

Cosmology and Morality: *The Scientific Captivity of Creation and Beyond* | BY DAVID LARSON

The Biblical idea of creation languishes in scientific captivity. This is a preoccupation with how it relates to the findings of disciplines such as geology, biology, and physical anthropology. The assumption seems to be that debates about origins are the only things that matter. The results are the outcomes of all imprisonment: narrowness, darkness, and lethal boredom.

In what follows, I sketch in three main points the sort of thing that can happen when we read Genesis 1–3 from the discipline of ethics instead. Ethics is not the only way to liberate these texts. Also, it would be easy to make more than these three points. Yet I hope that they are enough to signal an important message. This is what we need to liberate the idea of creation from its scientific bondage.

It makes no difference in the discipline of ethics whether one reads these stories literally or figuratively because the moral lessons are the same either way. Ethics doesn't offer different answers. It asks different questions. So do other disciplines that we should also hear.

Cosmologies: Stuff and Interpretation

Conversations about ethical issues range from the practical to the cosmological. This discussion is cosmological. I hasten to add that the word “cosmos” has long referred to the overall ways people interpret and organize their lives as well to the stuff scientists study. When Biblical people encourage us not to love the “cosmos,” or to be in the “cosmos” but not of it, they are not warning against studying the universe. Their concern is that we not live in harmony with interpretations that are more or less alien. Yet, although they are different, it is important not to drive a wedge between these two aspects of cosmologies which some call “empirical” and “hermeneutical.” Every society is a reading of the stars.

We can see this mix of stuff and interpretation in the claims of a cosmology that is a virtual consensus in many circles today. It includes assertions such as:

1. Our existence is sheer happenstance.
2. Our future is total oblivion.
3. There are no objective moral standards.
4. Aesthetic judgments are entirely preferential.
5. Happiness is pleasure and unhappiness is pain.
6. Societies flourish most when each citizen makes increasing his or her own wealth the overriding economic priority.
7. All human decisions are ultimately determined by factors over which those who make them have no control.



M.C. ESCHER: THE THIRD DAY OF THE CREATION

8. It is bad manners to inquire about basic things such as: Why is there something rather than nothing? What was there before the Big Bang? Are numbers real or merely convenient contrivances?
9. All claims about God are meaningless because there is no way to validate or invalidate them.
10. The meaning of a term is wholly to be found in its use rather than to what it refers.
11. Coercive power is more effective than persuasive.
12. The achievements of a society are best measured by what it affords its most advantaged citizens.

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Although it has much going for it, this cosmology does have one drawback: it doesn't work.

No cosmos in the history of humanity has ever survived, let alone thrived, with anything like it. None has even tried. It is maladaptive. It perishes before it flourishes. We are here today because our ancestors spurned it.

The Cosmology of Genesis: Contingency

The cosmology of Genesis begins with the realization that no cosmos has within itself all that it takes for it to be. It knows that every cosmos, including its own, is contingent. It acknowledges that it depends upon resources it did not create.

According to the authors of the Bible's first creation story (Genesis 1:1–2:3) their cosmos did not separate light and darkness. God did. It did not separate the waters above from the waters below. God did. It did not gather the seas so that dry land would appear. God did. It did not bring forth all kinds of vegetation. God did. It did not create the stars, sun, and moon. God did. It did not begin to populate the seas, air, and land with many living things. God did. It did not create human beings with a number of divine-like characteristics that other animals do not possess to the same degree. God did. These assertions are not rivals to plate tectonics and the like. They are protests against human arrogance.



THE 1ST DAY OF THE CREATION, 1925 - M.C. ESCHER

According to those who gave us the second creation story, (Genesis 2: 3–24), before the Lord God made them there was no earth and no heavens, no plant and no herb, no rain, and no one to till the soil even if there were. There was no food, no awareness of the difference between life and death, and no understanding of good and evil. Every cosmos depends upon all of these and none can wholly create them for itself. In its own way, then, the second story is also a cosmology of contingency.

Around the time of the Babylonian exile, Biblical people gathered, polished, and pointed these stories, which had long existed, often in oral form, and thrust them as sharpened conceptual spears into the cosmologies of those who had conquered them. “You have your creation stories and they are impressive,” they asserted. “But we have ours and they will prove themselves to be superior.”

The Bible’s first two creation stories aim at the pretensions of rulers such as Babylon’s Nebuchadnezzar and they hit their target. He built a huge golden image of himself. He commanded all of his subordinates in governance and many others, to bow before it or be incinerated. He strutted on the roof of his royal palace in Babylon crowing that he was the mighty King who had built the empire and its capital for his own power and majesty.

King Nebuchadnezzar was also the one who was driven from society and forced to live with animals in the fields, eat grass like cattle, and be bathed only by dew until his hair was as long as an eagle’s feathers and his nails were like a bird’s claws. When his reason returned, he blessed the Most High’s everlasting sovereignty and unending kingdom. He praised the King of heaven for truth, justice, and the ability to humiliate the proud.

It can be helpful to read back and forth the Bible’s first two stories about creation and its stories about King Nebuchadnezzar. They illuminate each other in literally telling ways.



The Cosmology of Genesis: Equality

Another conviction of the cosmology of Genesis is that, in a very basic sense that has to do with how we treat each other, all human beings are equal. Paul summarized this well to the philosophers of Athens when he declared that God made all the nations from one ancestor. This must have startled them at least as much as his talk about the resurrection of the dead did. Moral monogenism was as strange then as it is now.

The cosmology of Genesis undermines ethnocentrism. I once asked a graduate student from Italy whether there are any deep differences between the people of her nation and mine. “Oh yes!” she replied. “It’s a different way of thinking.” Instead of acknowledging and appreciating such differences, ethnocentrism makes one’s own ethnicity the measure of all others, even if enforcing it requires bloodshed. Although it is common, this is something that the cosmology of Genesis prohibits.

We must say the same thing even more strongly about racism, which is even more pernicious. This is so for at least three reasons. One of them is that it is easier to change or

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conceal one's ethnicity than it is to disguise one's race. Another is that the purported scientific support for racism has been discredited. A third is that racism makes all members of a racial minority extremely and often equally vulnerable, as many professional and prosperous African Americans can easily testify.

The cosmology of Genesis opposes both types of theological sexism. One of these justifies the man's power over the woman as a practical necessity in a world of sin. Whether this is the intended meaning of the text is debated; however, even if it is, the Biblical story as a whole seems to be about recollecting a lost paradise and anticipating a new one by living as far as possible in harmony with the expectations of each.

The second type of theological sexism, which sees the subordination of the woman as part of God's ideal even before there is sin, is undermined by a curious part of the Bible's second creation story. It is the report that the Lord God made the woman from one of the man's ribs. Those who included this part of the story wanted us to take it very seriously. They explained why when they portrayed the man exclaiming that the woman was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.

Their point was not that the Lord God made the woman out of the man's rib so that she would stand neither above, nor below, but beside him. It is that the woman consists of the very same stuff as the man, that they are identical in being and value. This leaves room for different roles because, for instance, only the woman could give birth. But every effort to transform differences in roles into differentials of power violates the cosmology of Genesis.

Taken together, the different accounts of the creation of human beings in the Bible's first two stories about it point to their lowliness and loftiness. The second story's account emphasizes human lowliness. It pictures all human beings as divinely-animated dust, which is exactly the same way it portrays all the non-human animals. Cosmologies that talk mostly

about this become too sensual. The first story focuses on human loftiness. It says that human beings are created in God's image. Cosmologies that make too much of this become excessively spiritual. These two stories, each complementing and balancing the other, make clear that the cosmology of Genesis seeks the integration of sensuality and spirituality.

The Cosmology of Genesis: Mutuality

There has long been a widespread conviction in cultures that have been most affected by Biblical thought that God made the animals for our benefit and therefore anything we do to them, whether it is in factory farms, medical experiments, or killing them just for fun, is ethically justified. The cosmology of Genesis casts a long shadow of moral doubt about such human-centered thinking.

The second story's explanation that it was not good that the man live alone and what the Lord God did about it deserves more scrutiny in this regard than it often gets. True, the Lord God eventually created the woman out of the man's rib and, as we have seen, the man at last had a partner that corresponded to him. But before doing that, the Lord God formed from the ground an astounding number of different kinds of birds and animals. While the Lord God waited to see what he would do, the man studied each kind well enough to give it a name that fit with its distinctive characteristics. Far from being a mere prelude to the solution of man's loneliness, the Lord God's creation of the birds and animals was an essential and necessary part of it. They were to be his friends and he was to be theirs. This was supposed to be a mutually beneficial and enjoyable relationship, instead of one marked by fear and ferociousness on both sides.

God's command to fill and subdue the earth and exercise dominion over every living being is also an important part of the first story. Many object that this language has been used to justify the exploitation of animals. The typical response is to agree but to

point out that in this case “dominion” actually means something like “stewardship,” or taking good care of the Creator’s creatures. Yet “dominion” is a strong word, and so is “subdue.” By themselves these terms could be taken to warrant animal exploitation; however, they aren’t by themselves.

This passage also says that for food God has given humans every seed-yielding plant and every fruit-bearing tree. Although in other places the Bible distinguishes between clean and unclean animals, permitting the eating of the first and prohibiting the eating of the second, this one doesn’t. Human beings eating other animals is not included in the cosmology of Genesis.

This touches on an aspect of our lives that reeks with hypocrisy. On the one hand, we rebuke the industries and manufacturers that pollute our air, land and water. On the other, we continue to eat vast numbers of cud-chewing animals even though we know that raising and slaughtering them is one of the greatest causes of needless animal suffering and preventable ecological destruction. It is hard to imagine anything more contrary to the cosmology of Genesis.

Deciding How to Decide

One way to select among rival cosmologies would be to expand and apply to this different topic a way of making ethical choices that Harvard University philosopher, John Rawls, made famous in his theory of justice. Let us imagine that we have gathered at the beginning of a new cosmos and that our job is to select the most promising supporting cosmology. Let us further suppose that in our discussions we can know all the general facts about the universe but none that is specifically about any of us. I would not know my race, for example, and neither would you. None of us would know his or her gender, ethnicity, educational level, sexual orientation, geographical location, economic class, philosophical tendencies, political loyalties, or religious



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commitments. Going well beyond Rawls, none of us would even know whether he or she is a human or non-human animal.

Because we all possess a will-to-flourish, what Rawls called the “maximin principle” would function. This means that in this situation of the greatest possible objectivity, we would all choose the option that to our eyes offers the maximum opportunities to prosper, even if we are minimally fortunate when our cosmos actually begins and we finally learn who we are. If I didn’t know whether I am a comfortably situated male in America or an impoverished female in Guatemala whose family was pressed out of subsistence farming by the agricultural interests of globalization, what would I choose? What would be my selection if I didn’t even know whether I am a human or non-human animal? Wouldn’t I choose the cosmology of Genesis? Wouldn’t you? ■

David Larson teaches in the School of Religion at Loma



Loma Linda University.