

Want in God is treasure to us. For had there been no need He would not have created the World, nor made us, nor manifested His wisdom, nor exercised His power, nor beautified Eternity, nor prepared the Joys of Heaven. But He wanted Angels and Men, Images, Companions: And these He had from all Eternity.¹⁰

For the sake of satisfying a want, manifesting His wisdom, exercising His power, and beautifying Eternity, He created the World and humanity. Without such a want, creation would be nonexistent. Traherne explicitly identifies creation, especially men, as "images" and "companions" of God, beings that mirror God not only in image, but also in want.

These two are interrelated, that "You must want like a God that you may be satisfied like God. Were you not made in His image? He is infinitely Glorious, because all His wants and supplies are at the same time in His nature from Eternity."¹¹ Here Traherne continues assembling an anatomy of God's wants—that in wanting, man images God in His own wanting. As a result,

⁹ Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, §41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, §42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, §44.

Traherne meditates on man's satisfaction. With a God-like want that stems from God's naturally eternal state, God's image—man—must *want* in a reflective fashion, *eternally* wanting. The only avenue of satisfaction, then, is an eternal satisfaction found in Eternity itself. How is this possible? Where Timaeus instituted a logic of the Eternal creating a thing as much like itself as possible, Traherne carries the baton further and articulates a necessary, active, and everlasting imaging of wants required of creation—especially of creation intended to image an everlasting God. As a created being, however, this raises the question of mankind's limitations in regard to the everlasting. How capable is mankind of eternal wanting and eternal satisfaction if man Himself is not by nature eternal as God is?

The Eternal End to Mankind's Wants in Divine Friendship: the Love of God Himself

To answer this dilemma, Traherne identifies man's eternally-derived want as a wanting of the Deity Himself: the eternal and infinite Creator, source, and—as Plato would see him—Demiurge. Humankind eternally satisfies their eternal wants when they are “present” with these wants and present with the only eternal thing—God. The Deity satisfies infinite wants as He Himself is the infinite Treasure, Traherne writes. Therefore, He not only deserves adoration, admiration, belief, and prizing as such a treasure, but deserves such because He eternally satisfies our eternal wants. Moreover, the Deity as the source of man's image deserves all the more glory, and even joy.

Let all the Kingdoms of the Earth be glad, and let all the Host of Heaven rejoice for He hath made His Image, the likeness of Himself, His own similitude. What creature, what being, what thing more glorious could there be! God from all Eternity was infinitely blessed, and desired to make one infinitely blessed. He was infinite Love, and being lovely in being so, would prepare for Himself a most lovely object. Having studied from all

Eternity, He saw none more lovely than the Image of His Love, His own Similitude.¹²

Traherne's meditations exude a fantastic optimism of man's capacity for infinite blessing in the likeness and similitude of his Creator. His expectations gloss over the aforementioned quandary of an object, albeit lovely like its source, participating almost beyond its createdness to image Love Himself. Traherne exhibits a childlike confidence in man's capacity, and in faith understands likeness and similitude as pure imaging and reflection that brings the God from all Eternity the utmost glory. This brings the man—in this case, Traherne himself—to acknowledge himself, and in the same meditation

see that I am infinitely beloved. For infinite Love hath expressed and pleased itself in creating an infinite object. God is Love, and my Soul is Lovely! God is loving, and His Image amiable. O my Soul these are the foundations of an Eternal Friendship between God and Thee. He is infinitely prone to love, and thou art like Him. He is infinitely lovely and Thou art like Him."¹³

Instead of resting on this tension mentioned previous, Traherne highlights God's infinite love of humanity, being made infinite as He is. God created humans with eternal wants, and designed them to find eternal satisfaction for such wants only in friendship with God Himself, the only eternal one and the only one who eternally wants and is eternally satisfied.

God Himself—being eternal, being wanting, being satisfied, being Love, being the One whom man is imaged after—is the answer to man's eternity that stretches further than mere temporal, transient createdness. This type of

Love has a marvellous property of feeling in another. It can enjoy in another, as well as enjoy Him. Love is an infinite treasure to its object, and its object is so to it. God is Love, and you are His object. You are created to be His Love; and He is yours. ... In Him you feel, in Him you live, and

¹² Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, §67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, §67.

move, and have your being, in Him you are blessed. Whatsoever therefore serveth Him, serveth you and in Him you inherit all things.¹⁴

God created humanity to be His Love and vice versa, thus mankind finds its being in Him alone and no other. Being is founded in Love—the Love of God. Enjoying Him and being His Love requires participation “in Him.” Drawn from Ephesians, “with Him” becomes a refrain uniting mankind to his creator in perfect Love with the quality of “nobility of Divine Friendship! ... And if His will be yours, the accomplishment of it is yours, and the end of all is your perfection. ... Were you not born to have communion with Him? And that cannot be without this heavenly union.”¹⁵ This Divine Friendship is man’s end. It assembles the ultimate “communion” and “heavenly union” necessary for man’s perfection. Such a companionship and friendship does away with loneliness and exclusion in regards to loving God Himself, in loving

God alone[, for] God alone cannot be beloved. He cannot be loved with a finite love, because He is infinite. Were He beloved alone, His love would be limited. He must be loved in all with an illimited love, even in all His doings, in all His friends, in all His creatures. Everywhere in all things thou must meet His love.¹⁶

Traherne calls for an infinite love from man to match God’s infinity. Such a love demands a love of all of Him, of all His creation and all created things that speak of His work from His creating words. Traherne meditates on this love in the sense that love itself is insufficient. The love with which mankind loves an eternal, infinite, illimited God must also be eternal, infinite, and illimited. How can Traherne demand this of man, created and limited? He believes that man’s eternal end designates and empowers his capacity for infinity in his love for the source of infinity itself.

¹⁴ Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, §52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, §72.

Creation's Capacity for a Union with the Uncreated

Traherne expounds on God Himself as the eternal and infinite creator **who** eternally wants and is eternally satisfied. In his understanding of mankind as image-bearers of such a God, he applies these qualities as both means and ends, seemingly quite easily. Pseudo-Dionysius frames this relationship between created man and his uncreated Creator in terms of man's limitations and man's end. Pseudo-Dionysius marries his own language of "proportionate" and "capacity" with that in *Timaeus* of bestowing eternity on a thing begotten. Like Traherne, Pseudo-Dionysius employs the language of "unity" of humankind to God in his answer, but unlike Traherne, he takes one step further, asserting such a union constitutes humankind's "being" or end, itself.

Right from his introduction of *The Divine Names*, he praises the Scripture's work of revelation from the Holy Spirit's "power by which, in a manner surpassing speech and knowledge, we reach a union superior to anything available to us by way of our own abilities or activities in the realm of discourse or of intellect."¹⁷ The power of the Spirit surpasses speech and knowledge, and serves as the means of uniting Christians to God. This union is **superior** to any other union that humans can experience, being beyond words and essentially inexpressible.

Inexpressibility does not necessarily denote inaccessibility, however, for "the things of God are revealed to each mind in proportion to its capacities; and the divine goodness is such that, out of concern for our salvation, *it deals out the immeasurable and infinite in limited measures...*"¹⁸ Although this clearly presupposes that each human mind has its own respective capacities, these limits do not inhibit the power of the Spirit and the revelation of the things of

¹⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, the Aeropagite, "The Divine Names," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49 (emphasis added).

God. Human beings limited in capacity receive revelations of the immeasurable and infinite God in limited measures, being limited in capacity, as Pseudo-Dionysius extrapolates from “the scriptures [in which] the Deity has benevolently taught us that understanding and direct contemplation of itself is inaccessible to beings, since it actually surpasses being.”¹⁹ Scripture is a means of God’s revelation and teaching of Himself. That God teaches us through the scriptures is, in itself, an act of His benevolence towards his creation. As the creator of being, the Deity surpasses being itself. In some senses this is a paradox, that through the direct means of Scripture the Deity teaches us that it cannot be directly understood to “beings, since it actually surpasses being,” but such paradoxes do not discourage Pseudo-Dionysius from gaining a Trahernian confidence that

on the other hand, the Good is not absolutely incommunicable to everything. By itself it generously reveals a firm, transcendent beam, granting enlightenments proportionate to each being, and thereby draws sacred minds upward to its permitted contemplation, to participation and to the state of becoming like it.”²⁰

As the creator and source of all good, as Plato and Traherne have both established as well, the Good itself is not entirely beyond creation’s reach. Created beings, originating from the Good itself, were created with the inherent capacity to receive revelations and “enlightenments” from Scripture and the Holy Spirit to ultimately participate in its source. Being created, however, necessitates a form of metering, as these “enlightenments” are granted “proportionate to each being,” and the contemplation of the things upward must be “permitted” first by the Good.

¹⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 50.

²⁰ Ibid., 50.

The Union of Necessary Denial and Transcendence

With this understanding of an accessible enlightenment and revelation of the Good, permitted by the Good in portions proportionate to each person, Pseudo-Dionysius addresses the tension that Traherne noticed regarding

that unity above being. I say that it surpasses not only the union of things corporeal, but also the union of souls, and even that of minds themselves. These minds purely, supernaturally, and thoroughly possess the godlike and celestial lights, but they do so in a participation proportionate to their participations in the unity which transcends all things.²¹

Proportions of revelation rest on one's participation in this transcendent unity that Christians, though created beings, encounter with the Creator—a “unity above being,” one that continually surpasses their rational understanding. This incapacity to reason with such a unity with their Creator does not inhibit their ability for participation, however. Creation's participation with the Creator is not only possible, but amazingly actual in relation to their participation. That such a participation is possible and active at all trump any perceived diminishment of quality in the metering of participation.

In tandem with Traherne's relentless optimism that created man can indeed rest with uncreated Creator God, Pseudo-Dionysius urges created mankind to “therefore approach that which is beyond all as far as our capacities allow us and ... pass by way of the denial and the transcendence of all things and by way of the cause of all things. God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing.”²² Despite his human limitations, Pseudo-Dionysius boldly speaks of passing into knowledge by denial, transcending createdness to reach the uncreated end. He expands, and exhorts those made in God's image to

²¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 62.

²² *Ibid.*, 108-109 (emphasis added).

... leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. *By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is.*²³

Such a denial demands an abandonment of all ties to human rationality and understanding, to move towards the end. Pseudo-Dionysius establishes an end beyond knowledge: union.

The Union is the End

In this union of the transcendent, eternal, uncreated kind, Pseudo-Dionysius finds humankind's very being and end, **Beauty** and the Good, for

Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things. It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have beauty. And there it is ahead of all as Goal, as the Beloved, as the Cause toward which all things move, since it is the longing for beauty which actually brings them into being. It is a model to which they conform.²⁴

That Pseudo-Dionysius categorizes Beauty as both cause and "Goal" seems at first inconsistent.

But with Beauty, such a unity of serving as both means and end does not denote multiplicity, but unity. This unity expresses Beauty's inherent oneness in stirring all things to itself as a cause, and through its teleological character as the "Goal, as the Beloved ... toward which all things move."

Only Beauty itself can consequently create beautiful beings, a logic that both Plato and Traherne affirm. And such beings, being beautiful, can only exude beauty when it longs for Beauty itself.

This reasoning extends to the **Good**, for "it sends the rays of its undivided goodness to everything with the capacity, such as this may be, to receive it. ... Their longing for the Good

²³ Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names," 135.

²⁴ Ibid., 77.

makes them what they are and confers on them their well-being.”²⁵ Longing for the Good not only constitutes being, but well-being. And consistent with Pseudo-Dionysius’ understanding of created humans’ limits, he assigns such being the Good gives in proportion to each one’s capacity. Thus, both the Good and the Beautiful bring man into being, for being Good, Beauty also constitutes being. Pseudo-Dionysius himself sums the two up, that

... all being drives from, exists in, and is returned toward the Beautiful and the Good. Whatever there is, whatever comes to be, is there and has being on account of the Beautiful and the Good. ... Here is the source of all which transcends every source, here is an ending which transcends completion. ... And so it is that all things must desire, must yearn for, must love, the Beautiful and the Good.²⁶

As derivatives of the Good and the Beautiful, all creation—including rationally limited human beings—longs for its source, to return towards it and find completion and being. Though limited, creation still longs for its unlimited source and end.

The Union Incarnate

To reach this transcendent end of well-being and being itself through the Good, Beautiful, and inexpressible union with the Transcendent Creator Himself—in proportion to each one’s participation in this unity—necessitates a mediator in the context of sin and the possibility of a well-being post-sin and post-Fall. While Pseudo-Dionysius utilizes the incarnation as an example and tool to illustrate the logic of the incarnation that utterly transcends human rationality, Traherne identifies such a mediator in the God-man Himself: Jesus Christ, and desires

... the same be in me that is in Christ Jesus. For he that is not led by the spirit of Christ is none of His. Holy Jesus I admire Thy love unto me also. O that I could see it through all those wounds! O that I could feel it in all those stripes! O that I could hear it in all those groans! O that I could taste it beneath the gall and vinegar! O that I could smell the savour of Thy

²⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

sweet ointments, even in this Golgotha, or place of a skull. I pray Thee teach me first Thy love unto me, and then unto mankind! But in Thy love unto mankind I am beloved.²⁷

In these exclamations, Traherne expresses his want to wholly unite to His Creator through an uncreated being incarnate as a created being—Jesus Christ Himself. It is only through our unity and participation with Jesus Christ, in His sufferings on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, that teaches man to surpass and transcend his transient createdness and Love in all its uncreated infinity.

In the perfectly immortal and mortal God and man, Jesus Christ, does the Creator unite His image-bearing creation to Himself. The ultimate and necessary paradox Himself, Jesus is the divine, uncreated means in which created human beings transcend their createdness through a perfect unity with Him.

²⁷ Traherne, *Meditations*, §63.

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