I: Phenomenology of Creation: The Hermeneutic Hypothesis of Genesis 1

Is it possible to experience the dynamic events of the creation of the cosmos? By way of philosophical method, the possibility of experiencing creation invites the adoption of a phenomenological attitude: a principled shift away from the natural attitude of empiricist realism that approaches the origins of the cosmos as a discreet and distant point in time. Setting aside the search for metaphysical causes and empirical evidence, phenomenology turns to the immanent appearance of the world before consciousness. A phenomenological analysis of creation examines how the appearing of the world may provide consciousness with access to events in the creative life of God and the world.

Within the Jewish and Christian tradition, the cosmic account of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4 serves as the classic site for inquiries into the creation of the world and into God as its creator. Rather than stipulate the theological doctrine of creation or presuppose the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, the present study approaches the Genesis account as a hermeneutic hypothesis, whose meaningful possibility and truth are to be adjudicated phenomenologically. As such, the current essay engages the biblical text as a hermeneutic point of entry into the possibility of experiencing the divine creation of the world. A hermeneutic deployment of phenomenology offers a potential avenue of access and inquiry into creation. In what ways is the measured unfolding of the cosmos, the irruption of the divine voice, and even the agitated waters of the void open to conscious experience? The selection of Genesis 1 aims to correct a scholarly imbalance in contemporary phenomenological engagement with the Bible, which has privileged the New Testament. The present engagement with the Torah may perhaps inspire increased phenomenological research in the Hebrew Scriptures. As there remains much to be done in the

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2 There are other significant descriptions of God’s creative activity in the Bible, e.g. Genesis 2-3, Job 38-39, Psalm 8, 104, 148. The current analysis should thus not be mistaken for a comprehensive or balanced theology of creation, which would require far more than the analysis of one biblical passage.

development and application of phenomenological methods to the Bible, the analysis that follows stands as a trial of method as much as an exposition of creation. At the level of method, the essay illustrates how the application of phenomenology to the Bible generates a critical and method-driven interpretation of Scripture as the meaningful expression of lived experience. Concerning inquiry into creation, it shows the literary and phenomenological privilege that the Genesis creation gives to life, so as to commend the question of life—how is there life rather than barrenness?—alongside ontological inquiries into the being of creation—why is there something rather than nothing? The phenomenological results of the study establish the ecological phenomenality of creation: God’s creative activity may be encountered across a set of ecological passions and phenomena, which disclose the flourishing and potential desolation of the environmental life of the world before God. Creation becomes manifest before consciousness in and for the ecological life of the world.

II: In the Beginning: The Void

“The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). The Genesis story depicts the original site of God’s creative activity as neither within Godself nor within the cosmos. Rather, creation begins with the formless void of the earth: a wasteland devoid of order and life. It is not “a general emptiness, but a lack of form and structure, and more specifically a lack of those realities that make the world beneficial for life.” The imagery of wasteland and watery depths suggest something utterly inhospitable to life, lacking in any inherent potential for life.

Whether there was something existing in the beginning other than God does not seem to bother the Priestly author, for the writer is clear about what must be regarded as the decisive matter concerning creation—life rather than being. Whatever may be said of the primordial existence and being of the earth and of the watery depths, there was in this original site of creation neither life nor the structural and material possibility of life, and this is the point. Creation must be understood first and foremost as the genesis of life, of the living and the

4 Adam Wells’ The Manifest and the Revealed (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018) may be the first systematic attempt to develop such a method. Jean-Louis Chrétien’s Under the Gaze of the Bible (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), Kevin Hart’s Kingdoms of God (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), and the essays in Phenomenologies of Scripture, ed. Adam Wells (Fordham University Press, 2017) also offer thematic and methodological direction, though they continue the virtually exclusive application of phenomenology to New Testament texts.

5 The essay does not presume to establish or stipulate the phenomenological privilege of life over metaphysics and being. The scope of such a thesis far outstrips the philosophical analysis of one significant religious text. However, the essay does offer sufficient reason and evidence to hypothesize a significant field of philosophical and religious inquiry and phenomena that opens before questions of life and living more readily than through inquiries into first principles and causes or being and beings.

6 As for Godself, Genesis lends little support to the rational speculations of Christian Neoplatonists, Molinists, and Leibnizians of various stripes, all of whom have attempted to trace essential aspects of creation to eternal ideas in the mind of God. As for the cosmos, whatever may or may not have existed in the beginning, it is clear that there is no order and thus no cosmos (world-order) when God begins to create.

7 Biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad explains, the Hebrew “Bohu is a noun (always connected with tohu) which means emptiness, desolation. Tohu is connected more with the concept of the wilderness or even with the wilderness itself” Genesis: A Commentary, trans. John h. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 50.

8 Mark S. Smith, Priestly Vision of Genesis I (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 50.
structures that support life, and not as the ontological genesis of being and beings. If one is to attempt a phenomenology of creation, it must likewise unfold as a phenomenology of life and the living, and not one that unfolds from question of being or the being of beings.

Across the barrenness of the void, the wind-breath of God’s Spirit sweeps desolation aside, so as to speak order and life upon the sterile face of the earth. The creation of an ordered and life-abundant cosmos does not however annihilate the abyss, so much as it conceals and marginalizes it.

Thus this second verse [of Genesis] speaks not only of a reality that once existed in a preprimeval period but also of a possibility that always exists. Man has always suspected that behind all creation lies the abyss of formlessness; that all creation is always ready to sink into the abyss of the formless; that the chaos, therefore, signifies simply the threat to everything created.  

At the hidden margins of the cosmos, there remains a barren disorder, into which there is always the possibility of descending once more. The possibility of descending anew opens a potential avenue for the return of the abyss to the center of not only creation, but also the conscious experience of creation.

I will suggest that the biblical description of the void takes on meaning and appearance at the level of the affective passions of thought. Beneath the surface of representational consciousness, the ceaseless surge and ebb of the passions course across consciousness. It is the force of these passions that empower and enervate conscious life in the world. The passionate subject lives, moves, and apprehends the givens of life, according to the bearings and force of the passions: joy, sorrow, anxiety, rage, hunger, boredom, nihilism, and eros. These passions comprise the immanent yet ecstatic modalities of one, who without possibility of substitution assumes the pronominal posture of the first person: I, me. The passions I feel establish me as a living and conscious force in the world. The passions are experiences of power, power one feels within oneself (immanence), power that propels one in the direction of contact and potential engagement with that which is beyond itself (ecstatic). Contact is the immanent yet ecstatic aim of the passions. The passions propel the contact and the withdrawal that constitutes our primary consciousness of life in the world.

The void is consequently not an empirical something to behold, but rather a way of feeling the life of the world slip away from one’s touch. The void arrives through the enervation

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9 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 50-51: “…This suspicion has been a constant temptation for his faith. Verse 2 teaches one to understand the marvel of creation, therefore, from the viewpoint of its negation; thus it speaks first of the formless and the abysmal out of which God’s will lifted creation and above which it holds it unceasingly. For the cosmos stands permanently in need of this supporting Creator’s will.”

10 These passions are immanent to the *ego* affected and internally constituted by them. Following Michel Henry, the passions are auto-affective, meaning they are not to be understood as secondary epiphenomenal effects of external material stimuli. Rather, the passions are the primary and irreducible phenomena in and through which my passionate experience of myself enables me to experience the things and persons of the world. See I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 95, 104-105. Pace Henry’s emphasis on the pathos and auto-affective interiority of the passions, I propose an emphasis on the power and the auto-affective ecstasy of the passions, such that 1) the impassioned one is not only transformed beyond its essential faculties, but also experiences itself as power to transform beyond its essential potential, and 2) the passions are not inwardly directed to the impassioned, but rather toward an embrace of contact and engagement with the excess of phenomenal givenness that surrounds the impassioned in the world.
and eventual collapse of one’s passionate contact with the primary embrace of the life of the world. The void is not a visible phenomenon, an object that appears or disappears from the world. It is a desolating passion that overturns one’s ecstatic apprehension of life in the world. The passion of desolation visits upon the conscious subject an entropic sense of powerlessness across the appearance of the surrounding world. Desolation opens the subject to feel more than the engaged receptivity of its conscious modes of dwelling can appropriate and bear. It inflects the apprehension of life with an unsurpassable and unbearable sense of powerlessness and futility, such that the subject can no longer maintain a resolute posture of openness and engagement toward the possibilities or actualities manifested by life in the world. The manifestation of worldly possibilities slips ever so slowly out of the grasps and engagements of the desolate subject. It is not that the world disappears from view. Rather, what fades is the ecstatic drive for contact with the world of the living. As the world continues to appear, the desolate subject is ever more faced with an awareness of passionate impotence and fatigue. One feels the embrace of life slip right through one’s thoughts and desires. Desolation weakens the conscious embrace of living on the earth.

Desolation disengages the subject from the world as a whole. It is true that no one ever experiences the “whole” of cosmic life. Desolation, however, contracts and encloses the open horizon of cosmic life into the whole of one’s own desolation, which is ever slipping away under the inner force of profound feelings of impotence and fatigue. Desolation produces a phenomenological contraction, which leaves me de-solate, alone insofar as I am rendered nauseous and exhausted by the ceaseless caress of the living upon me, by the sights and smells of the creatures, environments, and others that ceaselessly impress themselves upon me. The contraction through which the void enters consciousness is not the result of a method-based reduction; it is an eventuality of the passions that cannot be forced or anticipated. Desolation reveals the original depth of impotent barrenness from which life is created. Absent the movements of the divine breath sweeping over one’s desolation, it is difficult to imagine a way to find the embrace of life anew.

III: By the Light of Day: The Temporal Horizon of Creation

“Let there be light, and there was light...God called the light day” (Gen. 1:3,5). The phenomenality of creation begins with time-consciousness. Time appears as the first of God’s creations, and phenomenological analysis shows how time functions as the first and primary environment for the appearance and order of creation. The distinctive temporality of creation – the day – provides the constitutive framework for the appearance of the whole of creation, including the Sabbath.

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1 In this sense, the desolation that opens out of the void may well be described as a kind of saturated phenomenon (Marion), albeit one whose excess of givenness deprives more than it bestows. See Jean-Luc Marion, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), §21.

12 Heidegger’s analysis of anxiety and nothingness in What is metaphysics? served as a model for desolation and for resolving the problem of accessing the world as a whole and detaching from it across the void. See Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 99, 101-102.

It is easy to overlook the creation of time as day. The repetition of “day” in the phrase, “and there was evening and there was morning, the first day…the [second, third…] day,” directs one’s attention toward its established recurrence and away from its initial appearance. However, tucked after the dramatic appearance of the light, “Let there be light,” one finds the naming of the light: “God called the light day.” The light of creation is the time of day, and this day is a recurrent phenomenon. What then are the temporal contours of the day?

The appearance of life in Genesis is not instantaneous, occurring in the briefest of moments, and this is good news for consciousness. Whether one is recalling the events of the day or anticipating what today may bring, the mind gathers the temporal contours of a day with relative ease: the possibilities, actualities, limits, and events of the day. The day does not suffer from the elusiveness of the instant, whose passage through consciousness the mind seems unable to pin down. As the day extends beyond the instant into the future and past, it is clear that the day is bounded, limiting the possibilities of what can appear on any given day. The recurrence of the day allows for the gradual unfolding of appearances beyond the present day. Whether one thinks of a day past, present, or future, the contours of the day remain finite in duration and recurrence. Before consciousness, the day is neither instantaneous nor infinite, neither indefinite nor eternally recurring. The day presents a recurrent, bounded, and finite field for events that give life and appearance to the world.

The day of creation is not governed by affective disposition nor conscious engagement. It is not determined by one’s mood – boredom, anxiety, fun – nor by what one meaningfully makes of the given day. The day is given, however one may experience it, whether or not one takes advantage of its possibilities. Consciousness of the original givenness of time is affected and modified by the markers through which one registers and experiences the passage of time. Anyone who has been unable to stop looking at the clock has experienced the fascinating plasticity of time-consciousness. The awareness of time is directed, released, and measurable by the particular form of demarcation that brings time to mind. In Genesis, it is the sun, moon, and stars that mark the time that God has given. Astronomical bodies mark the time of day. Neither the passions nor the human being have the capacity to exert any form of control over the temporal markers of the day and night. The temporal rhythm of the day is thus a dynamic, original, and immutable element of cosmic architecture within the order of creation.

The time of day extends beyond its celestial appearance, as the recurrence of the day extends across the creation as a whole. The sea, the sky, and the land are all given to appear, host life, and give meaning within the temporal horizon of the day. The temporality of day establishes the constitutive framework for the appearance, environment, and meaning of each and every subsequent aspect of the creation. Time is not only the first creation; it is the primary horizon of creation. The time of day belongs to the creation and pervades the rest of the creation, as a fundamental condition of its appearance and life. The Genesis text ascribes appearance, world, and meaning to the day. These are not the literary marks of a purely symbolic device. They are the constitutive elements of created phenomenon. Though fundamentalist interpretations of Genesis suffer from the limits of their naïve realism, there are phenomenological reasons to stake

14 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI.
15 The finite recurrence of the day in *Genesis* thus differs from an infinite or indefinite recurrence of days without end, including the eternal recurrence of the same, which the biblical book of Ecclesiastes seems to ascribe to the earth, seas, and all that exists under the sun.
out a constitutive understanding of the temporality of day, as it concerns the appearance of creation before consciousness.\(^{16}\)

IV: The Six Days of Creation: An Eco-phenomenology of the Living World

“Let the earth put forth vegetation…of every kind… the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures…of every kind…living creatures of every kind…wild animals…of every kind” (Gen. 1:11, 20-21, 24). Genesis portrays the creation of a life-abundant cosmos or world-order. The world God creates is an ecological order, namely an assembly of distinct environments fit for the generation, habitation, and flourishing of an immense diversity of living species.

The daily division of God’s creative activity brings this ecological order to light. Focusing first on the interconnectedness of appearance and order, the text describes a symmetrical and two-tiered order at work across the six days. The first three days describe the creation of uninhabited environments, which contain everything required to support the life and movements of potential inhabitants. These are the sky, seas, earth, and day and night; these habitats or environments constitute the first tier of the created order. The second tier consists of the creation of inhabitants for these habitats on days four, five, and six. The symmetry and fitness between habitat and inhabitant is striking. The creation of day and night on the first day opens an environment for astral creatures – sun, moon, and stars – on the fourth day. The sky that God opens on the second day creates an environment for the creatures that fly through the sky, which arrive on the fourth day. Similarly, the seas gathered on the third day become the milieu for the creatures that swim on the fifth day, and likewise the land that God seeds with vegetation becomes on the sixth day the proper environment for all species of terrestrial life, including humankind.

God populates the previously uninhabited environments with the multiplicity of living creatures fit to thrive within that particular habitat. These tailored habitats are filled with a multitude of differing species, not simply a multitude of living creatures, signifying the rich and complex biodiversity working at the level of ecosystems. The temporal sequence of creation from the first to the sixth day signifies this ordered correlation of habitats and inhabitants, and the structural primacy of the habitat over the inhabitant. The worldly order of the world is thus one of habitation or dwelling. God creates dwellings. These dwellings are habitats that support the life and proliferation of the inhabitants that have been created to thrive within these environments.

Genesis does not speak to the creation of a “universe” in the modern sense of the word – a totality of energy and matter across the vast, lifeless dimensions of space and time. Rather, God creates environments, which the German word Umwelten helpfully conceives as surrounding

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\(^{16}\) If one may be allowed to cast a passing glance at the American evangelical hornets’ nest of the seven days of creation, the day-to-day temporality of creation offers a far more accessible, concrete, and intelligible form of time-consciousness than the evolutionary time-frame of the megaannum (Ma) or the gigaannum (Ga), namely the millions and billions of years across which paleontology marks the appearance of life. By no means does this imply that a phenomenology of Genesis supports the fundamentalist dogma of creation in seven actual days some six thousand years ago. The phenomenological reduction of the natural attitude discards with the naïve realism of any such claims at the outset. Yet, it does suggest that consciousness of creation may be more readily accessible within the commonplace time-consciousness of a day than the scientific consciousness of an eon.
worlds. In Genesis, an environment constitutes life in its embedded fitness, diversity, and abundant fecundity, constituted for the generative life of the living creatures that inhabit the given environment. God does not create a uniform world, but rather creates a diversified assembly of ecological dwellings. A phenomenology of creation privileges the appearance of creation across the ecological ensemble of environments that make up the living world.

The cosmic paradigm of the environment borrows from Heidegger’s ontological analysis of the world as environment. The principal difference between the created environment and the ontological environment concerns the role that humans in their existence (Da-sein) play in the phenomenal constitution of its environment. The Genesis text suggests that it is possible to constitute the appearance of an environment without reference to the existence of humans. The interdependent and biodiverse community of non-human flora and fauna determine the manifest scope and constitution of a given surrounding world. Genesis discloses how living environments are constituted by the ecological fitness and biodiversity of the non-human life that inhabits these environments.

By way of divine command, God directs these environments and inhabitants to proliferate an abundance of life—“be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:22), independent of human existence in the world. These habitats are divinely regarded as good, again independent of humanity. In their appearance and meaning, environments are neither a resource nor a correlate of human care and utility. To access the ecological phenomenality of a non-human environment, however, one must suspend the anthropic constitution of consciousness. It is an invitation to be conscious of one’s environment independent of structures of consciousness that coordinate the appearance of the surrounding world with human ways of being in the world. As the problem at hand belongs to the order of consciousness, it calls for a phenomenological resolution. What is required is a way to bracket out the primacy of human consciousness, in such a way that there remains a site of consciousness that can apprehend the non-human environment. Genesis not only mentions such a site, it establishes it as a refrain that echoes through the entirety of the creation story.

V: The Joyful Witness of Creation: A Phenomenology of Divine Consciousness

“And God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:10, cf. 4, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The conscious apprehension of the goodness of creation is announced on every day of creation with the

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17 For Heidegger, the lived experience of a surrounding world is inextricably constituted via existence or Da-sein, the way of being of the human being, in relation to whom there is a surrounding world at all. In other words, when we speak of environments, we are always already speaking of the environments that surround human being-in-the-world. The anthropocentrism operative in the Heideggerian account of environments deepens all the more as his existential analytic progresses, for the appearance and meaning of a surrounding world presents itself as the potential utility of a network of things for the human being that discloses the world in its useful (or uncanny) familiarity. See Being and Time, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996) § 15, 18.

18 My lived experience of the surrounding world inextricably corresponds to the care with which human beings engage and discover things in their environment. For Heidegger, care structures the meaning and appearance of the environment partially in terms of utility (“in order to…”). It is not that one simply finds useful things within the surrounding world; rather, the surrounding world as a whole is lived and experienced as a system of interconnected utility for human beings. An environment is fundamentally experienced as useful for human being-in-the-world. This is by far the most problematic aspect of Heidegger’s phenomenology of the world as environment. See Being and Time, §17-18, 41.
exception of the second day. God witnesses the manifest goodness of the created world. Within a phenomenological frame, consciousness of the goodness of creation takes the form of a recurring event of witness and manifestation. The goodness of creation appears across a particular mode of consciousness: seeing the good. Yet, it is divine consciousness, rather than human consciousness, that sees the good. Is there then a way for human consciousness to access the divine witness of the good in creation? A way forward would indicate that humans could see the goodness of the living world apart from human ways of seeing and valuing. It would be an experience of the goodness that God sees, when God looks upon the ecological life of the non-human world.

Let us begin with a sketch of the divine witness of the good in creation. Phenomenological reduction approaches “seeing” as a mode of conscious apprehension. To say that God sees creation as good signifies that God witnesses the goodness of the creation, insofar as the creation displays its goodness before God. Creation discloses its goodness and thus goodness appears as an immanent dimension of the created world.

Reframing the Augustinian distinction of use and enjoyment, one could say that the immanent goodness of creation invites enjoyment rather than use. God enjoys creation, insofar as God approaches creation for its own sake, and not for the sake of something else. God enjoys seeing the creation for the way it lives the life it has been given. Seeing the good can thus be regarded as joyful witness. One can imagine the cello teacher who enjoys seeing her pupil perform Vivaldi’s Cello Concerto in C for the sake of the dynamic beauty that unfolds from the student in vivo. In the same manner, God enjoys the creation for the sake of the live and dynamic generation of life that unfolds in the world. As God sees it, the emerging and procreative life of the world is good and to be enjoyed and thus loved for its own sake.

The joyful witness of creation preserves the intrinsic goodness found in the Augustinian concept of enjoyment, specifically the notion that what is enjoyed is approached for its own sake. It calls into question the view that God alone is to be enjoyed, or that only God can serve as the proper and blissful end for things within the created order. The joyful witness of creation opens the possibility that God enjoys something other than Godself, specifically that God enjoys the creation in itself. Assuming the traditional ascription of the supremacy of goodness to the Creator, the possibility of God enjoying the goodness of creation for the sake of creation implies a non-competitive and liberating relation between the goodness of creatures and that of God.

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19 In discussing “seeing,” we are engaged in a phenomenological, rather than empirical, analysis of perception. An empirical analysis of perception would have to take into consideration the necessary physical constituents of an eye, optic nerve, brain, and the biochemical and neural processes that play a role within visual perception among animals, none of which give any sense to the saying that “God sees.” However, this is far from our concern, not only because “seeing” is to be understood as a robust semantic metaphor for conscious apprehension, but also because our concern is with the meaning, events, and formal structures to be uncovered from within the manifest frame of what and how something appears before consciousness.

20 For Augustine, enjoyment consisted of loving something for its own sake, whereas use consisted of loving something for the sake of something else. See Teaching Christianity: De Doctrina Christiana, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press), Bk. 1, 114.

21 Ibid., 114-115.

22 Use and enjoyment are conceived by Augustine as modes of love, and from beginning to end, the discussion of use and enjoyment centers on the appropriate way to love God and neighbor. There is notably no discussion about the appropriate way to love the rest of creation beyond the human neighbor. While this lacuna is easily explained, in that he is explicating the two-fold essence of the law and prophets that Jesus presents in Matthew 22, it reveals a significant lacuna. Augustine, Teaching Christianity, 114-123.
Is it possible then for humans to “see” the goodness of the creation, as God sees it, as a joyful witness of abundant life? As with the void, it is the passions, specifically joy, that open the goodness of creation before consciousness.

Divine joy for the life of the world opens at the affective level of the passions. The phenomenal intersection of life, passion, and divine revelation builds on the influential work of phenomenologist Michel Henry. For Henry, phenomenology is about life, specifically the affective or passionate (pathetique) self-revelation of life. Life is auto-affection: the immanent passionate experience of oneself, whether in joy, sorrow, anger, or boredom. To experience this intimate and personal passion of life, one must displace the apparent exteriority of the world and enter into the interior passion of life. It is in the secret of my affections beyond the exteriority of the world that I can find life – my own life and the life of the living God.²³ Henry’s passionate reduction to life calls for the exclusion of the world from the phenomena of life. He deprives the world of passion and flesh and life. His exclusion presents significant problems for a phenomenology of creation that privileges the life of the world and God’s joyful witness of the living world. His denial of life to the world is deeply misguided, insofar as it promotes the destructive and intellectually unsatisfying mechanism that Henry himself opposed when speaking about the life of human beings.²⁴

Though the grasses and animals of the meadow may lack any personal ipseity, an I or self, Genesis makes it clear that the animals that fill the sky, land, and seas are living, breathing creatures (nephesh) that abound with the sentient pathos of life – flesh – immanently enlivening the creaturely flesh into responsive and generative contact with their surrounding world. The fruitful thriving and multiplication of living creatures – what amounts to the living of organisms – cannot be properly represented through the mechanistic categories of efficient causality.²⁵ In the hungry animal, the deprivation of the flesh is itself a pathos of desire – an auto-affection opening into passionate hetero-affection – spurring the animal into responsive engagement with its environment. Even non-sentient life – the soil, trees, air, and food on which all creatures depend – live in an embedded and interlacing pathos of responsive generation with the living creatures of flesh that such environmental elements support. A phenomenal reading of Genesis commends the extension of life and passion and flesh not only to the inhabitation of the ecological cosmos but also to God as transcendent witness of the goodness of creation.

God’s joy over creation is a pathos embracing the generative and sentient pathos of created life – a divine auto-affection opening in passionate hetero-affection – for the multiplicity of living species and environments that together form the world. It is the joy of witnessing the thriving of living organisms independent of one’s own life and self-consciousness. The living pulse of ecological life is given to be felt in the passionate embrace of flesh without reference to

²³ Henry, *I am the Truth*, 95, 97: “In self-affection, what affects me is no longer anything foreign or external to me who am affected, and consequently no object belonging to the world or the world itself” (105).

²⁴ Henry, *I am the Truth*, 42, 45-46, 48. Moreover, I follow Henry on the following theses: 1) the possibility of employing phenomenology to access and describe the divine life, in our case the divine consciousness of creation, 2) the phenomenological primacy of life and living over consciousness (Husserl), being (Heidegger), and responsibility (Levinas), such that the appearance of life manifests the truth to which all other forms of manifestation are beholden, and 3) that one manifests one’s innermost self in the interior affective experience of the flesh.

²⁵ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §81. Kant, however, remains committed to understanding the organism within the causal frame of teleology, albeit an inner and critical teleology, as opposed to the passionate account presented here.
self-consciousness or self-concern. The peculiarity and privilege of divine consciousness, at least as it relates to the living world, is its detachment from anything resembling a self. Divine consciousness apprehends the creation without concern or even joy for Godself and in doing so releases the perception of natural life into the living rhythms of its own immanent habitation. This two-fold release enables one to apprehend non-human life 1) in its radical otherness from self-concern and self-consciousness, and 2) in its immanent fitness for its own living, both of which together constitute 3) the inherent goodness of the creation that God enjoys. It is the good that one experiences in witnessing the freedom and thriving of a living organism. It is perhaps the sense of satisfaction or contentment that a conservationist derives from reintroducing an organism into the wild with the knowledge that it is capable of thriving on its own. To witness the responsive power of life that God has granted the non-human world is to behold the goodness of creation, as God sees it.

VI: Imago dei: Ecological Care

“Let us create humankind in our image…and let them have dominion…over every living thing” (Gen. 1:26,28). The human being is created to occupy a unique role in the environments that surround its existence. However, there is nothing in the distinctive privilege afforded to human beings that overturns the non-human manifestation of life as ecological flourishing. As discussed, God joyfully apprehends this ecological order as good no fewer than five times before the installation of human beings as divinely inflected rulers of the living world. Notwithstanding the ecological goodness of non-human life, the creation of the human being introduces a significant tension between the ecological transcendence of humanity and the immanent flourishing of non-human life.

The text describes rather insistently – three times in two contiguous verses! – how God creates humanity in the image and likeness of God. The divine image constitutes the appearance of humanity on the scene of creation. It ordains a discontinuity in the life and power of human beings relative to the life and power of the rest of the created world. Though created, humans transcend the rest of the created world. Just as God the creator transcends the world, so too the human transcends the world in some fundamental aspect of its life and constitution. Specifically, the human transcends the world, insofar as it images and reflects the God who is the transcendent giver of life and of cosmic order in all of its goodness. How then is the human qua created inextricably connected to the created environments that precede it? What phenomenological sense should one give the two expressions of transcendence that Genesis 1:26-28 confer on humanity: 1) the image of God, and 2) power and authority over the living creatures of the world?

Phenomenologically, to say that the human is created “in the image and likeness of God” is to say that it is created to manifest the appearance of the divine. The human is created as a privileged site for the manifestation of God – a privilege to be found in its transcendence. Divine transcendence becomes manifest through the human manifestation of transcendence. By contrast, non-human life reveals the order and goodness of creation in the immanence of its flourishing and the immanent joy it brings the creator. The answer to the question of cur deus homo? – why does God take on human form? – extends further back than the soteriological needs of humanity after the Fall or of the people of God after centuries of political and spiritual alienation under foreign gods and empires. As a phenomenal doctrine, the manifestation of God in human form –
incarnation – belongs to the original order of creation and life. From the beginning, God has
disclosed Godself in and through the transcendence of humanity in the life of the world.

The text goes on to explicate the human appearance of divine transcendence in terms of
dominion and governance over non-human life within the created order (Gen. 1:26, 28). The
transcendent manifestation of the God-human forms a dialectic, as the text connects divine
transcendence to embedded care for the living world. Humanity reveals the transcendent life of
God through embedded care for the environments that constitute the created order. The human
discloses God in the exercise of dominion over the surrounding worlds of non-human life. It is
care for the world – ecological care – that establishes human activity as the manifestation of
divine transcendence.

Care images and reflects the truth of God’s life-giving dominion over the cosmos. Human
care for the living manifests and brings into the realm of conscious experience the creative
activity of God. Ecological care reveals the creative activity of God: the provision and ordering
of creatures and environments so as to promote their immanent potential for ecological
flourishing. This is the distinctive privilege of the human in the order of creation: in its life-
giving dominion and influence over the environments and creatures of the world, the human
functions as the manifestation and witness of God’s creative activity. Ecological dominion, the
care that images and renders visible the creative activity of God, gives life, sustains life, and
promotes the flourishing of life in all its biodiversity. The giving of life to the world and the
manifestation of God as transcendent life-giver are woven together to form the imago dei.

The phenomenal connection between the image of God and ecological care is a
dialectical one. The human disposition to care for the world arises out of its ecological
transcendence. The human steps back from the created order into the manifestation of divine
transcendence. This step marks the phenomenological release of the human from the finite
horizon of the world, allowing human existence to enter a transcendent horizon of meaning and
living that is able to image God within its lived experience. This broader, transcendent horizon of
phenomenality is not a mystical manifestation of a celestial world “behind the scenes”
(Nietzsche), nor is it intended for “the contemplation of eternal truth” (Augustine). In direct
contrast to Augustine, the image of God enters consciousness first and foremost in humans’
“management of temporal affairs.” 26 The human in its divine and phenomenal transcendence is
directed to govern the created order in a way that manifests an image and reflection of the divine
power that gives life and order to the cosmos in all of its goodness. To the extent that humanity
manifests the divine life by taking care of the world, its life finds itself constituted “out” of step
with the living of the rest of the created order. The care of humanity for its world is not a
function of its being part of the living world or being in the world. Care for the world is a
function of manifesting the life of God, who transcends the world and yet gives life and rejoices
over it.

The divine transcendence of human life is manifest through caring for the world. This
care for the world takes place in and through the world as the primary site of human dwelling

made to the image of God, that its activity as a kind of rational life is divided between the contemplation of eternal
truth and the management of temporal affairs…With this division of roles however, that part alone is rightly said to
be the image of God which clings in contemplation to the unchangeable Truth.”
and origin. Humans are created in the world, in order to dwell in the world, and they are created to govern for the life of the world. And yet, humanity does not belong to the manifest truth of the world; it belongs to the manifest truth of God, that is, it belongs to the image of God. To be created in the image of God releases the meaning and life of the human from the mortal horizon of concern for its finitude (being-toward-death), and thus releases the human into transcendent and divine horizon of care for the life of the world. This is the properly phenomenological conception of being created in the image of God: to experience and give meaning to life from the open horizon of God’s manifest and creative care for the living. As the manifestation of God’s creative activity, as imago dei, ecological care constitutes the divine horizon of human power and authority on behalf of the life of the world.

VII: Sabbath: The Temporal Passivity of the Day of Days

“God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation” (Gen. 2: 3). As one comes to the final moment of creation – God’s holy rest on the seventh day – the text invites the reader to regard the seventh day as the consummate moment in the temporal unfolding of creation. Genesis 1 elevates the meaning and reality of Sabbath beyond the social and liturgical life of Israel into the very fabric of the creation of the heavens and the earth, and even further into the life of God. The Sabbath takes on cosmic and protological significance, and it is this Sabbath, exceeding Israelite ritual and religion, that concerns the phenomenologist of creation.27 In his reflections on Sabbath, Rabbi Heschel explains how God’s rest on the seventh day completes the creation by altering the very nature of time and reconstituting God’s relation to the cosmos. “Things do not change on that day. There is only a difference in the dimension of time, in the relation of the universe to God. The Sabbath…completed the creation.”28 What insights and access does phenomenology open before these new contours of creation: Sabbath temporality, God and the cosmos, and the consummation of creation? How does Sabbath consciousness manifest the life of God and creation in a new way?

As Heschel suggests, the phenomenological significance of Sabbath is to be found in time and temporality. As the creation begins, so it comes to completion, with the giving and opening of time and day. In dividing the creation into seven days, the Genesis narrative invites its readers to reflect on the particular “architecture of time” (Heschel) that structures the appearance of the created order and of God’s relationship to the creation. Time is the phenomenal structure that runs through every moment in the creation, from the appearance of the first light to the hallowed rest of God. Only the void and the sweeping breath of God – dimensions that precede creation – find their meaning beyond any temporal order. When on the Sabbath God steps back from the giving and appearing of creation to render the world whole, time remains. God and time: these are the only two phenomena that course through every aspect of the created order.

The Sabbath marks a significant shift in the temporal consciousness of creation. As soon as the creation narrative opens unto the seventh day, the reader is suddenly inundated with the

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27 One can see this re-aligning and appropriation of the Mosaic Sabbath into the story of creation explicitly in Exodus 20:11, where the Mosaic command to observe the Sabbath is justified by reference to God’s own rest after the creation of the world.

emphatic iteration of the seventh day no fewer than five times in two verses. In fact, every clause and substantive element of the Sabbath—finishing, resting, hallowing, and blessing—is directly attached to “the seventh day” or its pronoun. This shift of temporal emphasis and expression is dramatic, suggesting that the events of creation on the seventh day unfold in a different way than on the first six days. At its core, the shift is one from recurrent activity to recurrent passivity.  

The temporal light of day is no longer a time for creative activity. By the light of the seventh day, time opens to manifest the creative passivity of God. The Sabbath opens a temporal horizon for the meaningful appearance of various forms of divine passivity—consummation, rest, blessing, hallowing—rather than a horizon that conditions the appearance of divine activity.

The passivity of the Sabbath reframes the relationship of the living cosmos to God. In finishing or consummating the work of creation, God steps back from the temporal activity of creating the cosmos. God withdraws from all God has actively accomplished in the world and rests. For the first time in the unfolding of the created order, it becomes possible to regard the cosmos as whole and complete, for it has not been possible to regard the world as complete, as long as God was actively presenting and ordering the inner-worldly furnishings and environments of the created order. In like manner, it is not possible for humans to have a conscious awareness of the world as whole and complete, as long as they remain active and attentive to the ordering and governing of the inner-worldly constitution of the living world. An awareness of the world as a whole requires not only a conscious step out of the world, which already transpires for humans in their sovereign imaging of God over the living world, it also requires a shift into the passive rest of God. It is moments of radical separation (hallowing) and withdrawal from activity, passive moments of transcendent rest, that enable consciousness to experience the world and its creatures as whole. In these moments of divine passivity, the work of cosmogenesis reaches its consummate expression. Rest becomes an occasion to become aware of the consummate expression of the creation of life and of the world.

The shift into Sabbath affects not only the appearance of the world, it also affects the appearance of God, as the Sabbath marks a new and previously undisclosed horizon for the appearing of God relative to the created order. The appearance of God at rest signifies one more way in which God transcends the life of the world and the activity of human beings. In the passivity of rest, God appears as something other than the active and ceaseless ground of being and life in the world. The appearance of the world as whole and complete coincides with the appearance of a God who dwells otherwise than the transcendent and active ground of cosmic life. In other words, the consummate appearance of the world paradoxically coincides with the disappearance of God as the active ground of life for the world. By entering, or perhaps returning, into the temporal horizon of transcendent rest—the seventh day—God transcends the metaphysical function and activity of first cause of creation.

29 In different ways, phenomenologists Emmanuel Levinas and Michel Henry have both argued for the primacy of a certain kind of passivity, a pathos, an undergoing, that radically precedes or transcends activity, the noetic activity of consciousness as much as the ontological activity of being. See Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 54-56 and Henry, I am the Truth, 97. In both of their accounts, this passivity is experienced as a passion or affection that one undergoes but cannot contain or domesticate. For Levinas, this passive affection is a passionate sense of responsibility that neither consciousness nor reality can temper. For Henry, on the other hand, these passive affections can take place in sorrow, joy, and in any other number of passions that he ultimately identifies as the passions of life. However, it is Henry that goes the further step of inscribing pathos into the very life of God. See Henry, I am the Truth, especially chapters four and five.
At the end of the day, or rather from the beginning of this unique day, the radical transcendence and difference of God may be witnessed in and through the lived experience of a radical rest that restructures time itself into moments for withdrawal from the ecological fecundity of life and from the responsibility of transcendent care for the created order. This divine (and potentially human) withdrawal into transcendent rest expands the scene of creation beyond any ecological cosmos or human cosmos. The creation opens into the lived experience of the divine rest of God, and in this rest comes into its created fullness. One Jewish tradition remarks: “What was created on the seventh day? Tranquility, serenity, peace, and repose.” A phenomenological interpretation of the seventh day signifies a creative passivity in time that allows for the passion of divine, world-consummating shalom.

VIII: The Phenomenal Ecology of Creation

The phenomenological analysis of Genesis 1 discloses the profoundly ecological manifestation of creation. Creation manifests itself to consciousness in the passionate vitality and desolation of the ecosystems that constitute the ecological order of the cosmos. God’s creative movements appear from within living environments that teem with biodiversity, environmental fitness, and generative impulse. The appearance of these flourishing ecosystems is the primary form of creation on display in Genesis. The ecological phenomenality of this fertile cosmos differs radically from the vast and principally lifeless totality of matter and energy that contemporary culture and science names the cosmos. The creation of the cosmos becomes manifest in the flourishing of the ecological order of life.

The ecological manifestation of creation extends beyond the immanent flourishing of life into the transcendent vocation of humanity as divine image and sovereign over the natural world. The human images the divine through its ecological care for the living world. Care for the environments of the living world reveals precisely the creative activity of God in the world. Such care reveals the provision and ordering of creatures and environments so as to promote their immanent potential for ecological flourishing. The image of God is life-giving, sustains life, and promotes the flourishing of life in all its biodiversity. Such is the ecological and divine vocation of human being: to reveal God as the giver of life by way of transcendent care for non-human life. Far from imaging the divine, human intelligence and ways of life have sadly obfuscated and rendered unintelligible the authentic manifestation of God by way of its transcendent and powerful indifference and carelessness for the life of the world. Human reasoning and ways of being must be properly pre-disposed to care for the natural world. Such an ecological disposition requires a radical suspension of the anthropocentric tendencies of humanity. Transcendent delight in the inherent goodness of the created order passionately disposes humanity away from itself, as it steps into the way that God sees and enjoys the goodness of creation for the sake of its flourishing.

Within our current ecological crisis, calls for environmental concern are often born of prophetic anxiety over the degradation of human and non-human environments. It is the anxiety that comes from witnessing species and their supporting environments slide ever closer to the inhospitable barrenness of the void. It is my hope that this anxious ecological care may be complemented and strengthened by the joyous and divine witness of the immanent and

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flourishing power of natural life, especially by communities who have seen as God sees, and have given themselves over to manifest the creative power and life of God in ecological care for the living world in all of its environments. It is my further hope that we may begin to approach Genesis 1 as an ancient and sacred ecology – a description of the created world as the dwellings that God has brought forth for the appearance and flourishing of life in the fullness of its biodiversity – and that under the methodological guidance of phenomenology, we may begin to access and witness the unfolding activity and signification of creation within lived experience.

Insofar as the phenomena of creation manifest the divine genesis of life and living in the world, there is an invitation to shift away from the ontological question – why is there something rather than nothing? – and open a new line of inquiry that centers on the flourishing of life rather than being – how is there life rather than barrenness?