Relative and Creation

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1. Approach through usages

Like all common words, the term "creation" is ambiguous. It covers various fields, from theology (creation of the world) to particle physics (creation of matter), economics (creation of a business or a position), art (artistic creation) or administration (creation of a file).

All these terms have in common ideas of innovation and origin, which is confirmed by etymology: "to create" comes from the Latin *creare*, to bring forth, to create, to produce, or *crescare*, to arise, to grow, from the Greek root *kore- "to grow," also found in Ceres, the name of the goddess of grain and nourishing cereals (Chantraine, 1983, vol. 1, p. 566). Here, creation belongs to the broad field of nature, borrowed from the plant kingdom and particularly from agriculture, if we can assume that the first representations of humanity derived from georgic activities.

Creating hence means bringing something into existence. But this "coming into existence" can have two modalities. The first entails going from being to being and involves arranging and aggregating existing elements in a new way or in developing them until maturity. Creation is then a process, whether natural or artificial, increasing and transforming the pre-existing into the "newly existing," whether it is physical or moral. This form of creation relates to data that is "already here," and is then processed more or less extensively. The second form of creation entails going from nothing to being, and means, only using the mind's efficiency, inventing and shaping something that has never been seen before. This form of creation requiring no initial condition is thus absolute. It is an ontological thesis: the being comes from the non-being. But it is primarily a theological thesis: identifying a certain type of divine from the defining attribute of the all-mighty making it capable of shaping not from something *ex materia* (i.e. from a pre-existing material submitted to its omniscience) but from nothing (*ab nihilo*, *de nihilo*, *ex nihilo*, depending on the level of radicality one wants to give this efficiency).

2. Challenges and limitations

The idea of absolute creation is in itself absurd, in the proper sense of the word: impossible to be thought of by man, as it is by essence contradictory. Without going into a lengthy theological debate, as specious as intellectually exciting, let's simply point out some impossibilities:

The concept of absolute creation is what Kant called a puzzle. But it nevertheless has such an aura – at least in the cultures of the Book – that it serves as a model to think and justify human production, especially the idea of artistic creation as a miniature version of it. For ease of understanding, we will thereafter use of following typographic code: **C**reation when creation is absolute, and **c**reation when it is relative.

The notion of creation is therefore supposed to tell us about the beginning of all beginnings. It first falls under mythical cosmogonies, these accounts about the foundation of the world which recall the story of heaven and earth to clarify and justify the situation of man within his environment. These accounts are metaphysical in the sense that, on one hand, they assert an original cause and, on the other, they postulate a sequence

of phenomena beyond any possible observation. They put forward an ordered vision of the apparent world founded on beings that are supposed to have shaped it. These principles of advent and explanation are called divinities, whether they are multiple (polytheism), unique (henotheism) or unique but excluding any other (monotheism). The divinity brings order into chaos, differentiates, prioritizes and valorises beings by giving each of them a specific symbolic value.

Myths therefore show us a genealogy. Again, without going into details, let's just put in parallel the concept of Creation, as structured by monotheism, with those of genesis or process.

The concept of genesis, which comes from the Greeks, falls within the *genesis/phtora* or generation/corruption pair, i.e. the study of movement according to substance. Genesis starts from the pre-existing, whether it is chaos, formless matter or a gaping abyss awaiting order and harmony, or *sperma*, a seed that fertilizes and organizes a substance awaiting development. This genesis thus initiates a process that arrives at maturity (*acmè*) before degenerating, while tending, not to non-being, but to its decomposition. While Aristotle admits absolute genesis, which transforms non-being (*mè ontos*) into substance, it is thought in relation to absolute destruction, which transforms the substance (*ousia*) (Aristote, 1969, V, i, 225 a) into non-being (*mè eînai*), Judaism sees Creation as an irreversible ontological advent. Besides, by analyzing the transition from non-being to being, Aristotle comes to the conclusion that no movement is possible within the non-being (*mè on*) since there is no support (*hypokeimenon*) from anything likely to change. Thus, "we also say that there is no generation (*gignesthai*) that comes absolutely from non-being (*ek mè ontos*)" (Aristote, 1969, I, viii, 191 b13). This does not mean that this type of proposal cannot be used in a sense relative to such-and-such subject or state of a subject.

In addition to the metaphysical, physical and logical issues raised by the idea of Creation (how to make intelligible, therefore not absurd, what goes beyond understanding?), it appears as a dogmatically spiritualistic conception. Because, conversely, observation and reasoning point in favour of materialism: everything comes from matter, and by consequence matter is from all eternity. There is therefore no Creation, that is to say that divine state of pure spirit, prior to any matter and of which it would be the origin. According to the Epicurean principle that "nothing comes from nothing," or "all things come from another," the being cannot come from nothing and matter cannot come from a pure spirit, in the same way as the apple does not fall far from the tree and corn does not ripen in winter. Considering that the being comes from nothing is an insurmountable paralogism, as is the fact of saying that matter comes from the mind while affirming the radical heterogeneity of these two substances.

The notion of Creation is therefore relevant only within a monotheistic and spiritual culture. Above all, it implies the exteriority of the creator to its creature. No creation without a creator. In this sense, the idea of self-sufficient nature and of a process of immanent generation ruins the concept of creation. In this, it is of little help in understanding Asian thought patterns, conceiving the advent of beings through the propensity of an energy comprising of complementary poles. These two poles Yin-Yang, do not form an ontological dualism (being against nothingness), but two modes of being. Therefore, it is little more than a Creation, in the sense that an out of the world Spirit would conceive it before undertaking it, and would be the unique and unitary origin of a

secondary duality (being-non-being, light-obscurity, top-bottom, solid-liquid, eternal-mortal). It is, in the words of François Jullien, a "process" without a creator (Jullien, 1989, p. 87-93), where a series of correlates (male-female, hot-cold, hard-soft, etc.) combine, interpenetrate and invert their qualities to produce the constant fluidity of the world or its mobile permanence made of continuous metamorphoses. Therefore, Chinese thought can even afford to do without the concepts of first cause, God and transcendence to favour those of mutation, collaboration and immanence (Jullien, 1989, p. 87-93).

3. In the beginning

Creation, which seems so obvious and indisputable for the civilizations of the Book, [1] therefore results from a history and geography of thought. We do not say this to relativize this notion and denounce its claim to universality, but to test the limits of the human mind when trying to reflect on the origin without trying to fall within the order of events.

The Hebrew Bible does not, strictly speaking, mention creation, but a beginning, *bereshit*, as the sacred text begins with the second letter of the alphabet, bet, therefore meaning that the root itself, the first aleph, goes beyond the speakable and the understanding, what the Koran calls the Unknowable. The transition from Hebrew to Greek results in the genesis. As we have seen, this translation does not provide an equivalent, but a rational reorientation of the relationship between being and non-being.

Let's try to listen to this preliminary proposition: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," or in Hebrew transcribed in Latin letters: *Bereshit bara elohim; et hashamayim ve'et ha'aretz*. Without pretending to undertake an expert exegesis of this preliminary line, let us for clarification sake explore it briefly word for word. *Bereschit*, "in the beginning" is not followed by a complement here, so it is an absolute beginning, without any comparable precedent. This is why André Chouraqui translates it as "Entête" (*La Bible*, 2007).

This is therefore not an indication of time, which could be assigned to a continuous or discontinuous history, but a mere benchmark of postulated caesura, as Creation is not an emanation of the mind, according to what metaphysicians call an emanative cause, but the actualization of a free will by an efficient word, like a magic formula.

Elohim, the plural of *Eloah*, whose root would evoke tremor. God (collective plural) is the Almighty of whom we fear the judgment from above, the One whose perfections are formidable according to monotheism.

Bara: In the singular form [2], this verb means "to sharpen" (for ex. a nib or an arrow), therefore to separate [3], in the sense of shaping, building. It does not imply the absence of any pre-existing material. In the form used here (*kal*, first conjugation), its subject is God and its oblique case is the word that designates the result of the action performed. But when this verb refers to an action exerted on an existing material, it takes another form (*Pihel*, third conjugation, *bere*), and has for its subject a human being, and its oblique case is the material on which the work is carried out.

Schamaim: root denoting elevation, the celestial spaces that superimpose each other, which could be borrowed from the Babylonian myths.

Eretz: land in the geographical and political sense: the one that has borders and is the habitat of a nation (Godet, 1889), and thus differentiates itself from an empty land, the desert (*midbar*) and from the pre-existing fallow amended by the work of man or arable land (*adama*) liveable and as mouldable as the potter's clay (*La Bible*, 2001).

To express God's action on existing matter, the Old Testament also uses other verbs like *bara* (to create), *asa* (to do) or *jatsar* (to shape), words borrowed from the lexicon of artisans. How does one reconcile this with a conception of the Creator as an autonomous, unique and free personality that freely conceives and executes His plan? In fact, one should not forget that The Book of Genesis comprises of two different texts, in addition to quotations borrowed from Babylonian myths. In the story told by the Yahwist, creation is anthropomorphic and based on the trades of the time - potter, well digger, gardener, and builder - but still according to an efficient word. While in the text called the Priestly Source, *bara* is never used to describe a human activity. God is thus sometimes a craftsman who fertilizes a wasteland or transforms a desert into a garden, sometimes the One who orders and fills chaos, sometimes the One who gives orders to the abyss (Bottero, 1986).

In this sense, envisaging absolute creation is done through metaphors borrowed from relative human creation. As in Mesopotamian accounts, the creative act is a modelling originating from the vocabulary of industry and human activity, that does not relate to a specific activity (even if it evokes modelling clay), but nevertheless shows the result of an action (Bottero, 1998). It is clear that one should ask oneself who recounted or wrote the first sentence of the first hypothetical beginnings because it speaks of God in the third person. The author is therefore not the divine himself narrating His creation in the first person ("I am the One who is"), but an unidentified narrator who postulates an unconditional origin of which he/she would be the anonymous spokesperson, and recounts it using anthropomorphic metaphors that make this creation conditional, as it would be in the image of the shaping action made by a human. This account of the beginnings is not even presented as a revelation to a human, as the experience of amazement or as an unusual destiny, as is the case with Abraham, Moses, Mary or Mohammed, but as a kind of anonymous obviousness, therefore requiring to believe it to give it some validity.

The fact is that the great schism introduced by ancient Judaism is therefore to imagine a divinity that is not immanent to the world or, conversely, a world which is an emanation of the divinity. This divine is indeed a Creator, i.e. the One who creates by His word only, a word that thinks and creates something accurately and immediately. The first intention indeed coincides with the correct action. In addition to the performative power of the divine word, the Creator is, contrary to ancient theogonies, the One that is no longer part of the cosmos or its future. Instead, it is an eternal spirit who presides over the future of the cosmos.

4. Nothing at all?

The Book of Genesis does not speak, indeed, of nothingness, but of a hubbub, the desert and the emptiness filled by the divine will, as the gardener irrigates and fertilizes the desert. This cosmological myth gives a reason for being to what exists, an order of appearance to celestial phenomena and a classification of beings that belongs to a thoughtful plan that gives them a situation.

Why must the notion of Creation assume precursory nothingness? Because it involves the coherence of the very concept of a unique God. Indeed, in this inaugural creation, one cannot assume a pre-existent matter, otherwise one would obtain the following scenarios:

- whether chaos appeared by itself, in which case God would simply be the organiser or shaper of the world, which would mean limiting His power, denying His limitless abilities, and would make Him a divinity of lower rank, just an ordinary genie;
- whether the matter has been present for all time, so that this material eternity doubles the divine and therefore also limits it and would allow one to assume whether the need for another god to explain this original matter, thereby denying monotheism, or the uselessness of any concept of God, thereby making atheism possible.

This brings one to postulate a Creation which, starting from nothing material, designs and produces the world. This unprecedented initiative, without any pre-existing material, is portrayed in the Bible: "So I urge you, my child, to look at the sky and the earth. Consider everything you see there, and realize that God made it all from nothing, just as He made the human race' (Maccabees, II, 7-28).

This Creation therefore assumes an intelligent and efficient being which is superior, exterior and inaccessible to the world, therefore transcendent. This first being – *ens originarium* – is called God. As the author of the world, He is the initiator and the master of it; conversely, all the creatures are supposed to depend on Him and be accountable to Him for their existence and circumstances.

In this sense, Spinoza wrote: "creation is an operation in which no causes except an efficient one concur [4]. Or, a created object is one which presupposes for its existence nothing except God" (Spinoza, 1954, p. 286). It conversely involves that one can conceive a radical absence of any being, something that one can only imagine through an exhaustive subtraction of all perceptible things (*nihil privativum*). This originating nothingness, which can be an object of our reason or even our imagination (a blank or black space without any assignable extent), is nothing to our perception, and therefore is beyond any possible experience. That is why any effort of empirical regression to this *punctum originarium* is pointless and infinite. The concept of creation is indeed what Kant calls a transcendental idea: a concept relating not to the data of experience but to the way we conceive the world by reflecting on the limitations and conditions of our knowledge. It helps our reason, without any reference to the sensible world, to put order in our representation of the world (Kant, [1787]1976), especially through the idea of a beginning of the world (the first transcendental antinomy) and, through that, the idea of an absolutely necessary being that initiates a series of changes in the world (fourth antinomy).

5. From absolute to relative

This absolute Creation is certainly a wonderful intellectual machine, but it is based whether on blind faith in this transcendence or on reasoning capable of demonstrating this hypothesis. The evidence of the existence of God [5], which we do not intend to argue or discuss here, has the merit of showing that human reason is able to demonstrate what is supposed to be beyond it, but has never led to any irrefutable conclusion, as Kant so clearly explains in his transcendental dialectics (Kant, [1787]1976). It even forms a statement of principle: God exists because our reason can demonstrate the coherence and necessity of what exceeds our sensibility, and as our reason, which understands the order of the world, cannot be at its origin, it is therefore an absolute and prior reason that structures and designs the world, and therefore that God exists. The sophism lays in obscuring the fact that our reason does not understand much of the order of the world, except when reducing it to a poor outline and taking for granted (a reason for the world) what remains to be demonstrated (a rational world).

Besides, attempts to justify this absolute act of a Creator reverse the evidence, as they are based on a humanization of the divine in His works as an architect, artisan, or watchmaker of the universe. This relative metaphor is then denounced as inadequate or inaccurate. This is therefore a sophism *ad ignorantiam*: instead of making a topic understood, one denounces the ignorance of those who do not understand it.

This Creation, for obvious reasons of political and social prestige, nevertheless remains the paradigm of human creation. This is seen, for example, in the approach chosen by art history, in the propensity to overuse the concept of "groundbreaking", as if each innovative artist brought to life a radical innovation which broke the thread of time, while there are more humble and simple ways to distinguish oneself from one's predecessors while reusing the knowledge they acquired. The French guild of the *Compagnons du Devoir* uses the image of *pas de côté* (a step aside), i.e. to leave the beaten path before taking a step forward to create your own path.

This theological reference gives us various correlates for the concept of creation, which can be identified and applied both to Creator and creator.

What is the extent of human creation? For example, a Neanderthal man could hardly imagine a nuclear submarine. But *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) imagines remote video communication. A man of the Middle Ages would consider a remote control to be a magic wand. This is due to the time scale. Comparing two very distant eras produces an effect of radical technological leap, while comparing two periods close together gives an effect of continuity. But human creations are based on slow accumulated combinations and theoretical and practical principles constantly developed and amended. From cutting flint to splitting the atom, it is the same principle of percussion that produces fire.

Our creations, whatever the field, are therefore related to material, technical and social data. Any human creation always presupposes something else before it. It can therefore only be relative, being a beginning conditioned by other beginnings. Its originality can therefore always be compared to a previous or concomitant work. Even if creators of all kinds praise, from their point of view, the merits of their innovation, and claim its

radicalism, there can always have been a similar or conditional creation before. When reading Pliny the Elder, one can see that, in Ancient history, there were already monochrome paintings and works made from one single delineation. Cinema would be nothing without the optical effects described by Descartes and Plato before him. GPS navigation systems would be nothing without Harrison's clock. The cult for selfless creative works would be nothing without The Instruction of Dua-Kheti (In Sagesses, 2001). The Koran would be nothing without the Pentateuch or the Gospel according to Luke and the Book of Genesis would be nothing without the Babylonian and Egyptian myths.

Human creation therefore has a genealogy that allows one to recognize or disclaim filiations. The relativity of our creations should therefore encourage us to remain measured.

6. Footnotes:

[1] Note that the Koran, especially the first revealed surah, The Heifer, does not suggest any cosmogony, as in The Book of Genesis or in the Gospel According to John. When one speaks of "Creator" (bari', II, 54) it is when quoting Moses. In Surah XVI, The Bees, there is an account of the Creation, but it is very cursory and focused exclusively on the benefits that man can obtain from it. Elsewhere, references to Creation are presented as signs of the divine. In Arabic, many words can be used: *ansa'a* to grow; *bada'a* to establish, to give a beginning to something, *badi* for the Creator of the world, the One that produces something new; *bara'a*, to create, close to Hebrew by its meaning and use, and *bari'* for the Creator; *fatara* for the Creation of Heaven and Earth and *fatir* for the supreme Creator, the One that separates and starts; *khalaqa* for shaping and *Khaliq* for the One who brings things into existence. The notion of original nothingness does not seem to be directly present. Translations consulted: *Le Coran*, 1967 ; *Le Coran*, 1995 ; *Le Coran*, 1999.

[2] The plural subject (*Elohims*) with a verb in the singular form gives rise to exegetical controversies among scholars, but in which we will no get involved here. Let's talk about 'collective plural'.

[3] In Arabic, *fatir*, the Creator, means the One that separates (the Heaven from the Earth). This originating act seems to have been borrowed from the first tablet of the Babylonian epic poem *Enuma Elis*, written in Babylon during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar 1st (1124-1103 BC) and of which copies dating from the first millennium remain.

[4] The efficient cause is the one that causes the transition from power to action.

[5] They are numerous; a priori: ontological or *per notionem*; a posteriori: cosmological or a *contingentia mundi*, physico-teleological, moral (basis for the ideas considering good and justice as possible), aesthetic (to explain the beauty and the harmony of the cosmos).

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