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NATURE GOOD AND EVIL
A THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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In general I agree with Hefner's theological view on nature. The framework of his approach to nature is praxis-oriented. This is in line with his main work The Human Factor¹ with the thesis: human beings are created co-creators. Moreover, he regards the relation between human beings and nature as a communion. In spite of my agreement in general with Hefner's view, I have some comments on its elaboration. My main objection is his too optimistic view on nature. The title of his conference-paper is: Nature Good and evil: A Theological Sketch, but he is speaking only about evil in passing. In his book The Human Factor he is calling natural evil the falsifier of his theory of man as a created co-creator. In the preliminary of his conference-paper he refers to his article on natural evil and says "that God is not yet finished with nature, and that divine providence will unravel the contradictions that are noted". Has this statement to be explained in line with Hick's theodicy which he endorses in The Human Factor and the mentioned article on natural evil?² I would like to discuss three questions. Firstly the issue of nature as creation, secondly the problem of natural evil and thirdly nature as a communion.

1. Nature as creation: the counterworld

How can we view nature as Gods creation? This issue is important with regard to the question of whether the christian idea of nature conditioned by the nature of God, as Hefner asks, "can continue to interpret our experience of nature today adequately". Hefner speaks about nature as a gift. He is right to distinguish the Christian idea of creation out of nothing from Plato's second grounding element of nature, pre-existent chaos, but I miss in his theological view on nature as a gift the element of the dark counterworld. Creation out of nothing means only that creation is an action of God alone. The question - is creation either out of nothing or of something - is not raised in the creation story of Genesis itself. The dilemma for P, the author of Genesis 1, is creation or formlessness. "The earth was

¹ P. Hefner, The Human Factor, Evolution, Culture, and Religion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

² The Human Factor, 44; Hefner, "Natural evil: The Continuing Theological Challenge", in: Word & World Supplement Series, 4, 2000, 119.

formless (tohu) and empty (bohu), darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters ..." (Genesis 1:1). In Hefner I miss a distinction between creation and nature. In the Genesis-story (and in other parts of the Bible) there is always an awareness of an opposing world. In God's good creation the counterworld is a constant threat, present in droughts, earthquakes, floods, miscarriages and disease. The threatening chaos is discussed when in creation God separates light from darkness. Only the light is called good (Gen1:4). The night is a reminder of the darkness of chaos eliminated. Because of God there is a limit to the threatening power of chaos, of primeval flood and the darkness. Thus the Genesis story articulates the experience of many people of the ambiguity of nature and Gods limit to the dark counterworld. When it is right to acknowledge the chaos element in God's good creation, then in my opinion Hefner's comparison of the creation with a gift is too strong. This image misses the ambivalence of world and nature which is becoming Gods creation. Do refer all events, all things to God? I don't believe that everything in nature speaks of the goodness of God. There is a counterworld, therefore we must distinguish between nature and creation.

I will give two other options than the view of nature as a gift. The first one is Tillich's proposal to view nature in God. As far as the counterworld is concerned, Tillich holds that this cannot be seen apart from God. He points to the Protestant mysticism of Boehme and Schelling, who pose the question of how God as pure spirit can bring forth nature. The answer of Protestant mysticism is: He can do it only *if he has a nature within himself*. This mysticism thus speaks of a mysterious nature in God: God is not an abstract Spirit without nature but a spirit that stands in a vital, tension-filled union with nature in itself. This expresses, according to Tillich, the divinity of the ground of nature (*Naturgrund*). The divine ground of nature is not only the creative but also the destructive principle, not only divine but also demonic. In all places where nature does not achieve union with the Spirit it is demonic. Thus this mysticism also sees nature as terrifying, dark, melancholy, as the place of fear and torment.³

Tillich elaborated on this *doctrine of the nature in God* in his dissertation in connection with Schelling and retained it as a basis for his own doctrine of God. He views God as a unity of being and contradiction. Thus he writes in his *Systematic Theology*: "If God is called the living God, if he is the ground of the creative processes of life, if history has significance for him, if there is no negative principle in addition to him which could account for evil and sin, how can one avoid positing a dialectical negativity in God himself?"⁴ Greek philosophy held that nothing originates from nothing (*de nihilo nihil fit*). There must have been something like eternal matter out of which God made the world. Plato called this the principle of indeterminacy. But can monotheism recognize two principles? Early Christian theology held to a creation *ex nihilo* and thus rejected the second principle. Nevertheless, the

³ "Nature and Geist im Protestantismus" in: P. Albrecht (ed.), *Gesammelte Werken* (- GS), vol. XIII, 100. On this see H. Jahr, "Tillich's Theologie der Natur als Theologie der Versöhnung von Geist und Natur," in: *Natural Theology versus Theology of Nature?* Ed. G. Hummel (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1994), 156-83.

⁴ P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (London: J. Nisbet & Co., Ltd., 1986), I, 210.

second principle of matter (*me on*) continued to survive, viewed as the nidus of evil in the Christian tradition. Tillich places, as indicated by the quote, the negative dialectical principle in God. It concerns a dialectical negativity in which negativity or non-being is a *negative dialectical principle* that we encounter as an abyss, as the ontological shock and as the stigma of our own finitude.⁵ Thus God is both the abyss as well as the loving God who overcomes evil. There is a contradiction that has been overcome in the being of God. That is the difference between God and the world of human beings and nature in which evil has not (yet) been overcome. Tillich holds that the positive side of the mystery—that includes the negative—is revealed in Christ and the work of the Spirit. God thus works as the Power of (New) Being, conquering natural evil.

With his view of nature in God Tillich gives another view on the relation of God the Creator and the world than the view of nature as a gift. Is it convincing? Tillich's stance raises objections. According to Tillich, the divine life *is* creative and realizes itself in an exhaustible fullness. God's being is creative and shows itself to us as a negative and positive mystery. Evil is thus very directly linked to God. If one shares Tillich's view of nature in God, then one receives the impression of natural evil in creation as an emanation, a coming forth from God. Evil as chaos is, after all, both a (conquered) part of God as well as destructively present in the world of human beings and nature. Although Tillich would want to deny that—God reveals himself primarily as a power for salvation—it seems difficult to avoid the notion of God as a split being. I'll give yet another option which differs from Hefner's image of nature as a gift. Kierkegaard remarks on God's omnipotence and evil as following. Characteristic for omnipotence is that it recognizes true freedom and therefore tolerates something independent alongside itself. It is precisely this that is strange for human practices of power which always include the element of the other as dependent. God's omnipotence does indeed tolerate something independent alongside himself and therefore it is his goodness, for goodness means: "to give absolutely, yet in such a way that by taking oneself back one makes the recipient independent."⁶ God creates, in a free decision, a world that is independent of him. That obtains for both nature as well as human beings. This means that existing natural evil is logically implied in God's choice for a creation that is independent of him. This view concurs with the view of the natural sciences of an emergent universe that includes probabilistic processes that lay the basis for a free and creative acting. It also concurs with Hefner's issue of freedom as arising from nature. This way of viewing the relation of God and creation gives room for our experience of the world of nature as ambivalent.

2. Teleology and natural evil

2.1. Hefner's teleological view of nature

In *The Human Factor* Hefner gives a teleological interpretation of evolution. The human being is created by God to be a co-creator in creation for which God establishes goals. The process of evolution is God's process of bringing forth a creature which represents a more complex phase of the zone of freedom of creation and which is therefore crucial for the origination of a free creation. There is thus a teleology with respect to the bringing forth of the human being in the process of evolution. But there is also a problem: does natural selection not contradict this? Empirical observation does not reveal end in any direct way. And, further, this process is full of injustice and pain, without respect of persons. It is this that

⁵ For a more extensive treatment see W. Stoker, "Can the God of the Philosophers and the God of Abraham be Reconciled?" in: *Being versus Word in Paul Tillich's Theology*, ed. G. Hummel and D. Lax (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1999), 206-24.

⁶ *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. and intro. By Alexander Dru (New York, 1958), 113.

poses the problem of theodicy.

Hefner attempts to respond to the first objection with his theory of the human co-creator: the freedom that characterizes the created co-creator and his culture is an instrument God uses to have creation participate in the intentional fulfillment of God's purposes.⁷ God's purposes are not only that the creation will freely acknowledge its creator and fulfill the will of the creator in freedom, but also that the human being as co-creator will help build a future that is wholesome for all of nature.⁸

How does Hefner deal with the problem of natural evil? Given his accent on human freedom that has arisen because of the process of evolution, he justifies evil by means of an elaboration on the 'free will defence'.⁹ If humans are to choose freely, it is logically inevitable that they also have the possibility of choosing evil. The free will defence is primarily concerned with moral evil but not with natural evil, which is the issue here. Therefore it must be developed further to a theodicy in which natural evil is justified. That has been done among others by Hick. Hefner endorses Hick's theodicy in his *The Human Factor*.¹⁰ He holds with Hick that evil is inevitable in the evolutionary process in connection with the origination of human freedom and personhood.¹¹ I will look at Hick's theodicy of natural evil.

2.2 Natural Evil and Theoretical Theodicy

A creation with free human beings implies not only the possibility of moral evil, according to Hick, God also allows natural evil precisely in connection with human freedom. Hick proposes the following:¹² 1. It is the divine intention to create perfect, finite beings in a personal relation with their creator. 2. Because we can enter *freely* into a relation with God and can freely choose between good and evil, it is logically impossible for human beings to be created immediately into this perfect state of a personal relationship with God. 3. Therefore the human being is created via the process of evolution as a spiritually and morally immature being as a part of a world that is both religiously ambiguous as well as ethically challenging for good moral acts. 4. Moral and natural evil are necessary aspects for the current stage of the process in which God creates perfect finite persons via a gradual development. 5. The process of 'person-making' is completed only when all people have a perfect relationship with their creator.

Without discussing them extensively, we will raise the following objections:

1. The justification of natural evil lies in that it occurs for the greater good (human freedom). Natural evil is defended here on the basis of its service to an end. Natural evil exists for the sake of something else: the human choice between good and evil and its consequences. But does every evil have such a reason to exist? Does this answer to the question of why truly explain the reality of evil? Questions like these strengthen the following objection. 2. Does an *excess* of natural evil not outweigh the good (human free choice) that it serves? The following objection coheres closely with this. 3. Is evil not discussed *in an abstract way*? Someone who has been affected by serious natural evil will not be convinced by Hick's argument of the inevitability of the reality of natural evil.

In short, God places us in a dangerous world with natural evil in which mutual care and

⁷ Hefner, *Human Factor*, 265.

⁸ Hefner, *Human Factor*, 43f., 264.

⁹ For this see also the contribution by Keith Ward in the conference volume, 87.

¹⁰ See note 2. In the discussion at the conference Hefner exercises more restraint concerning Hick's theodicy. Anyway, apart from Hefner's attitude, the issue is important to discuss.

¹¹ Hefner, *Human Factor*, 271.

¹² J. Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy," in: *Encountering Evil*, ed. S.T. Davies (Atlanta: Westminster/John Knox Press)

love can arise. Within such a world we are on the way to the Realm of God in which all people live in a loving relationship with God. Hick emphasizes the *eschatological* dimension. The process of evolution and natural evil are assessed from the perspective of an alleged perfect end. Hefner considers this eschatological dimension indispensable for the justification of natural evil.¹³ Hick (and Hefner) thus provide(s) a *theistic teleology* in which insight in the whole from the beginning to the completion of the world is given.

The teleological argument is used here in two ways: as the argument of natural evil as a means for serving the greater good of freedom and of the 'person-making' of the human being and also from the perspective of the whole of creation, and the final state of the Realm of God. It would require too much space and time to go into the issue of how this final situation is represented. I will limit myself to the question of the validity of the use of a theistic teleology concerning the justification of natural evil. This use of teleology is, in my view, problematic.

2.3 A Teleological Explanation of Natural Evil is Problematic

I will first say something about teleology in general. As is well known, since the modern period a teleological view of nature has been both disputed as well as defended.¹⁴ If a causal explanation of nature is the only one that has any validity, the question as to the purpose of our knowledge of nature would vanish. Empirical facts could no longer be connected to the ultimate meaning of the facts in the way in which Hefner does that in *The Human Factor*. Mental processes ask for an explanation of values, according to Keith Ward. That is why they defend a teleological view of nature: a teleological explanation of nature as a complement to the causal explanation of nature.

A teleological view of human beings and nature can be defended on the following grounds:

1. The human being does not live by scientific knowledge alone but also by "successful contact with values that transcend him" (De Dijn). In addition to science there is also religion, the attribution of meaning and worldviews. A religion as the christian religion claims to state how things really are. I will later show that teleology must be more closely specified if it is intended to provide answers to questions of meaning and the attribution of meaning.
2. A causal explanation always stands in the context of the action of the researcher in question. Causality cannot be conceived, according to the thesis of the so-called interventionist theory of causality, without a teleological moment. This entails that every causal interpretation of an event presumes that we actively—whether in fact or mentally—influence event A, change it and then establish (or consider) what happens with B.¹⁵
3. The ecological crisis requires a different approach from a one-sided causal explanation of nature which has given rise to much violence against nature. Hefner gives such an approach in his *The Human Factor*.
4. A theological reason is that speaking of God's purpose for the creation is given in the Christian view of creation.

We should understand that the teleological view of nature is of a different order than the causal. It does not entail prediction and is given *a posteriori* or as a draft of a future development. It rests on the interest of reason. That can be a theoretical interest, which we see in Ward. Ward provides us with a teleological metaphysics. It can also be of practical interest. That is the case with Hefner's theory of the

¹³ Hefner, *The Human Factor*, p. 43: "The conditioning matrix that is constituted by evolutionary processes is understood by Christians faith, however, not simply in terms of what it has been and is now, but in terms of what it can become, and what it can become in the light of God's intentions."

¹⁴ R. Spaemann, R.Löw, *Die Frage Wozu? Geschichte und Wiederentdeckung des teleologischen Denkens* (Munich/Zurich: Serie Piper Band 748).

¹⁵ Spaemann/Löw, *Die Frage wozu?*, 245f.

created co-creator.

To acknowledge the justification of a teleological view of nature as Hefner proposes in *The Human Factor* does not, in my view, imply that natural evil needs to be justified within this scheme. I consider that to be problematic.

The question of (natural) evil is a question that belongs to the area of the attribution of meaning. The attribution of meaning is the interpretation of existence as such, successful contact with values that transcend us. Insights into fundamental questions such as that of natural evil play a role in this. Evil can, after all, so overwhelm us that the contact with transcendent values fails. We then bid God and perhaps life farewell. I wish to state that questions of meaning, such as that of natural evil are *existential questions*, questions that have to do with an interest in *attributing of meaning*. That is an interest, as I have defended elsewhere, that must be distinguished from the theoretical and the practical interest, even if it is connected to them.¹⁶ With regard to ascription of meaning one often speaks in terms of purposes, but what is meant? A distinction can be made between *external teleology*, something that is a means for something else, something is good or of value for something else, and *internal teleology*, something as an end in itself, something (relatively) unconditional, something good or of value in itself. In the interest of the attribution of meaning the concern is primarily internal teleology: something is good or of value in itself. If such contact with something good in it self succeeds, then one can speak of an experience of meaning. It concerns matters that are ends in themselves, values such as love, justice, the enjoyment of art, of striving to be God's co-creator. Where the attribution of meaning is spoken of in terms of means and ends, it often concerns the pseudo attribution of meaning. A relation is not a true relation in which the other is seen only as a means to an end, for example, entering into marriage in order to acquire the other's inheritance after his death. We can actively position ourselves over against something of value outside ourselves, but whenever we use that as a means to an end, then we do not recognize that in an experience of meaning we have to do with something that is (relatively) unconditional.

In short, the attribution of meaning concerns successful contact with values or ends in themselves that transcend us and not an external teleology, a means/end relation. I will show this by means of the question of meaning into the why of natural evil. Such a question can in my view not be answered by external teleology.

Let us look, for example, at Hick's theodicy. He portrays the development in the world of humans and nature as a road that leads to the perfect end. The adversities experienced while underway are responded to by the remark that they are means to an end. Natural evil is ascribed value (*sic*) in connection with our soul-making and with the final end of our journey. Thus the meaning of life is discussed in terms of means and ends. The attribution of meaning is viewed in terms of a chain of reference.¹⁷ The final whole, the perfect state is the ultimate justification for the reality of natural evil under which people now suffer. Thus insights into the questions of life overshoot their goal in connection with the meaning of life.

Let me give another explanation of the image of the road. This leads, for the Christian, certainly somewhere, but the stages along the road are not only a means to the end. Each stage on the road has its end in itself, its meaning in itself. A mountain path reveals panoramas at every step that are worthwhile in themselves regardless of the fact of whether the path leads to the top. The issue is that natural evil affects people precisely in their experience of meaning on a certain stage of the journey of life and then insights about evil as a means to an end do not suffice. The reason is that the attribution of meaning has to do with internal teleology and not external teleology. The present stage of the road can be its meaning, its

¹⁶ W. Stoker, *Is the Quest for Meaning the Quest for God?* The Religious Ascription of Meaning in Relation to the Secular Ascription of Meaning (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), 11f.

¹⁷ See Stoker, *Is the Quest for Meaning the Quest for God?*, 81v.; 170-174.

value in losing itself because of an excess of natural evil. I will add two more objections to this.

From a shocking experience with (natural) evil questions emerge that have more the character of a protest than that of a search for insight. Job came to a renewed contact with values that transcended him not through a teleological rationalization but through the recognition of the character of mystery that evil has. The reality of natural evil is recognized in Scripture. Sometimes Scripture makes a connection between moral evil and natural evil (Genesis 3) and sometimes provides no reason for the reality of natural evil, as in the wisdom of Ecclesiastes and Job. Dysteleological natural evil and suffering also exists. This view stands perpendicular to a functionalist reasoning regarding evil such as: if we do not understand unruly reality, then we need to understand that it is a stage on the road to an all comprehensive whole, the perfect end. But there are seeds that die and do not bear any fruit. There is something that does not square in this reality. The absurd is a category of life.

Finally, by referring as Hick does to creation as a whole, to the supposed perfect end of morally perfect people in a personal relation with God, one claims to have *insight into the whole*. This theodicy posits the acceptance of natural evil *for the sake* of an end that is hoped for. Natural evil is viewed as a means for person-making, a process that is only completed at the end. As far as this insight into the whole is concerned, God poses the following question to Job:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
Tell me, if you understand. (38:4)
Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth?
Tell me, if you know all this. (38:18)

"God's design", remarks Ricoeur about Job's newly acquired insights into evil, "is removed from any transcription in terms of a plan or a program; in short, of finality and teleology. What is revealed is the possibility of hope in spite of ... This possibility may still be expressed in terms of a design, but of an unassignable design, a design which is God's secret."¹⁸

In short, insights into questions of meaning such as that of natural evil are not adequately answered by means of the means/end response. The attribution and experience of meaning concern primarily internal teleology rather than external teleology. In addition, with such an answer we ignore the fact that there is also pointless natural evil. Moreover, human knowledge is limited and we do not have insight into the details of God's plan for this world.

3. God, man and nature as a communion

Serious experiences of natural evil invoke questions that do not have the character of a search for insight in which teleology can be of help. The why question concerning evil has the character of a protest. The adequate answer is the struggle against evil. Therefore I will argue for a practical theodicy, in which I will indicate how God is involved in the process of evolution and natural evil without *wanting and being able to answer the why question of natural evil*. Kierkegaard's remark on omnipotence and evil (see above) requires

supplementation. A God who only tolerates something independent alongside himself could also be a deistic God who withdraws himself from the world after a creation in the beginning. Therefore this supplement with respect to the way in which God, according to a Christian theology, is involved in the evolutionary process with its natural evil.

Prigogine points in connection with the 'thermodynamics of life' to dissipative

¹⁸ P. Ricoeur, "Towards a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation", in P. Ricoeur, *Essays of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A.S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 87.

structures (structures dissipatives).¹⁹ According to the second law of thermodynamics we live in a universe in which differences in energy are more and more being levelled. Everything tends towards entropy, the loss of order. Nevertheless, evolution goes in precisely the other direction: not towards chaos but towards order. There are phenomena which appear in open systems, of physical, chemical or biological nature, which remain far removed from the state of balance. Evolution chooses the way of the improbable. The local vulnerable increase in order is possible only if use is made of the all-ruling entropy. It concerns a dissipative structure. The continuing existence of that structure go together with dissipation or with increasing disorder elsewhere in the system. Plants make use of the increasing entropy in their environment and in their own existence suppress entropy. Every order appears to have to be fought for. Thus the title of the English translation of Prigogines' book, *Order out of Chaos*.

If I interpret these scientific facts theologically, then I see nature in its ambiguity of an order that goes against the stream of disorder. There is a opposite side to order. Only if I see the shadow side, can I, with De Boer, see a reflection in the evolutionary process of a divine strategy that, as Paul says, "makes its strength perfect in weakness".²⁰ The human being is the fellow-sufferer of nature. With plants and animals we experience the fleeting victory over the powers of disintegration. Like Hefner and Tillich, I also emphasize the communion of nature and human beings.²¹ Therefore, redemption is not only a matter of the human being alone but of the human being and nature. Human beings and nature are each other's fellow-sufferers. Tillich states in a sermon: "The tragedy of nature is bound to the tragedy of man, as the salvation of nature is dependent on the salvation of man ... man and nature belong together in their created glory, in their tragedy and in their salvation."²² Because the human being is a creature of nature, the redemption through Christ, the true man, obtains also for nature: "Therefore, Jesus is called the Son of Man, the man from above, the true man in whom the forces of separation and tragedy are overcome, not only in mankind but also in the universe. For there is no salvation of nature, for man is in nature and nature is in man."

¹⁹ I am making use of J. van der Veken, *Een kosmos om in te leven* (Kapellen/Kampen, 1990), 40f. See also T. de Boer, *De God van de filosofen* ('s Gravenhage: Meinema, 1989), 88-94.

²⁰ De Boer, *De God van de filosofen*, 94.

²¹ Tillich comes to this communion of human beings and nature on the basis of Idealism's philosophy of identity and Hefner on the basis of the facts of the natural sciences.

²² For this and the following quote see P. Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), 89.

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