

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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## Creation as Art

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## Creation as Art

### Abstract

"If we consider God an artist, we should study His technique, the elements of balance, proportion, repetition, and variation in what He has made."

Posting about experiencing God through interacting with nature from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

### Keywords

In All Things, creation, art, miracles, nature, prairie conservation

### Disciplines

Biology | Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# Creation as Art

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 [all in allthings.org/creation-as-art/](http://allthings.org/creation-as-art/)

Jeff Ploegstra

## A View of the Creation

A few weeks ago, while I was standing outside admiring a friend's new car, I slapped a mosquito. My friend (also a biologist) made the observation, "You know that you just destroyed something more complex and more beautifully designed than my car."

Let me be clear, I am not advocating that we let those little bloodsuckers have their way, but what opportunities to experience God do we miss every moment? Shouldn't we be able to appreciate the creativity of God even in that mosquito?

## Natural and Supernatural

All of creation is miraculous. God's initial action in the creation of the cosmos was miraculous. And all he has made continues to be marvelous in its diversity, complexity, and function. If we truly believe in God's providence through his continual action of creation, we have no choice but to be continually in awe. We should be so in awe that we can hardly stand it. The study of this ongoing activity of God is an opportunity to *experience* God, to give recognition to who he is as a creator and sustainer. It is an act of *worship*. It is hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, and tasting God's expression of himself and then responding with our deep attention, appreciation, and engagement.

I think we experience the creation all wrong. It may seem odd coming from a biologist, but I think we should be studying the creation first and foremost as a work of art, one that expresses something of who God is, what he values and desires, and his purposes for us. To truly experience God through his creation, we need to view it appropriately. But it doesn't end with viewing; we also have the opportunity to respond to God with love, creativity, thanksgiving, praise, diligence, and skill through what he has made.

Miracles are often used to show God as powerful. People present them as evidence of the power of God because we cannot understand how they could have happened. This is a very dangerous way of thinking for a number of reasons. Miracles are no more and no less the activity of God than the everyday sustenance of his creation. Miracles are *special* because they represent God breaking his normal activity to make a point, and in *that* sense, they should be set apart. If we focus only on the "awe" of a miracle, we fail to look past it to the real point. Moreover, we assume that there is no evidence of God's power in what is regular and what we *do* understand in creation.

What happens then as our understanding of the world grows? Do we lose the joy of seeing God through the *regularity* of his creation? Does God's power shrink? Our understanding or lack thereof does not determine the value, meaning, or power of his activity. Failing to grasp this can lead to a dangerous misunderstanding of our relationship with the rest of creation and how we can experience God through what he has made and is making.

When we forget that *all* of creation is the Lord's and an expression of his purposes, it is easy to misuse it. Creation has more value than simple utility. If you were raised in an art museum and never left it, you might fail to recognize the beauty of each creation. You might be tempted to make origami out of masterpieces.

That isn't to say that we shouldn't develop the creation, but we should do it always with an eye to the value it has in God's eyes, independent of our sustenance, and also the value it has for helping us experience and understand God. In fact, a part of experiencing and understanding God through what he made is shaping our own valuation of things to match His. We have to attend to things differently.

Common should not be synonymous with dispensable, neutral, or boring. What God created is not boring- it is GOOD, and we have the opportunity to experience God more fully when we take that seriously.

But what does "good" mean?

## The Good Creation

Shortly after I began teaching at Dordt, I was giving my dad a tour of Dordt's prairie restoration and he asked me with complete sincerity, "What good is a prairie? This was really productive farmland."

To consider this question fully, one should first broaden the scope of the conversation. Embedded in this question is the understanding that the value of the land resides in how we can *use* it or how it can benefit us. The question is all about us and the land. To come to a more complete understanding, the question needs to be embedded in our relationship with God and God's relationship with the rest of his creation.

To start with the latter, God clearly cares about his non-human creation. He declares it good repeatedly before man is created (Gen. 1); explicitly includes shared ownership of the land for the wild animals along with humans (Gen. 1:30); provides a Sabbath for it (Lev.25); includes it in the entire biblical narrative including the fall (Gen. 3:20), the giving of the law (Ex.23, Lev.25), the Noahic covenant (Gen. 9:8-17), and the redemption of all things through Christ (Col. 1:20).

What good is the prairie? The ultimate determination of "good" comes solely from God and it is clear throughout the Bible that God considers what he made "good." This is not a vague determination. Specific aspects are valued and given certain specific rights.

So then, what of *our* relationship with God?

Mankind is given a unique role as God's image bearer. When we do it right, we represent Him and his interests in our relationships with one another and with the rest of his creation. We should understand our role as reflecting the clear intentions of God for his creation: to see it as "good" in the same way that he did, to maintain the integrity of it as he upholds all things, and above all, to enable it to glorify God. If we consider God an artist, we should study his technique, the elements of balance, proportion, repetition, and variation in what he has made. We should seek to understand what he is expressing through his art and develop those elements in ways that emulate his style and contribute to the work. We can't do any of this if we don't value it appropriately.

The creation has instrumental value; it can provide for our needs. The Great Plains prairie met all of the physical needs of Native Americans. It continues to provide a variety of ecosystem services: cleaning the water, renewing the air, building the soil, providing habitat and food for the wild animals, serving as a genetic resource for the development of new crops, and providing overall stability to the biosphere.

The creation also has intrinsic value (or at least value independent of our use for it). God declared it good, provides for its sustenance, includes it in his covenants, and reconciled it through his death.

There is much more to the picture, however. The creation also has value because it is a means by which we experience God. Through our interactions with it, we can image God, come to know Him better, and give Him glory. We expect art to express something of the mind of the artist; we should have the same expectation as we engage the creation. It is not neutral, un-purposed material. It is the working out of

God's creativity and love.

*"There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places." – Wendell Berry*