An Augustinian Defense of

the Rational Coherence of *Creatio ex nihilo*

By

Stephen Brown

A Thesis Submitted to the College of

Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

in the Department of Philosophy

University of Saskatchewan

Saskatoon

Permission to Use

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the libraries of this university may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this thesis in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my thesis work or, in their absence, by the head of the department or the dean of the college in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this thesis or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other uses of materials in this thesis in whole or part should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of Philosophy
Department of Philosophy
University of Saskatchewan
9 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A5
Canada

OR

Dean
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
University of Saskatchewan
116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9 Canada

Abstract

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* has been by far the dominant Christian view of creation for more than eighteen centuries, rising to prominence long before Augustine's seminal formulation. Few doctrines are as central to Christianity, as uncontested throughout history, or as difficult to fully comprehend. It has long been challenged by those who deny a creator on the grounds of supposed incoherencies implicit in the notion of a transcendent creator of time and space. The significance of demonstrating that such a view is coherent is that it shows as mistaken one reason for setting aside the God-question; insofar as the conception of God in Augustine's account is found to be coherent, this clears away one obstacle to raising the question of God's existence. I explain and defend Augustine's view in three chapters.

In the first chapter I explain Augustine's conception of *creatio ex nihilo*, the philosophical context in which the doctrine arose, and show that the doctrine is no less relevant in the modern context. In the second chapter I address arguments made by Julian Wolfe, Adolf Grünbaum, and Graham Oppy that challenge the rational coherence of divine agency in the timeless act of creation. With help from William Lane Craig I find that these challenges are not successful because they – along with Craig's own view – fail to adequately comprehend and consistently apply the concept of God's timelessness developed by Augustine.

In the third chapter I address alleged contradictions arising from the timeless nature of God in *creatio ex nihilo* and God's relation to the temporal world. I argue that Augustine's view of God is specially situated to avoid the problem of determinism – as raised by Nelson Pike – that is thought to arise as a result of the existence of an omniscient God. Further, I argue that Pike's arguments against the coherence of a timeless God possessing abilities of a person do not succeed. Finally, I take up the positive burden of demonstrating that *creatio ex nihilo* is coherent by showing that the eternal-temporal relational model developed by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann provides one possible way of conceiving and talking of God's relationship with the temporal world. Notwithstanding objections made by Graham Oppy and Paul Helm, I find that Stump and Kretzmann's model demonstrates that the idea of a timeless God who relates to the temporal world is coherent and intelligible.

Acknowledgments

Contents

Introduction

The historic Christian creeds declare that there exists one God who created heaven and earth. Few doctrines are as central to Christianity. Such notions as that God and the universe have always existed or came into existence together would not be reconcilable with the historic Christian confession. Nor does the much nearer idea that God merely formed the world out of pre-existing matter – such as the Platonists believed – capture all that is involved in this foundational Christian claim. The God of the creeds and the Bible is the inventor and creator of reality as we know it, and therefore its master. Accordingly, the Christian creeds, and certainly the Bible, are concerned not only with what God is, but with our relation to him. They speak of a wholly transcendent creator who, as the author of reality, designed and created us to be ultimately fulfilled by our relationship with him. As such, the Christian doctrine of creation is more about the respective natures of God and creation than it is about the act itself.[1] On this view, everything that exists is radically dependent for its existence – not only what it is, but that it is – on God.

Defending the Christian identity of God, particularly against Manichaean challenges, was a central motivation for Augustine's work on creation.[2] Challenging the notion of a creation event, the Manichees ask, "what was [God] doing before he made heaven and earth? And why did it suddenly take his fancy to make what he had never made previously through eternal

---

[1] See Janet Soskice, "Why *Creatio ex nihilo* for Theology Today?," in *Creation* ex nihilo: *Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 38,40.

[2] Augustine's opposition to challenges from the Manichees drives his exposition of *Genesis* in *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*, and Augustine refers to the challenges posed by the Manichees in each of his other commentaries on *Genesis*. For discussion of Augustine's anti-Manichaean polemic, see N. Joseph Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaean Polemic and Beyond* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), x.

times?"[3] By this challenge, the Manichees, who believed in an uncreated everlasting world, seek

to point out that the doctrine of creation implies an arbitrary change from a time in which God

exists, alone and 'eternally'[4] without any other created thing, to one in which God acts to effect a

new creation. What reason could God have for creating that he did not have from 'eternity' (i.e.

at times prior to that creation)? For it would seem that if he had that reason at some prior time,

then the creation would have already occurred at that time. This line of argument makes clear

that the Manichaean challenge presupposes that time existed before the creation of the world.

Augustine's answer to this challenge, however, unequivocally limits the temporal to the created

order:

> God, after all, also made times, and that is why there were no times before he made any.
> We cannot therefore say that there was any time when God had not yet made anything.
> How, I mean to say, could there be a time which God had not made, seeing that he is the
> one who forges all times? And if time began to be together with heaven and earth, no
> time can be found in which God had not yet made heaven and earth.[5]

This limitation of the temporal to that which is created is a central thesis of Augustine's view of

creation, and one that is repeated throughout his career.[6] For Augustine, God's eternal (or

timeless) nature sets him apart from temporal – and, therefore, contingent and corruptible –

creation. *Creatio ex nihilo* ("creation from nothing") is therefore much more than a doctrine

about the origin of the universe, or a first moment in time. It *is* about these things, but more

---

[3] Augustine, "On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees," in *On Genesis: The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 13: I.2.3.

[4] The Manichaean objection has force only if it is assumed that to say that God is 'eternal' is to say that God exists in time everlastingly, an assumption that Augustine did not share.

[5] "Refutation of the Manichees," I.2.3.

[6] See: Augustine, "Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis," in *On Genesis: The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 3.8; Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), XI.11.13; Augustine, "The Literal Meaning of Genesis," in *On Genesis: The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), I.2.4-6; Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 2000), XI.6.

importantly, it firmly maintains a particular relationship between two kinds of beings whose natures or essences differ fundamentally: a necessary, atemporal, immutable, and incorruptible creator and a completely novel substance that is contingent, temporal, mutable, and corruptible.

The 'eternity' that the Manichees speak of, then, is the notion of an infinite duration of time. Augustine's response indicates a different sense of *eternity*: that of *timelessness*. He argues that the idea of time before the beginning of time is absurd: "There was no such things as 'then' when there was no time."[7] However, as the creator of time itself, God must nonetheless exist in order to have created time. Some find this account absurd; for if God existed *before* he created time, they suggest, it would be necessary to posit a time before time, which Augustine denies. Such challenges as the Manichees raise, suggesting that the concept of creation itself is absurd, persist in contemporary philosophical discussions on creation. These challenges can be grouped into two categories. First, there are objections to the coherence of divine agency *in* eternity: that is, to the account of God's activity in the original creation of the universe. Second, there are challenges regarding the coherence of divine agency *from* eternity: that is, to the claim that God knows, relates and responds to temporal events within creation. I will argue that, in both groups of challenges, incoherence arises not from the implications of *creatio ex nihilo* itself, but from a failure to understand and consistently apply a *timeless* sense of eternity, which Augustine defends, to God's nature. I will be defending Augustine's conception of *creatio ex nihilo* as rationally coherent. I will not be arguing that Augustine's view is correct, nor for the correctness of *creation*, nor for Theism in general.

Augustine's idea that God both creates and remains involved with creation, while existing outside of the temporal order that he caused to be, is not merely an eccentric and private

---

[7] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.13.15.

view, but is a basic tenet of classical theism. If it could be shown to be incoherent, this would prove extremely problematic for the rationality of the Theistic position itself. The significance of demonstrating that such a view is intelligible and coherent – as I aim to do in this essay – is that it shows as mistaken one reason for setting aside the God-question; insofar as the conception of God in Augustine's account is found to be coherent, this clears away one obstacle to raising the question of God' existence.

Challenges and Definitions

The question of God's eternal nature, or essence, is therefore a critical feature of Augustine's account of creation, but it is a notoriously difficult concept to grasp and make sense of. We will need to talk about an existence in which change is impossible, yet actions occur. We will need to speak of a way of being without reference to past or future, in which all that is, is constant; but we will also need to speak of a being that exists this way without being inert, of a being who responds to events in time. Étienne Gilson captures the difficulty well:

> Our inability to perceive things simultaneously and in the unity of an indivisible act is primarily the inability of things to exist simultaneously in a permanent and stable unity . . . Hence, in order to form an idea of eternity it is not enough to think of the universe as a familiar song and to imagine a boundless consciousness which always knows exactly how much of that song has been sung; it is far beyond any such mind as this that God subsists, for He is the Creator of every mind. For Him there is neither past nor future; His knowledge of things is one and undivided, like the act itself by which He created them. Hence, we may reasonably expect that the study of this creative act has great difficulties in store for anyone who would attempt to describe it.[8]

As Gilson warns, this is no easy task. As temporal creatures, *changelessness* implies inertness; *beginningless existence* implies infinite temporal extension; *acting* implies a temporally prior state; and *atemporally knowing* temporal facts that we might presently describe as *future* implies

---

[8] Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960), 196.

knowing what does not exist. Attempts to think consistently about atemporality are prone to falling into self-refuting ways of talking. I will resist these implications throughout this analysis. This resistance, however, should be understood not as a dogmatic rejection of the legitimate logical implications of the atemporal concepts used, but rather as a denial of strongly associated connotative implications of temporal language that are, erroneously – if perhaps almost unavoidably – applied to atemporal uses. Showing that such temporal implications can rationally be resisted will be a requirement of this defense of the coherence of Augustine's view.

Therefore, for the sake of clarity, some definitions are in order. First, the doctrine we are focusing on is *creatio ex nihilo*, and, in particular, Augustine's formulation and defense of it. This should be differentiated from *creation* in general, which may include Platonic or other views that make mention of a *creator*. The features that distinguish *creatio ex nihilo*, as indicated above, include the following: (1) that by *God* is meant the intelligent cause that is directly and freely responsible for the existence of everything that exists other than himself;[9] and (2) that God created *out of nothing*, meaning that no initial substance – even his own – was used to produce anything he created. Secondly, as has already been noted, Augustine's view calls for a distinction between the temporal world and a timeless or atemporal creator, and thus a distinctive understanding of what *eternal* means. While the terms *eternal* and *eternity* are used by others to refer variously to *endlessness* (or, *sempiternity*)*, infinite duration*, or *timelessness*, my use of *eternal* follows that of Augustine and will recognize only the strictly atemporal sense: a denial of extension in time. It should be noted that, since *endlessness* is ambiguous with regard to

---

[9] A more encompassing definition of the term *God* is unnecessary here. In Augustine's historic Catholic position, however, the referent of *God* does include more than this, and I follow Augustine in referring to God in conventional Christian ways (i.e. with male pronouns, as intelligent, personal, etc.). However, alternative conceptions of *God* may be found that can be substituted coherently for the purposes of an analysis of *creatio ex nihilo*.

temporality, such usage should be limited to the identification of ambiguous statements, whereas *infinite time* is clearly incompatible with atemporal eternity, and must not be confused with the *eternity* referred to in *creatio ex nihilo*.

Outline

This essay has three main goals. First, to sufficiently represent Augustine's conception of the doctrine of creation; second, to defend that conception against challenges that it is incoherent with respect to the act of creation; and third, to defend it against challenges that it is incoherent with respect to the characteristics of God and his relation with creation.

In the first chapter, I will explain Augustine's conception of *creatio ex nihilo*, a position that is of more than historical importance as it continues to inform contemporary discussions in philosophical theology. I will outline the historical origins of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* up to Augustine and his influences, showing both that the concept of timelessness has a long history in western philosophy and that the idea of timeless creation was adopted early by the Christian church and has persisted into the modern era as the standard Christian understanding of creation. Following this, I will give a more detailed analysis of Augustine's conception of *creatio ex nihilo* and the resulting distinction between temporal creation and its atemporal creator. Finally, I will briefly consider the question of whether *creatio ex nihilo* is still relevant in the 21st century, given the incredible advances that have been made in cosmology in the past eighteen centuries.

In chapter two I will address arguments made by Julian Wolfe, Adolf Grünbaum, and Graham Oppy that challenge the rational coherence of divine agency in eternity: the notion of *timeless creation*. I will also address a fourth view held by William Lane Craig, which is sympathetic to timeless creation, as one that fails to avoid incoherence.

In chapter three I will address alleged contradictions arising from the nature and characteristics of God and his relation to the temporal world. I will argue that Nelson Pike's presentation of the problem of determinism as a result of divine foreknowledge, and his defense based on God's timeless nature are both fallacious. I will show that in Augustine's view the problem does not arise. I will then address Pike's arguments against the coherence of traditional characteristics of God's personality. Finally, I will take up the positive burden of demonstrating that *creatio ex nihilo* is coherent by showing that the eternal-temporal relational model developed by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann provides one possible way of conceiving and talking of God's relationship with the temporal world.

Chapter 1

Augustine and *Creatio ex Nihilo*

I. *Creatio ex nihilo*

Creation in the Greek and Christian Traditions

By Augustine's time, a uniquely Christian view of creation had already been established, distinct from, yet richer because of, the developments in Greek philosophy. Briefly considering some important elements of the two main philosophical streams – Greek and Christian – that intersect in Augustine's development of *creatio ex nihilo* will help us to grasp his position with greater clarity and precision.

While *creatio ex nihilo* is not widely considered to be explicitly taught in the scriptures, some early church Fathers[10] claimed support in *2 Maccabees*, which states: "God did not make [heaven and earth] out of things that existed."[11] Augustine himself, despite his generally prolific use of scripture, does not make use of this verse in his commentaries. On the other hand, the language in both *Genesis* 1 and *Wisdom* 11:17 has been used as evidence of a belief in a pre-existent material, from which the universe was ordered, although this position does not necessarily exclude the idea of a prior creation of this pre-existent material.[12]

Richard Sorabji reports that in European antiquity, virtually nobody outside the Judeo-Christian tradition believed that the universe had a beginning. However, he notes that many Greeks accepted a beginning of the present order of the universe, and others, such as Platonists,

---

[10] Notably, Theophilus of Antioch (2nd century) and Origen (2nd to 3rd century). Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 2.

[11] 2 Maccabees 7:28 NRSV.

[12] See Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 3.

even accepted the creation of matter, only denying that creation implied a beginning.[13] While much can be said about the early Greek philosophers, it remains that their general denial of a beginning of the universe stands starkly opposed to Augustine's view, so that it is more helpful, for coming to terms with Augustine, to focus on the main views and developments in the interplay of Greek and Christian traditions leading up to Augustine's time.

At the beginning of this interplay stands the Jewish Platonist, Philo Judaeus of Alexandria (15/10 BC - 45/50 AD).[14] Philo is an important figure in the development of *creatio ex nihilo*, as he represents an early mixture of Greek and Jewish philosophy, and his influence is seen to extend throughout the formation of the Christian doctrine.[15] Philo contrasts the notion of an unbegotten God with that of a begotten – and therefore contingent – universe; but he questions its temporal beginning.[16] Although Philo does not explicitly articulate *creatio ex nihilo*, his work anticipates many of the important concepts Augustine focuses on later, including the denial of *past* and *future* as categories applicable to God,[17] the denial of a time before creation,[18] and even a non-temporal use of *origin*.[19]

The majority view of the Middle Platonists (mid-second century BC to early third century AD),[20] held to an everlasting universe,[21] in spite of Plato's teaching in the *Timaeus* that the

---

[13] Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 193.

[14] See Marian Hillar, "Philo of Alexandria," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden (ISSN 2161-0002), accessed November 16, 2019, https://www.iep.utm.edu/philo/.

[15] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 33-34.

[16] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 27; Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 208-9. Both find his conclusions regarding a temporal beginning ambiguous, but Sorabji considers his work in the *de Providentia* – where he affirms a beginning of both matter and the formed universe – as his clearest and most thoughtful treatment.

[17] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 264.

[18] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 206.

[19] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 114.

[20] Edward Moore, "Middle Platonism," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden (ISSN 2161-0002), accessed November 16, 2019, https://www.iep.utm.edu/midplato/.

[21] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 24; Torchia uses the word "eternity."

universe was 'generated.'[22] In opposition, Plutarch (45-125 AD)[23] and Atticus (101-177 AD)[24] took Plato literally, accepting a temporal creation from a pre-existing state consisting only of chaotic movement.[25] While early church Fathers, like Justin and Athenagoras, adopted the prevailing Platonic model of creation from pre-existing matter, Torchia reports that the church eventually developed a uniquely Christian understanding of creation:

> Christians (apparently beginning with Tatian) recognized the importance of demonstrating that matter (the ultimate constituent of things) was likewise created from nothing. From this standpoint, matter proceeds from God, but remains ontologically distinct. In Christian terms, matter can neither exist as a part of God (as the Stoic pantheists held), nor as an efflux of the One's goodness (as the Neoplatonists held), nor as an independent reality in its own right (as the Gnostic dualists held).[26]

By the beginning of the third century, the position defended by Irenaeus (second century AD)[27] and Tertullian of Carthage (155/160-220 AD)[28] – that God created all things from nothing – had become the orthodox Christian position on creation.[29] This view was also adopted by Origen (185-253/254 AD),[30] although he posited a two-stage model of creation, according to which matter was first created without form, and then form was added.[31] In addition, he argued that the doctrine of creation entails a beginning in time.[32]

---

[22] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 22; Albinus and Apuleius, for example, took 'generation' as a kind of perpetual activity; See Torchia, 24-25.

[23] Edward Moore, "Middle Platonism."

[24] Keith H. Seddon, "Epictetus," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden (ISSN 2161-0002), accessed November 16, 2019, https://www.iep.utm.edu/epictetu/.

[25] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 25-26; Atticus additionally suggests the valuation of order as a motive.

[26] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 32.

[27] Date of birth estimates range from 125 to 142 AD; Albert Poncelet, "St. Irenaeus," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08130b.htm.

[28] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 14. Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 195.

[29] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 14-15. Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 194-5.

[30] Ferdinand Prat, "Origen and Origenism," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11306b.htm.

[31] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 16.

[32] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 16.

Plotinus (204/205-269/270 AD)[33] and the subsequent Neoplatonist tradition developed

three key concepts: *creation* as 'generation,' *eternity* as 'timelessness,' and the non-temporal use

of *always*. According to Torchia, Plotinus' metaphysics relied on the idea of creation as a

generation, or effusion of being, "[presupposing] an ontological continuum between an ultimate

causal principle and its effects."[34] Sorabji confirms as "the most orthodox Neoplatonism" the

idea that God needs no pre-existing matter for creation, with support from Plotinus and his

disciple Porphyry.[35] As for the timeless nature of the eternal, Sorabji notes Plotinus' repeated

dissociations:

> It is unextended (*adiastatos*), partless (*ameres*), all together (*homou pasa*), as if in a point
> (*hoion en sēmeiōi*), and is not of any size (*tososde*). Its life must not be partitioned
> (*meristheisa*), but has pure partlessness, and its thinking is timeless (*achronos*). It is not
> scattered (*skidnasthai*) like time into an interval (*diastasis*) but is like a point. It does not
> run along with and is not stretched out with (*sumparathein, sumparateinein*) the
> movement of the soul . . . You will not separate it out (*diistanai*), nor unroll it
> (*exelissein*), nor extend it (*proagein*) nor stretch it (*parateinein*). You cannot find any
> earlier or later (*proteron, husteron*) in it.[36]

While Sorabji notes that non-temporal uses of such words as *prior*, *older*, *origin*, and *created* had

already been used, Plotinus and Origen simultaneously developed the idea of a non-temporal use

of *always*.[37] In addition, although Plotinus did not see God as omniscient, he described God's

knowledge as both present and changeless,[38] further indicating his commitment to a conception

of God as timeless.

---

[33] Lloyd Gerson, "Plotinus," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/plotinus/; Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 112.

[34] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 36-37.

[35] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 314.

[36] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 113.

[37] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 114.

[38] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 264.

Basil of Caesarea (329-379 AD) [39] and Ambrose of Milan (340-397 AD)[40] both argued against the Platonic position that matter is 'eternal,' that this would make it comparable to, or in some sense equal with, God's substance. Basil argued that without form it could not be comparable, and Ambrose argued that if it were comparable, it would therefore be incorruptible.[41] Torchia suggests that Ambrose's depiction of God as creator of all created things implies that "there was a time when [the world] did not exist," but he also reports that Ambrose believed that "the origin of the world coincides with the start of time."[42] Torchia does not make anything of the implicated paradox, of a time before time begins, so it is not clear that the paradox is ascribable to Ambrose, and this is of some importance, given the influence that Augustine tells us Ambrose had on his thought.[43]

Augustine's Influences

Situated as he was, Augustine certainly had access to much of the above developments. Through his close contact with Ambrose, by whom he was baptised[44] and to whom he evinced great devotion,[45] he may have been influenced by Basil, Origen, and Philo from the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as the Roman Stoic, Cicero.[46] Basil, in turn, is found to have been influenced by both the Christian and Platonic traditions, and by Philo as well.[47] Augustine certainly picks up on the necessary distinction between 'eternal God' and 'corruptible creation'

---

[39] Joseph McSorley, "St. Basil the Great," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02330b.htm.

[40] James Loughlin, "St. Ambrose," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01383c.htm.

[41] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 18-19.

[42] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 20.

[43] Augustine, *Confessions*, V.13.23, VI.3.4.

[44] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 35.

[45] Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.7.15.

[46] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 33-36.

[47] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 33.

argued by Philo, Basil, and Ambrose,[48] and the two-stage creation of matter and form developed

by Origen.[49] As mentioned, Augustine finds great utility in his view for a non-temporal *origin*,

the denial of 'time before creation,' and God as an atemporal being – all ideas pioneered by

Philo.

Additionally, Augustine credits "some books by the Platonists" as having led him

towards truths of the Gospel.[50] Torchia identifies these as the *libri platonicorum*,[51] a collection of

Neoplatonic works, traditionally including Plotinus' *Enneads*,[52] which have since been lost to

time.[53] Through these works, Augustine claims to have been exposed for the first time to

philosophies that support or suggest the doctrines taught in the Bible: that God existed in the

beginning,[54] without equal ("the darkness has never been able to master the light");[55] that he is

the creator and sustainer (creation is "alive with his life") of all that was created; that there is a

distinction between the nature of God and humankind, with humankind, but not God, being

prone to sinfulness and error ("exchanging [God's] glorious, imperishable nature for idols and a

variety of man-made things).[56]

Finally, though not itself part of the development of *creatio ex nihilo*, Augustine's former

involvement in Manicheism[57] – a Gnostic dualistic world religion popular throughout the Persian

---

[48] Augustine, "Unfinished Literal Commentary," 1.2; "Literal Meaning," VIII.26.48.

[49] Augustine, "Refutation of the Manichees," I.7.11; "Literal Meaning," I.4.9.

[50] Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.9.13-14.

[51] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 141.

[52] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 37.

[53] Paul Vincent Spade, "Medieval Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/medieval-philosophy/.

[54] Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.9.13; see *John* 1:1-2.

[55] Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.9.13; see *John* 1:5; Cf. Manichaean cosmogony, in which some of the good power ('light') is overcome by the evil power ('darkness'). See Augustine's reasoned rejection of Manichaean dualism, *Confessions*, VII.2.3.

[56] Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.9.14-15; see *Romans* 1:23.

[57] Augustine, *Confessions*, III.6.10.

and Roman Empires[58] – clearly played a significant role in his development and defense of the

doctrine. Torchia identifies four key teachings that set Manicheism in opposition to Christianity:

> *First*, a pessimistic view of the human condition; *secondly*, the attribution of the world's creation to a malevolent principle (rather than to God the Father); *third*, a dualism between principles of goodness and evil (that is, between God and the evil demiurgic creator of the world); *fourth*, a knowledge of oneself and God (*epignosis*) that yielded a certainty of salvation by virtue of a recognition of the fundamental kinship between one's own soul and the Divine nature.[59]

In adopting the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, Augustine came to reject each of these positions,

and thus the core of Manichaean teaching. Not merely a doctrine about creation, Augustine

defends a conception of a good God as creator of a necessarily good creation.[60]

II. Augustine's View of Creation

Augustine's view of creation is developed principally in his five commentaries on the

biblical book of *Genesis*. These are found in the following works: *On Genesis: A Refutation of

the Manichees* (~388 AD), *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis* (393-395 AD), *The

Confessions* (Books XI-XII; 397-401 AD), *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (401-416 AD), and

The City of God (Books XI-XII; 416 AD).[61] While his exegetical approach to *Genesis* varies over

time, his central theses concerning the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* remain consistent. These are:

(1) that God created the heavens and the earth, including not only the visible universe, but

everything besides God that was created;[62] (2) that God created from nothing, which is to say

neither from any pre-existing substance, nor from his own substance; and, following from the

above, (3) that the created substances constitutive of the universe as a whole, being by necessity

---

[58] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 67.

[59] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 66-67.

[60] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 65.

[61] Edmund Hill, general introduction to *On Genesis: The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 13:13-14.

[62] "Unfinished Literal Commentary," 3.9.

mutable, are of a nature characterized by the term *temporal*, thus radically differing from God's own eternal and immutable nature.[63]

Creation of a New Substance

Augustine's commentaries are very consciously undertaken in submission to the authority of Christian doctrine and scripture. He opens the *Unfinished Literal Commentary* with a statement of official doctrine on the subject of creation: "so Catholic teaching bids us believe that this Trinity is called one God, and that he made and created all things that are, insofar as they are, to the effect that all creatures, whether intellectual or corporeal . . . are not born of God, but made by God out of nothing." This statement approximates the Nicene Creed, adopted only seventy years earlier in 325 by a nearly unanimous ecumenical council of bishops from throughout Christendom.[64] In his commentaries on *Genesis*, Augustine is not attempting to demonstrate to unbelievers the truth of Christianity, or even of creation. His purpose, instead, seems to be to explain and explore the meaning in *Genesis* for both pastoral and apologetic purposes. Pastorally, explaining *Genesis* promises a deeper insight into the nature of God and his relationship with humanity. On the other hand, various competing ideologies challenge aspects of *creatio ex nihilo* or related doctrines affirmed by the church, making the subject of creation a broad area of conflict that Augustine uses to guide his apologetic purpose in drawing out differences and defending the superior consistency and coherence of Christian doctrine.

In particular, the beliefs of Manichaeism, wrapped up in its alternate view of creation, occupied much of his effort. As indicated above, Manichaeism taught that there are two powers from two distinct realms: a good power from the realm of spirit, associated with light and

---

[63] "Unfinished Literal Commentary," 1.2.

[64] Henri Leclerq, "The First Council of Nicea," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11044a.htm.

knowledge, and an evil power from the realm of matter, associated with darkness and ignorance.

Through conflict, the evil realm was believed to have absorbed much of the light, resulting in

parts of God's spirit being trapped within corruptible human bodies. Augustine concludes in the

Refutation Against the Manichees:

> *They* say that there is a nature of evil to which God was forced to hand over a part of his
> own nature to be tortured. *We* say that there is no natural evil, but that all natures are
> good, and God himself is the supreme nature and all other natures come from him; and all
> are good insofar as they exist, since God made all things *very good* (Gn 1:31).[65]

Here, Augustine is holding up the Christian view as more coherent. In order to account for the

corruption of humankind, whom the Manichees say share God's spirit, they hold that God's spirit

is corrupted in that it is combined with the evil material power. This sharing of the divine spirit

in Manichaeism has the consequence that "God's nature goes astray, and is wretched, and is

riddled with vices, and commits sin . . . is defiled by contamination with the filth of an opposing

nature."[66] Such an account is not merely an affront to the Christian faith, it raises a serious

question for the Manichee: if such is the nature of God, what reasons do the Manichees have to

worship their own deity?

Augustine's view, informed by the authority of scripture and the united confession of the

church, starts with the notion of an incorruptible God and the creation of an entirely new

substance, which, in *Genesis*, God declares to be good. This new substance is, by necessity,

contingent. The very idea of its creation entails that it is essentially mutable, and therefore

corruptible.[67] This move allows Augustine to reconcile the perfect goodness of God with the

apparent corruption in creation, which the Manichees are unable to do. For, while affirming that

---

[65] Augustine, "Refutation of the Manichees," II.29.43.
[66] Augustine, "Refutation of the Manichees," II.8.11.
[67] "By the very fact that they undergo change and variation they cry out that they were made" (Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.4.6).

the perfection of God entails the inherent goodness of creation, the contingency of creation nonetheless allows for its subsequent corruption. He explains: "The unchangeable good, of course, is God, whereas human beings, as far as the nature is concerned in which God made them, are indeed a good, but not an unchangeable one like God."[68] This 'changeable good,' he goes on, is capable of becoming better or worse, depending on how it relates to the unchangeable good.

Thus, in affirming the inherent goodness, yet corruptibility, of creation, Augustine offers a system that additionally suggests answers for two important questions. First, 'if a wholly good God created the world, why is there evil?' The corruptibility of nature and of humankind suggests that evil is a corruption made possible by the contingency of nature and human nature, and not by any defect in the creative act of God. Second, perhaps prompted by the first, 'why has God created such corruptible creatures?' The answer may follow from the same changeable nature: that which is changeable, and not a perfect good, *is nonetheless good* – and it is these good things that God directly willed in creation, not the evils that these good things may bring about through voluntary or non-voluntary agency (in the case of human and non-human created realities, respectively). Since the created world is good, but not perfectly good, both natural and moral evil remain possible and explainable.

The marked difference Augustine observes between the two substances – creator and creation – is perhaps best displayed through the dichotomy of eternity and temporality, respectively. Augustine makes much of this dichotomy, using the human experience of temporality to draw insight into the non-temporal nature of God. Mary Clark says that time, for Augustine, is "one of the creatures which . . . had a beginning," from which it follows that "there

---

[68] Augustine, "Literal Meaning," VIII.14.31.

was no time before the world existed, and the world is not co-eternal with God."[69] Gilson agrees that, according to Augustine, "since time is by definition change, it too is a creature. It had a beginning therefore, so that things which have duration are not eternal nor is time itself eternal."[70] On the contrary, "with respect to God there is neither before nor after: He *is*, in a motionless eternity."[71] John Rist adds that Augustine holds that "eternity is changeless, and 'all is present.' "[72] There is agreement about Augustine's general position, then, that God's nature is radically opposed to the temporal nature that encompasses all other existing things.[73]

Temporality of Creation

In order to understand what this juxtaposition reveals about God, Augustine seeks to understand temporality. He expresses well the difficulty of explaining something so basic to human experience as time: "If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know."[74] In a sense, we all know what time is and take it for granted as a fundamental reality of human existence. We have measured it throughout human history by the cosmic movement of the heavens, and, more recently, by the nanoscopic movement of electrons in the atomic clock.

In *The Confessions*, Augustine's discussion of time begins with the following certainty: "If nothing passed away there would be no past time; if there was nothing still on its way there would be no future time; and if nothing existed, there would be no present time."[75] Past and future, then, are defined respectively by what has passed away, and what has not yet come; and

---

[69] Mary T. Clark, *Augustine* (London: Continuum, 2005), 35.
[70] Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, 190.
[71] Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, 191.
[72] John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 80.
[73] See also, R. A. Markus, "Augustine: God and Nature," in *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 403.
[74] Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.14.17.
[75] Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.14.17.

from this, Augustine concludes that neither the past nor the future exist. Understood as a statement in present tense, this realization is an analytical truth: the future and the past cannot be understood as that which presently exists. Furthermore, not only does the present require that something exist, but if it were always present and never moving into past, nothing would ever change, and it could not be said to be time at all. Ironically, Augustine observes, if the only way we can consider the present to be time is that it is constantly "slipping away into the past," which we say does not exist, then the only reason we can say that the present exists is because it tends towards non-being.[76]

Now, if the past and future do not exist, and the present has no extension, how is it possible for us to make sense of extended times, such as *this year*, or *this day*, or even, *this second*, and how can we make sense of past and future times? It seems that it should be impossible.[77] But the difficulty, as Augustine bemoaned, is not in our ability to make sense of these things, as, we certainly do make sense of them; the difficulty, rather, is in *how* we do so. What sense are we making of them? Augustine reasons that if past and future do exist, then 'wherever' they exist they are not *past* and *future*, but *present*; "For if in that place too future things are future, they are not there yet, and if there too past things are past, they are there no longer."[78] This is self-evident, but interestingly, this means that the only time there can possibly be is present time. Therefore, Augustine concludes that when a true account of the past is made, it is not the events themselves that are brought from memory, but "words formed from images of those events which . . . left some kind of traces in the mind."[79] And, concerning the future, he argues that because only that which exists can be seen, and that which already exists is not future

---

[76] Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.14.17.
[77] Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.15.20.
[78] Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.18.23.
[79] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.18.23.

but present, therefore, when future events are said to be seen, it is not the future events themselves that are seen, because they do not yet exist.[80] Instead, he suggests that it is their causes or signs that are seen, as the dawn signals the future event of the rising of the sun. Augustine concludes that there are not really past, present, and future, but three present tenses: "the present of past things, the present of present things, and the present of future things."[81] These are understood as memory, attention, and expectation, respectively, and each is experienced in the present.

It is important to note that these three modes of experiencing time are not an ontology of time, but simply our experience of time.[82] Augustine calls them "realities in the mind,"[83] suggesting a subjective, rather than objective, reality. Jason W. Carter argues that the common interpretation of Augustine's view of time, taken from *The Confessions*, that the only existent time is the indivisible present (as seemingly held by Clark, Gilson, and Markus), is mistaken.[84] On the contrary, Carter argues that Augustine is saying that time does not exist at all, even in the present, but that it is an *accident* – or non-essential property – of a created substance. Drawing on Augustine's *De Trinitate*, Carter argues that it is a mistake to think of time as existing in the manner of a substance in its own right: "Since Augustine affirms that time is correctly listed among the categories, this is a first sure indication that time is not a substance for Augustine, and must be understood to persist *relatively to an individual substance*."[85] This understanding is confirmed by Rist, who sees that Augustine takes *time* as a "formal concept or 'category' of the

---

[80] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.18.24.
[81] Augustine, Confessions, XI.20.26.
[82] See, Rist, *Augustine*, 82.
[83] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.20.26.
[84] Jason W. Carter, "St. Augustine on Time, Time Numbers, and Enduring Objects," *Vivarium* 49, no. 4 (2011): 308. Cf. Clark, *Augustine*, 35; Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, 195; Markus, "Augustine: God and Nature," 404.
[85] Carter, "St. Augustine on Time," 317-318.

physical universe."[86] Augustine himself, in *The Confessions*, implies that his intuition of the objective existence of time is mistaken, telling his mind: "do not interrupt me by clamouring that time has objective existence."[87] Recognizing the temptation to understand the undeniable "impressions" of time as evidence of time's objective reality, he maintains that the impressions are the measurable effects of "passing phenomena." Augustine's use of *impression*, here, seems to be equivocal. In the first place he seems to describe a *mental impression* (i.e. a sense of time), while he subsequently describes a *metaphysical impression* (i.e. a *real* and *measurable* thing). This seems to draw the reader to reflect on whether the figurative use of *impression* is not, after all, much closer to a literal reality.

If Carter and Rist are correct, Augustine's view of time lays the foundation for a means of relating God with creation. We should make a distinction between the experience of time, explored thus far in *The Confessions*, with the ontology of time, which Carter explores through an analysis including thirteen works of Augustine in addition to *The Confessions*. While, in *The Confessions*, Augustine seems initially interested in trying to understand the ontology of time, his subsequent shift to the measurement of time[88] can be described as an experiential analysis that ends in a comparison with the eternal perspective of God.[89] This comparison serves to relate God to his creation in the way that he perceives, or knows, creation.

While Augustine does not settle on a clear ontology of time in *The Confessions*, what he does settle on is time as *distentio animi*.[90] Maria Boulding seems to imply a psychological interpretation by translating this as "tension of consciousness."[91] This suggests a tension *within*

---

[86] Rist, *Augustine*, 83. See also: Markus, "Augustine: God and Nature," 403.
[87] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.27.36.
[88] Carter, "St. Augustine on Time," 308.
[89] Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.29.39 - 31.41.
[90] The Latin is reported in Markus, "Augustine: God and Nature," 404, Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, 194, and is referred to by Carter, "St. Augustine on Time," 310.
[91] Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.26.33, page 267 of the translation.

Augustine's three modes of time, particularly between the future and the past, of which the present is the threshold. Augustine *does* seem to support this implication with an example of a poem recitation, in which the present action is in tension between the expectation of the unfinished part and the memory of the finished part.[92] This tension is present in Augustine's explanation of the *experience* of time, but to take this as Augustine's ontology of time would miss the point of his attempt to understand its *measurement*.

On the other hand, tension can also imply a spatial extension, and this is the sense of "*distentio animi*" given by Markus, Gilson (according to Lynch's translation), and Carter. Markus and Lynch both use "extension,"[93] while Carter refers only to the Latin phrase but provides a compelling rationale for the spatial interpretation. As Carter points out, Augustine thinks that measurement is impossible without extension, which is why he excludes the idea that we can measure the present.[94] Carter explains:

> The paradox that Augustine gives is that if the present has no extension, it cannot be measured directly, but we do measure it, which means that either it does have extension, or we measure it indirectly. To claim that time has three modes of psychological presence in 'memory', 'attention', and 'expectation', as Augustine does, does not solve the paradox, because it does not preserve the description of the present as without determinate size.[95]

What Augustine needs, according to Carter, is a persisting space that can hold an impression of time, such that time can be measured indirectly by the enduring impression.[96] The mind's present attention is no such enduring thing, passing out of existence as soon as it exists; and neither does the memory hold an enduring impression, for the present memory suffers the same transience of

---

[92] Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI.28.37-38.
[93] Markus, "Augustine: God and Nature," 404; Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, 194.
[94] Carter, "St. Augustine on Time," 310. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.26.33.
[95] Carter, "St. Augustine on Time," 310.
[96] Carter, "St. Augustine on Time," 311-312.

22

all that is present. It passes out of existence just as fast, leaving nothing permanent: only an endless series of disappearing images.

Carter's analysis fits with what Augustine says in *The Confessions*: "What I measure is the impression which passing phenomena leave in [my mind] . . . not the things that passed by so that the impression could be formed . . . Hence either time is this impression, or what I measure is not time."[97] Carter explains that in *De Trinitate* Augustine sees thoughts as a kind of *place*, and identifies the memory as an extended and enduring space capable of receiving a lasting impression.[98] A difficulty that may seem to arise with Carter's explanation of *distentio animi* is that his account of *memory* as an enduring space seems to contradict Augustine's description of a 'present faculty.' If memory is a faculty of the present, how can we avoid the transience of the disappearing attention to the enduring imprint being measured? It seems, however, that Carter elucidates the means for Augustine's notion of *memory* to be able to function at all. The memory, then, can be seen as an enduring space bearing the imprint of experience – the process of which is experienced as the passage of time – which is subsequently accessed by the present faculty of attention. And though the present faculty – as present – must constantly be passing away, yet its object endures so that like the cascade of innumerable passing frames of a video, it becomes possible to hold the ever-flowing attention on a stable impression of the mind.

God's Eternal Nature

Now, the point of this analysis of time, and our experience of it, is that the same categories by which we understand our own experience of reality can be used to understand and relate to God. For if, as Augustine has laboured to show, God's nature is fundamentally opposed

---

[97] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.27.36.
[98] Carter, "St. Augustine on Time," 311.

to our own, Augustine runs the risk of alienating God from all comprehension. But if time is taken as an accidental category of a substance, then to start with, a being whose substance is taken as necessary and immutable cannot have any such accidental categories associated with it. Therefore, Augustine's view of time can at least be seen to cohere with his identification of God as timeless.

But what of God's experience of time? If God is to be seen as one who acts and reacts in time, it seems that some account of his ability to perceive time will be necessary. Further, a serious challenge arises from the idea that God knows events in time that are future to us. Recall that Augustine denies the existence of the future, arguing that what is future to us is merely our expectation of what will be present. But what is expected is not really known, except insofar as it is determined by what can be known in the present. But if knowledge can only apply to the present and God has perfect knowledge of the future, it would seem that we are forced to conclude that the future is wholly determined by what is true in the present. Augustine seems to affirm this, declaring that "what does not exist obviously cannot be taught," and therefore, it is "better to say that [God teaches] what is present but has a bearing on the future."[99] This statement appears to mean that God only knows what *will* happen because it *must* happen according to what is true in the present. However, the statement is prefaced by the question: "What method can you adopt for teaching what is future, *when to you nothing is future at all*?"[100]

There are two ways we might understand this. In light of his argument that the future is defined as that which does not yet exist, this can be taken as simply upholding that judgment with respect to God's experience. In this sense, the future cannot be known by God, since it does not exist, but only a knowledge of what is determined in the present can be known as a present

---

[99] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.19.25.
[100] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.19.25. Emphasis added.

24

expectation of the future.[101] However, this interpretation makes the distinction, "*to you* nothing is future," upon which his explanation is predicated, irrelevant. If the future is that which does not yet exist, then there is nothing that exists as future *to anyone*, and God is no exception. The future, by definition, does not exist, but this makes no distinction between God and humanity. Furthermore, if Augustine was affirming determinism in this way, he would be contradicting his strong position on God's atemporality. This is because if our future is non-existent to God, then it is also future to him, meaning that he is temporally bound to the present. Therefore, we must understand Augustine to be saying that to God there is no such thing as the experience of future, meaning that to him there is no present expectation of things which do not yet exist (for him).

With respect to God's knowledge of our future, then, Augustine is saying that our future, which to us does not exist, is present to God. Therefore, God teaches what is present (to him), but has a bearing on the future (to us). This is difficult to comprehend, as it should be if we have understood Augustine correctly, for he immediately confesses, "this method of yours is far above the reach of my mind." But despite its difficulty, there is no incoherence expressed here.

In contrast to the temporality of creation Augustine always maintains God's eternal nature.[102] In *The City of God*, he says: "the divine mind is absolutely unchangeable, infinitely capacious, and, without succession of thought, counting all things without number."[103] But how can an unchangeable mind, with no succession of thought, *do* anything? By denying a prior temporal moment to creation, has Augustine really answered the challenge, 'what was God doing prior to creation?' From the questioner's perspective of an everlasting world, certainly: he has answered it by denying the premise of an infinite past. However, this does not mean that an act

---

[101] This interpretation is taken by Rist, *Augustine*, 84.
[102] Augustine, "Refutation of the Manichees," I.2.4; "Unfinished Literal Commentary," 1.2, 7.28; *Confessions*, XI.8.10; "Literal Meaning," VIII.20.39; *City of God*, XII.14.
[103] Augustine, *City of God*, XII.17.

by an eternal being makes any sense. If God is unchanging, then it would seem that he cannot do anything at all. Certainly, an atemporal God cannot *temporally* do anything if this would entail any change with respect to God. But what other kind of *doing* is there? How can we understand such notions as the origin of time and space, or the many acts of God necessary to the Christian worldview and emphatically affirmed by Augustine?

Augustine's solution is found in the very nature of God as immutable. He argues: "God's will belongs to the very substance of God. But if some element appears in God's substance that was previously not there, that substance cannot accurately be called eternal."[104] Creation, then, cannot represent a change in God's will, but must be eternally willed. Augustine anticipates the objection: 'if God's will to create is eternal, then why is creation not also eternal?' He answers that it is not possible that creation, even though willed eternally, should be eternal. If temporal creation is to exist at all, it cannot be other than *temporal*. His answer cuts to the heart of the misunderstanding that motivates the question. "Eternal," in the objection, is used in the sense of *infinite*. It certainly would be absurd if creation were willed for an infinite time, while remaining finite in its own duration; but this is not what is in view with *creatio ex nihilo*. Augustine explains that "in eternity nothing passes, for the whole is present, whereas time cannot be present all at once."[105] In eternity, therefore, the whole history of creation is complete and exists permanently without change.

However, granted that creation is by nature temporal, does it not still follow from being eternally willed that creation must be present through all eternity, and therefore eternal in some sense itself? Might we not call it co-eternal with God, in that it is the expression of God's eternal

---

[104] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.10.12. See also, *Confessions*, VII.4.6: "God's will and God's power are identical with God himself."
[105] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.11.13.

will, which is identical with his own substance? In fact, no, for this would be to make the same error as above, of reading a temporal sense into *eternity*. While Augustine holds that God's will is identical with his substance, and the *expression* of that will – as an act of God – can be understood as identical with the will, however, the *expression* – as the effect – cannot likewise be taken as identical with God's will. We have already determined that the nature of creation is not eternal, but temporal, and that which is co-eternal with God – and, therefore, is God by nature – cannot be temporal. The error that 'creation is present *through* all eternity, and therefore eternal' is again to treat *eternity* as a duration.

Eternity is not a duration, but rather, a form of being in which everything that relates to that being does so together, wholly, and without change. However, it is not required that everything that relates to an eternal being must itself be eternal. No contradictions arise from the supposition that temporal beings relate to an eternal being. Therefore, one may coherently suppose that in eternity God wills to create, and in eternity there is a creation - a temporal thing, by nature. Or perhaps it is better to say that a temporal creation is eternally related to God. All that is necessary is that creation be understood as temporal and that the whole of it be related to God in eternity.[106]

Therefore, we have in Augustine's doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* quite a robust view that is not only an internally consistent account of the origin of the world, but one that offers considerable insight into divine and created natures. By understanding the necessary difference between an eternal creator and contingent creation, we get to the heart of the doctrine as a doctrine principally about God. Through further analysis of the human experience of reality, Augustine provides a way of coherently relating God to human beings, as well as suggesting

---

[106] The question of whether creation can coherently be related to an eternal God will be considered in detail in section X of this paper.

solutions to apparent conflicts between good and evil, and divine foreknowledge and human freedom. Furthermore, he does all of this within a deep commitment to the authority of Church teaching and Scripture, such that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* has persisted well into the modern era as the definitive Christian position.

III. *Creatio ex nihilo* in the Modern World

Since Augustine's time, *creatio ex nihilo* has persisted as the historical orthodox Christian position on creation. Sorabji reports that while there has been some dissent throughout the ages, the orthodox Judeo-Christian view has come to be that the universe had a beginning.[107] Janet Soskice notes that despite the many theological debates on central Christian doctrines, *creatio ex nihilo* has never been the subject of debate for an ecumenical council,[108] and is affirmed in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds[109], which continue to be widely held confessions. While the wording of the Apostle's Creed, in various possible formats, is not inconsistent with a denial of *creatio ex nihilo*, the Nicene Creed's, "maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible," does not seem amenable to a denial of the doctrine. Therefore, a successful challenge to the coherence of this doctrine would have significant consequences for modern Christianity. While our focus will be on philosophical challenges, it would be remiss to avoid a consideration of where Augustine's view stands in terms of modern cosmology.

Relativity

When Newton's laws were accepted, it became apparent that movement is relative to perspective. Does the Sun rise and set, or does the Earth revolve around the Sun? The answer is:

---

[107] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 194-95.
[108] Soskice, "Why *Creatio ex nihilo*," 38.
[109] Soskice, "Why *Creatio ex nihilo*," 49.

both. With respect to a perspective from the Earth, the Sun does rise and set, but with respect to a perspective from the Sun, it is the Earth that rises and sets as it orbits the Sun. Neither description is more correct. It was the inadequacy of Geocentrism to accurately describe the forces involved in the rising and setting of the Sun that made it an inferior model, not the description of 'rising and setting' itself. Stephen Hawking explains the relativity of space using a ball bouncing on a moving train.[110] If the ball lands on the same spot on the train, an observer on the train would say it traveled no distance, while an observer beside the train would say it had traveled some distance down the track. The answer is relative to the reference point we choose, but there is no absolute reference point; the Earth itself is moving relative to the Sun, and the Sun is moving relative to the Milky Way galaxy, and so on.

Likewise, relativity holds that neither is there an absolute time. In 1887 Albert Michelson and Edward Morley compared the speed of light in the direction of the movement of the Earth and at right angles to it and discovered that the speed of light is constant regardless of direction. This unexpected discovery led to the realization that time is relative, depending on one's perspective, because of the relativity of space.[111] Since the speed of light is constant and space is relative to one's perspective, it follows that time is also relative, as the time that passes for light to travel between two points is relative to the distance between those points from one's perspective.

Since Augustine could have no idea of the physics entailing the relativity of time, and his conception of God's timelessness is related to his conception of time, how might relativity affect his views? Based on his explanation of time in *The Confessions*, we might suppose - along with

---

[110] Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: Updated and Expanded Tenth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 17-18.
[111] Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 20.

Clark, Gilson, and Markus - that he holds a presentist view of time, in which only the present exists but the past and future do not exist. Recall that Augustine spent considerable effort to explain past and future in terms of the present, landing on the idea of three present tenses of time. On the other hand, his explanation of God's eternal perspective lends itself to the growing popularity of eternalist views of time, in which all of time can be said to be equally real – as Augustine certainly does claim for God's perspective.

I do not find that we would need to settle this debate in order to hold that Augustine's view on creation is coherent, and therefore Augustine does not need to have anticipated the correct cosmological views in order for his view on creation to be relevant. For, a presentist will hold that only the present exists now, but that the past no longer exists, and the future does not yet exist. All of this is in agreement with Augustine. And when Augustine talks about God knowing all times in eternity, the presentist cannot disagree on any claim about the present. The best he can do is to deny the reality of eternity; but this is not required of presentism, except to say that eternity is not present, with which we should all agree. On the other hand, when an eternalist says that past, present, and future are equally real, we cannot really take him to be supposing that they are equally real *now*; for *now* just is the present. He may say that just as Canada is no less real when we travel to Mexico, the year 2020 is no less real when we are not in 2020. Yet Mexico is real *at the same time* as Canada is real, no matter where our perspective is located. It is not the case, however, that Canada is real *in the same place* as Mexico is real, because part of what it means to be Canada is that it is not Mexico. Likewise, 2020 may be no less real than 2019, but it is certainly not the case that 2020 is real *in 2019*, because part of what it means to be 2020 is that it is not 2019. Therefore, eternalism need not be incompatible with the claim that in the present the past and future do not exist. In fact, Augustine's view provides a

perfectly workable perspective in which it is true to say that all times are equally real – the

perspective of the eternal God – while at the same time allowing the presentist perspective that

only the present is real *now*. For, when we say that anything *is real* we make a temporal

statement about the present, and anything that is by definition 'not the present' cannot logically

be held to be presently real.

Cosmology

One final consideration must be made regarding Augustine's consistency with modern

science. Various cosmological models have been offered that suggest a possible explanation of

the universe without reference to a creator. For example, Lawrence Krauss proposes that the

universe can arise out of 'nothing,'[112] and Stephen Hawking proposes a model of cosmology that

denies a temporal boundary (i.e. an origin in time). It may be thought that such models cast doubt

on the view that creation is a plausible explanation of the world. Krauss and Hawking certainly

think so.[113] However, neither of these models are in competition with the creation hypothesis.

As discussed earlier, *creatio ex nihilo* is not primarily about what happened regarding the

origin of the world. It may be fair to say that these questions have been taken as the primary

concern of many who have studied the question of whether the universe has been created;

however, to understand the doctrine of creation as primarily about describing physical events is

to take it as a primarily empirical study. In this case, it would follow that the creation hypothesis

would be in competition with other empirical models. What sets the doctrine of creation apart

from empirical studies, however, is the claim that a being unlike anything else in the world – a

---

[112] Lawrence Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 151.

[113] Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing*, 183. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 146.

necessary being – is responsible for the existence of the contingent world as a whole. This is not to answer the question, 'how did the universe come about?' but 'why is there anything at all?'

As Krauss points out, 'why' questions are not the same as 'how' questions, and cosmologists are really asking 'how' questions.[114] But Krauss suggests that when we ask, 'why is there anything rather than nothing?' we really want to know *how* it has come about that there is anything. This is part of what we want to know, surely, but Krauss' proposed model of *how* the universe came to be begins with a pre-existing state of contingent reality.[115] He has chosen to call this pre-existing state "nothing," but he is quite clear that by *nothing* he actually means *something*.[116] Therefore, Krauss does not even propose to answer *how* the universe exists, let alone *why* it exists. He begins with a universe called 'nothing,' and goes from there. Similarly, Stephen Hawking's proposal attempts to explain the beginning of the universe without a definite beginning. Such a universe, Hawking explains, "would be completely self-contained and not affected by anything outside itself. It would neither be created nor destroyed. It would just BE."[117] Hawking's uncreated deity[118] has a shortcoming: it is made of contingent matter. Even if Hawking's model were validated, the question would remain, 'why is there a contingent uncreated universe?'

In opposition to the philosophical convictions of Krauss and Hawking, that empirical models explaining the initial stages of the universe may preclude the universe's creation, Adam D. Hincks argues that *matter* – as potentiality, or, that which makes *form* possible – is the

---

[114] Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing*, 143.

[115] Stephen Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 278.

[116] See Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing*, 58: "By *nothing*, I do not mean nothing, but rather *nothing* – in this case, the nothingness we normally call empty space."

[117] Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 140.

[118] His implication. Cf. Exodus, 3:14.

primary subject of *creatio ex nihilo*: the subject presupposed by all empirical models.[119] This metaphysical division between *matter* and *form* is a division of the concepts involved in the idea of *physical matter*: the 'stuff' or 'matter' of the empiricist. A cosmological model is an empirical model, and as such it must begin with *empirical matter* (including both metaphysical matter and form together). Some attempt to explain the origin of empirical matter – which is to go beyond the scope of empirical models – by postulating pure potentiality (i.e. metaphysical matter without form). However, metaphysically, matter never exists without form – what form would it take? Therefore, any attempt to explain how empirical matter came to be from pure potentiality is incoherent, because there can be no such thing. Thus, Hincks argues that as long as cosmology remains an *a posteriori* science, it presupposes, and therefore cannot explain, potentiality.[120]

None of this means that the doctrine of creation is certain or unequivocally vindicated. What it does demonstrate, I think, is that cosmological models would need to do far more than explain the earliest conditions of the universe if they are to pose any serious challenge to the creation hypothesis in general. Short of becoming an *a priori* science, revealing the necessity of everything we see in the universe, cosmology can have little to add to the question of whether or not the world is created. Ever an adopter of the science of his day, Augustine would very likely have had no difficulty accepting modern advances in cosmology and relativity. The development of eternalist conceptions of time (owing significantly to his work) would have given him a richer vocabulary to work through the implications of temporality, eternity, and the relationship between the two.

---

[119] Adam D. Hincks, "What Does Physical Cosmology Say about Creation from Nothing?," in *Creation* ex nihilo: *Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 327.

[120] Hincks, "What Does Physical Cosmology Say about Creation from Nothing?," 337. See also: Andrew Davison, "Looking Back toward the Origin: Scientific Cosmology as Creation *ex nihilo* Considered 'from the Inside,' " in *Creation* ex nihilo: *Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 381.

Chapter 2

Incoherence in the Creative Act

Augustine thinks of God as existing in an eternity that is antithetical to time, where "the whole is present."[121] Within this all-encompassing present he takes God as the *first cause*, who created everything else from nothing.[122] The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* has been by far the dominant Christian view of creation for more than eighteen centuries, rising to prominence long before Augustine's seminal formulation.[123] But it has long been challenged by those who deny a creator on the grounds of a supposed incoherence implicit in the notion of a transcendent creator of time and space. I will defend Augustine's conception of God's timelessness as providing a coherent model of the exercise of transcendent causality. My purpose will be to show that a failure to adequately comprehend or take timelessness into account is responsible for problems arising from the doctrine of creation, rather than any incoherence.[124] I will demonstrate this failure in two contemporary challenges from Julian Wolfe and Adolf Grünbaum. Along the way I will draw on William Lane Craig's defense of a timelessness conception of God who timelessly acts to create the world, as well as further criticisms from Graham Oppy, who seeks to refute the coherence of Craig's position. I conclude that despite demonstrating comprehension of *timelessness*, Craig and Oppy both also fall into similar inconsistent characterizations of timelessness as temporal.

---

[121] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.11.13.

[122] Augustine, "Refutation of the Manichees," I.6.10.

[123] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 14-15; Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 194-95; Soskice, "Why *Creatio ex nihilo*?," 37-38.

[124] While I will be defending Augustine's view of *creatio ex nihilo*, I recognize that not all challenges to creation have this doctrine in mind. This is part of the problem, in my opinion, given the lengthy history of dominance this view has enjoyed. If one is to bring challenges against the general idea of creation, one ought to at least be familiar with the view that has enjoyed such a central and uncontested place in the history of religious thought.

IV. Julian Wolfe

In his article, "Infinite Regress and the Cosmological Argument," Julian Wolfe

challenges the idea that an infinite past is impossible. He attempts a *reductio* to show that the

conclusion of the Cosmological Argument – 'there exists an uncaused cause of the universe' –

entails an infinite past, thereby contradicting one of its own premises.[125] If it can be shown that

the existence of a transcendent *first cause* entails an infinite past, as Wolfe maintains, then this

principle can be generalized to any conception of creation. While one could still consistently

hold a creation hypothesis as an explanation of the potentiality in the system as a whole, as

discussed in the previous section, at the very least it should be understood that accepting the

possibility of an infinite past would call into question the context in which much of Augustine's

development of *creatio ex nihilo* arises.[126] On the other hand, if we accept that the concept of an

actual infinite is incoherent,[127] and if Wolfe's argument is sustained, then we must also consider

creatio ex nihilo to be incoherent. However, Wolfe's attempted *reductio* fails because it relies on

a presupposition that a cause of the universe must be temporal, and so he provides no reasons as

to why the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* should be rejected.

Wolfe presents the Cosmological Argument as follows:

(1)   We know that at least some things are caused to come into being
(2)   Either whatever causes something to come into being has itself been caused to come into being or there is something that causes something to come into being which has not itself been caused to come into being
(3)   But if whatever causes something to come into being has itself been caused to come into being, there is an infinite series of causes stretching back in time
(4)   But there cannot be such a series
(5)   Hence there is something that causes something to come into being which has not

---

[125] Julian Wolfe, "Infinite Regress and the Cosmological Argument" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2, No. 4 (Winter 1971): 247.

[126] For instance, much of the implications of *creatio ex nihilo* are spelled out in the context of biblical revelation, which Augustine takes as involving a beginning in time. If it were demonstrated that an infinite past time is possible, the relevance of many of these implications would likely suffer.

[127] See William Lane Craig, *Kalām Cosmological Argument* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1979), 65-110.

itself been caused to come into being. That is, there is an uncaused cause, and this is God.[128]

Wolfe explains the rationale underlying the controversial premise (4) as follows: "If there were an infinite series of causes stretching back in time, in order to reach the present an infinite time would have had to elapse . . . But, it is contended, it is not possible for an infinite time to elapse, for any time period that elapses is necessarily finite."[129] Wolfe will try to show, however, that premise (4) is not available to the proponent of the argument. Wolfe's presentation of the Cosmological Argument is mostly fair. He seems, for the most part, to adequately understand the force of the argument and does not misstate it to his advantage.

Nevertheless, the presentation is deficient in the temporal implications in the latter part of (3) where the series of causes is described as "stretching back in time," and again in his explanation of (4), given above. For, strictly speaking, it is not necessary that the causal chain be conceived as extending in time. Consider, as an example, a train. The 1948 operating manual of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway defines a *train* as "an engine or more than one engine coupled, with or without cars, displaying markers."[130] Using this definition, consider a series of cars stretching indefinitely in one direction, with appropriate markers, but without any engine. Now, if an engine is attached, this would cause each car to simultaneously become members of a *train*, according to our definition, and each car would do so because one of two conditions is met: either (a) it is connected to an engine, or (b) it is connected to a car that is a member of a train. Suppose that there was a marker on each car that would identify whether or not it was part of a train, and we observed the last car's *train state* change from *false* to *true*.

---

[128] Wolfe, "Infinite Regress," 246.

[129] Wolfe, "Infinite Regress," 246-47.

[130] Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway (1948). *Rules: Operating Department*, 7 (quoted in "Train," *Wikipedia*, accessed June 6, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Train#cite_note-3).

Although we understand that (b) is a sufficient reason for each car to be a member of a train, we also easily deduce that an infinite series of cars with no engine could not each meet condition (b) without some car in the series meeting condition (a). Thus, if any car's train status changes from *false* to *true*, we would deduce that an engine had docked with the other end of the train, and that the series prior to the docking, at least, was finite.[131]

The Cosmological Argument is based on the existence of a series of causes, like the train, which it is then argued cannot possibly be infinite. As the train example shows, temporality is not a necessary feature of the argument, as a causal chain can be understood to be simultaneous; in fact, one of the causes in the Cosmological Argument – the *first cause* – cannot be properly understood as temporal. However, to minimally understand the force of the Cosmological Argument, the way it has been characterized by Wolfe may suffice, given that the argument is made against a naturalistic view in which an infinite past time is assumed, and a temporal causal chain is implied. What is being denied is an infinite temporal series, and this can be understood without understanding the atemporal implications of the concept: *first cause*. Nevertheless, this misunderstanding does become a problem in the next part of Wolfe's argument.

Wolfe's next move is to show that there cannot be an *uncaused cause* without it also being the case that an infinite past time has elapsed, in order to refute the Cosmological Argument. He argues:

(6)   nothing comes into being without a cause
(7)   hence an uncaused cause can never have come into being
(8)   if, prior to causing the "first effect" (whatever it is that is caused by the uncaused cause), there were a point in time at which the uncaused cause did not exist, it would have had to come into being at some subsequent time in order to be in existence to cause the first effect
(9)   hence, prior to causing the first effect, there is no point in time at which an uncaused cause does not exist

---

[131] This scenario would not preclude the docking of a train containing an infinite number of cars, so long as one or more of them was an engine.

(10)   if an uncaused cause, prior to causing the first effect, existed for only a finite time, there would have been a point in time at which it did not exist

(11)   hence an uncaused cause must exist for an infinite time prior to causing the first effect

(12)   hence by the time the first effect is caused, an infinite time would have elapsed.[132]

Wolfe is now considering the implications of the existence of an *uncaused cause*, but, like before, he is assuming a purely temporal context. Premises (6) and (7) are unobjectionable whether one views the *first cause* as temporal, as Wolfe does, or eternal, as Augustine holds. Premise (8), however, postulates a time earlier than the first effect, rightly concluding that if there were any such points in time when the *first cause* did not exist, then the *first cause* would have had to have come into being at some later time. But Augustine would simply have denied the postulated time prior to the first effect. In *creatio ex nihilo*, time is included in the effects caused by God, so premise (8) is incoherent in Augustine's view.

However, even if we grant Wolfe's postulation of a past time for the sake of completing his argument, he gets tripped up again with a similar mistake. Premise (9) follows from (7) and (6), that there cannot be any time earlier than the first effect, in which the *first cause* did not exist. Premise (10), then, implies a dichotomy between the *first cause* having a finite or infinite existence, given the assumption already allowed from (8) that the *first cause* existed before the first event. The dichotomy follows from the assumption of past time, but the conclusion in (10), that a *first cause* having a finite existence entails a time in which the *first cause* did not exist, does not follow from what has been argued. For, Wolfe has not argued that if there is any past time, it must be infinite. Wolfe has thus far postulated a time before the first effect, noting that an *uncaused cause* could not fail to exist at any such time. He then argues that if we assume God exists for a finite time, then *there would be a time when God does not exist*. But it does not

[132] Wolfe, "Infinite Regress," 247-248. Argument numbers changed for continuity.

follow from any of the above premises, nor the postulated past time, that the past time must be

infinite. For the same reason, Wolfe's conclusion in (11), that the first cause must have existed

for an infinite time, does not follow from his argument. Hence, his conclusion (12), that an

infinite time would be entailed by the existence of a *first cause*, also does not follow. The

conclusion of infinite time, therefore, is already suggested in premise (8), and required for (10)

and (11). Thus, not only does Wolfe fail to anticipate that the most accepted conception of a *first*

cause, as timeless, avoids the contradiction he seeks to prove, but the argument is also invalid

because premise (10) does not follow from the previous premises without also assuming the

conclusion.

The significance of Wolfe's oversight regarding the atemporality of God is explained by

the preeminent contemporary proponent of the Cosmological Argument, William Lane Craig.

Craig maintains that Wolfe's assumption that 'uncaused' equates to 'infinite temporal existence'

is a *non-sequitur*, explaining that "if time is the relation arising from the succession of events,

then prior to the first event *there simply was no time*."[133] And in any other view of time that

would allow the conceptualization of '*before* the first effect,' if there were no events to count

there would still be no way to conceptualize an infinite number of anything.[134] So it does not

follow from the existence of a *first cause* that any kind of infinite series of discrete events or

countable durations would be entailed. Therefore, *creatio ex nihilo* does not entail the existence

of an infinite series and cannot be considered incoherent on this basis.

---

[133] William Lane Craig, "Julian Wolfe and Infinite Time," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11 (1980): 134.

[134] Craig, "Julian Wolfe and Infinite Time," 134.

In a subsequent article, Wolfe responds to Craig with two related arguments.[135] First, he insists that *priority* is an essentially temporal relation and, as such, any appeal to a prior state *just is* to postulate prior time. If this objection can be sustained, it would follow that the concept of an atemporal being is incoherent, because according to the objection, any state of reality constitutes *time*. However, this argument would have to brush off a history of using *prior* in an atemporal sense that dates back at least to Plato.[136] In the train example, above, we had an example of a causal chain that did not require causes to exist prior in time, but could instead be understood as *causally prior*. In that example, however, while the causes were not *prior* in time, *they were in time*. In addition, that example did not involve an atemporal cause of a temporal event.

How might the case of atemporal causation, then, differ from the temporal example? It seems that Wolfe has in mind a state of reality in which the first event does not yet exist, followed by the state of reality in which it does. However, this picture is not an accurate depiction of *creatio ex nihilo*. That which is eternal is immutable, which means that there can be no change in eternity from one state to another. Therefore, the first event, and all events in time, must be related eternally if they are to be related at all. On the other hand, in time there is no first cause; time begins with the first effect. Therefore, neither in eternity nor in time can the *first cause* and first effect be coherently represented in a temporal relation. It remains to be seen whether any relation between the *first cause* and first effect can be coherently expressed, but it is clear that Wolfe has not given us any reason to think that such a relation is impossible.

Secondly, Wolfe asserts that the act itself, of causing the first event, requires that we assign temporal predicates to that cause. But if time did not exist prior to the first moment of

[135] Julian Wolfe, "On the Impossibility of an Infinite Past: A Reply to Craig," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 18 (1985): 91.

[136] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 114.

creation, then the *first cause* is timeless and not the kind of being that temporal predicates can be applied to. Wolfe's argument seems to be based on the temporal locatability of the first event. However, this locatability only places the *effect* in time. In order to determine that the *first cause* must also be in time we must assume the impossibility of atemporal causation. Thus, Wolfe's argument begs the question. He assumes that a timeless being cannot be a cause of an event in time.

Wolfe's initial argument fails to demonstrate that the existence of a *first cause* entails an infinite series of time (or discrete countable durations). His conclusions rely on a particular conception of time that is rejected by Augustine, and Craig's rebuttal shows that Wolfe's argument cannot be generalized to apply outside of that specific conception of time. Additionally, Wolfe's argument does not even succeed within his own stipulations, committing a *non-sequitur* that implicitly assumes the truth of the conclusion. Subsequently, he fails to substantiate his assertion that atemporal causation is incoherent. Instead, he simply assumes that a temporal relation must exist between any cause and effect. Therefore, Wolfe has failed to demonstrate that *creatio ex nihilo* implies any incoherence whatsoever.

V. Adolf Grünbaum

Adolf Grünbaum's approach to timeless creation suffers from a similar oversight. In his article, "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation in Physical Cosmology," Grünbaum advances an argument that the act of creation entails the self-contradiction that 'there was time before the beginning of the universe.' If such an argument can be demonstrated, it would follow that *creatio ex nihilo*, which posits the creation of time but denies the possible existence of any prior time, would be rendered incoherent. However, Grünbaum fails to adequately understand and account

for Augustine's conception of timeless causation and oversteps the philosophical implications of the Big Bang.

In his article, Grünbaum offers a comprehensive rebuttal to traditional creation hypotheses in three groups of objections. These objections focus on features of arguments that do not concern *creatio ex nihilo*. One view that Grünbaum consciously ignores, however, is Augustine's view of "timeless causation," which Grünbaum dismisses as "unintelligible or incoherent."[137] In a subsequent version of his article, Grünbaum explains his reasons for not examining this position in any detail by saying that timeless causation is not relevant to current physics.[138] However, the subject he is addressing is the origin of time and space – the origin of physics itself! Surely, there is nothing more relevant to current physics than its origin. Grünbaum's justification for avoiding Augustine's view is troubling, also, because it is inconsistent. Incoherence and irrelevance are not the same problem. Grünbaum appears to be unaware of any demonstrable incoherence, so we are left to conclude that he simply finds Augustine's view unintelligible. However, this incomprehension does not keep Grünbaum from commenting on views that invoke timeless causation.

Grünbaum considers creation arguments involving two similar models of Big Bang cosmology, one in which there is a single temporally first moment in time ($t = 0$), which occurred a finite time in the past, and a second in which the universe is the same finite age, but which denies the instant $t = 0$.[139] In both cases, Grünbaum explains, "*there simply did not exist any instants of time before $t = 0$!*"[140] Grünbaum objects to the implication often drawn from this,

---

[137] Adolf Grünbaum, "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation in Physical Cosmology," *Philosophy of Science* 56, no. 3 (Sept. 1989): 378-79.

[138] Adolf Grünbaum, "Creation as a Pseudo-Explanation in Current Physical Cosmology," *In Erkenntnis* 35 (1991), 244.

[139] Grünbaum, "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation," 389-391.

[140] Grünbaum, "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation," 389. Grünbaum confirms this in the second case on p. 391.

that either scenario represents a *beginning* of time. His objection is based on a supposed

difference between the Big Bang scenarios and any other event – such as a concert – that involve

a *beginning*. The difference, says Grünbaum, is that "the concert was actually preceded by actual

instants of time, when it had *not yet* begun."[141] This means that a thing cannot have had a

beginning unless there existed prior moments of time in which it did not exist. Thus, Grünbaum

argues, "To ask how this matter came into existence in the first place is to presuppose not only

earlier moments of time, but also the non-existence of any matter at those supposed earlier

times."[142] So the requirement to consider the Big Bang as a *beginning* is that there exist earlier

times in which no matter exists. But this is both analytically impossible – because in Big Bang

cosmology time cannot exist without matter – and logically impossible – because time cannot

exist before the first moments of time.

In a rebuttal to Grünbaum's article, Craig objects to Grünbaum's definition of *beginning*.

The second premise in Craig's Cosmological Argument, is that the universe began to exist,[143] so

it is important to him that the universe be understood as having a beginning. But a greater

concern with respect to the coherence of *creatio ex nihilo*, is Grünbaum's generalizable claim

that a beginning of time is positively incoherent because it entails a time before time. Craig

argues that Grünbaum's requirement of the existence of prior time is an unnecessary addition to

the concept of *beginning*. Instead, he argues that a thing *beginning to exist* logically entails *only*

that there is no immediately prior time in which it existed.[144] Of course, any example of a

beginning that we can draw from experience will have the feature included by Grünbaum, of a

---

[141] Grünbaum, "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation," 389.
[142] Grünbaum, "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation," 390.
[143] "1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence. 2. The universe began to exist. 3. Therefore the universe has a cause of its existence," Craig, *Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 63.
[144] Craig, "The Origin and Creation of the Universe: A Reply to Adolf Grünbaum," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 43, no. 2 (1992): 238.

prior temporal instant in which the thing did not yet exist. However, there is no deficiency in Craig's definition of *beginning* that requires Grünbaum's addition. Since Craig's definition of *beginning* is sufficient for any example we might produce and is simpler, making no demands regarding the existence of a time with no relation to the event in question, Craig's characterization is clearly superior.

By writing off Augustine's view involving timeless causation, Grünbaum assumes that the universe is the only domain in which the act of creation can possibly be intelligible. That is, Grünbaum begs the question by assuming naturalism in order to disprove creation. Grünbaum's appeal to the prior temporal non-existence featured in temporal examples of *beginnings* fails to demonstrate that this is an essential feature of those *beginnings*. Craig's defense of a simpler conception of *beginning* is superior even without reference to *creatio ex nihilo*. However, even if the reverse was true, the fact that any conception can be found that is consistent with *creatio ex nihilo* would remove any remaining force from Grünbaum's argument. If *creatio ex nihilo* is only incoherent according to one way of conceiving *beginnings*, and other reasonable options exist, then this does nothing to suggest the incoherence of *creatio ex* nihilo.

VI. William Lane Craig

Despite Craig's defense of timeless creation against both Wolfe and Grünbaum's challenges, his own view is not free from inconsistency. In *The Kalām Cosmological Argument*, following the conclusion of his argument for the existence of an *uncaused cause* of the universe, Craig offers two models for understanding an eternal God's act of creation. These models represent two ways of understanding time: the *relational* and the *Newtonian*, views. In the Newtonian view, time is absolute – it is not dependent on the universe but extends back infinitely

before the moment of creation.[145] The relational view, on the other hand, takes time as consisting

in the occurrence of events themselves, so the beginning of time is taken as synonymous with the

first event.[146] So, whether time is dependent on or independent of events, these two models

purport to represent all possible options. If both models entail some incoherence – which I find

that they do – then unless some third characterization of the relation of time with events can be

found, it would follow that *creatio ex nihilo* is incoherent. However, Graham Oppy attempts to

make a better defense of the relational view – a defense more in line with Augustine's

conception of God's eternal nature – only to find that this entails that God began to exist. But if

this is the case, then *creatio ex nihilo* is incoherent, for the doctrine holds that God necessarily

has no beginning. I will argue that Oppy's Augustinian shift works better than he knows, and that

his arguments against this defense fail to go through.

On the Newtonian view, Craig explains, "God exists in absolute time changelessly and

independently prior to creation, and that creation simply marks the first event in time."[147] In his

reply to Wolfe, he adds, "on a Newtonian view of time, prior to the first event would exist the

unchanging uncaused cause. There would be no events to differentiate time into temporal

segments of hours or days, there would be only the sheer duration of the eternal uncaused

cause."[148] On this account, time is infinitely extended prior to creation, in which God exists

changelessly for an infinite time. Oppy argues that this is incoherent:

> On the one hand, to say that eternity is 'measureless' is to say that it does not support a
> measure. However, to say that eternity 'elapses' is to say that there is a kind of succession
> that can be attributed to eternity: eternity may be undifferentiated, but it consists of one

---

145 Craig, *Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 152.
146 Craig, *Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 107.
147 Craig, *Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 152.
148 Craig, "Julian Wolfe and Infinite Time," 134. Note that Craig's use of *eternal* is not exactly consistent
with Augustine; due to the allowance of some sense of *time*, Craig's use seems more in line with *sempiternal* (i.e.
everlasting).

'part' after another. On the other hand, to say that eternity is 'infinite' is precisely to say that the 'parts' that make up eternity are themselves measurable.[149]

Oppy wants to know how Craig can maintain the infinity of Newtonian time, while at the same time holding that it involves no differentiation whatsoever. If infinite time is in view, then in what way is it *infinite*? Craig cannot accept an actual infinite,[150] but surely the infinite time of the Newtonian is not merely a *potential* infinite; for God is said to actually exist from eternity, not merely to possess eternal potential existence.[151] I find, therefore, that Craig's allowance of infinite *absolute time* is not coherent. There is no acceptable way to understand the infinity of past time *as infinite*.

The relational view, on the other hand, holds that God wills timelessly to create, which is the beginning of time.[152] So far it is consistent with Augustine, however, Craig does not consistently maintain the timelessness of God. He reasons, "If God is related to the world, then it seems most reasonable to maintain that God is timeless prior to creation and in time subsequent to creation. This occurs not because of any change in God but because He is suddenly related to changing things." What is troubling about this is not the idea that a change occurs with respect to God's timeless nature, which Craig resists. The problem is that the entire statement is given a temporal sense. *Prior* to creation, God is timeless, but then *suddenly* creation occurs, and he is *subsequently* related to changing things. But if it makes sense to talk about a sudden shift, then God wasn't really timeless in the first place. Craig's relational view sounds identical to the Newtonian view. Only in absolute Newtonian time can it make sense to talk about God's lack of temporal relations *before creation*, and *subsequent* relation in created time.

---

[149] Graham Oppy, *Describing Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 123.
[150] Craig, *Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 69.
[151] Craig, *Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 152.
[152] Craig, *Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 151.

Oppy charitably ignores the incoherent implication that Craig is making a temporally relative statement, supposing he cannot mean "*temporally prior*."[153] However, this seems to be precisely how Craig means it. He explains that "on a relational view of time, God would exist timelessly and independently prior to creation: at creation, which He has willed from eternity to appear temporally, time begins, and God subjects Himself to time by being related to changing things."[154] In his article, "God, Time, and Eternity," Craig defends this temporal language by appealing to an analogy from Brian Ellis.[155] Craig argues that we can coherently speak of lower temperatures than absolute zero when we say that they do not exist. In the same way, Craig argues, we can speak of a *time* when the universe did not exist without implying there was any such time, meaning that we can conceptually move past the boundary of possibility. Therefore, Craig intends to refer to a *time before time*, which he does not believe exists, in order to be able to say something meaningful about creation. Thus, he treats creation as a change in the eternal *time before time*: a notion he understands to be incoherent.

But what is the use of conceiving of the impossible? When we deny the existence of temperature below absolute zero, we only mean to deny that the statement, 'below absolute zero' is coherent. We cannot, then, use this conceptual freedom to make any coherent statements about reality other than statements that deny their own referent, such as to say that there is no such thing as a *temperature below zero* or a *time before time*. To go on to say anything else about such temperatures or times would be like would be absurd. In fact, Craig rebukes Stephen Hawking for a similar move in using *imaginary time* in his model of cosmology to avoid a beginning

---

[153] Oppy, *Describing Gods*, 122.
[154] Craig, *Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 152.
[155] Craig, "God, Time, and Eternity," *Religious Studies* 14, no. 4 (Dec. 1978): 501.

moment in time, calling Hawking's use "a meaningless combination of words."[156] Therefore, it is

not clear that Craig can say anything meaningful about reality if he can only say it in the context

of what he calls "a product of the imagination."[157] Therefore, creation is incoherent in both of the

possible models provided by Craig. In the Newtonian model he relies on *infinite* absolute time

that cannot be infinite in any meaningful sense. In the relational model he claims special

permission to use self-refuting statements to make claims that would otherwise be incoherent,

but, unsurprisingly, he is unable to make these statements communicate anything coherent.

VII. Graham Oppy

Oppy's analysis, however, seeks to find a better way to make sense of Craig's relational

view. He suggests that what ought to be meant by saying that God is prior to creation is that he is

causally prior. Oppy has some difficulty making sense of Craig's indexicals: '*at* creation,' and

'*from* eternity,' and his objection is well made that these ideas do not belong to timelessness. If

God is causally prior to creation, then this is just to say that he is the reason the universe exists,

but it need not have any temporal implications.[158] Let us dispense, then, with confused talk about

what things are like in eternity *prior to*, *at*, and *subsequent to* creation.

> However, the conclusion Oppy draws from this move is mistaken. He reasons:

> There is simply *nothing* to say about God's status prior to God's causing of the existence of his creation. Since God exists alone, and since there are no causal processes going on in God, or otherwise involving God, there isn't anything that creates a relational framework within which it makes sense to predicate metrical or topological properties of God (or of an arena in which God exists). God is simply the absolute origin of both causal and temporal reality.[159]

---

[156] Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, revised edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 110.
[157] Craig, "God, Time, and Eternity," 501.
[158] See the analysis of creation in eternity at the end of section II: "God's Eternal Nature."
[159] Oppy, *Describing Gods*, 122.

Oppy is arguing that the relational view commits us to an absolute beginning of reality. Since nothing changes in eternity, Oppy says nothing can be said about God in eternity *prior* to creation. This is not quite right. Whatever God's nature is can surely be attributed to him always. We can say, however, that nothing *new* can be said about God, but this is not restricted to 'prior to creation.' On a view in which God is timeless – and therefore immutable – the act of creation cannot be understood as an act that represents any change in God's will or in how he relates to anything with which he has any relation. However, having granted that the act of creation is *causally*, rather than *temporally*, prior, Oppy seeks the end of that causal chain. He argues that saying that God exists eternally either implies a series of successive states of reality – which are perhaps causally but not temporally related – or, if this is rejected, it means a single "initial causal state" of reality that includes only God.[160] But if the former case, then according to Craig's argument against an actual infinite, there cannot be an infinite number of causal states; there must be an initial causal state. In both cases, therefore, Oppy holds that there exists an initial causal state, which represents a beginning of reality.

Craig's Cosmological Argument held that "everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence."[161] Oppy now applies this premise to the initial causal state. If the initial causal state represents a *beginning to exist*, then according to Craig, it must have a further cause of its existence. But the initial causal state does not have a cause, by definition; it is *initial*. Therefore, Oppy concludes, the relational view is forced to deny Craig's premise that everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence.[162]

---

[160] Oppy, *Describing Gods*, 123.
[161] Craig, *Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 69.
[162] Oppy, *Describing Gods*, 124.

Oppy's argument, however, falls into the same error that we have seen Wolfe, Grünbaum, and Craig fall into. This error is to assume a temporal context in discussions of timelessness (or to miss the distinction altogether). Oppy is right to deny Craig's temporally relative statements, but he is wrong to conclude that this represents a "beginning to exist."[163] He wants to draw a parallel from the first instant of time to the first *instant* of atemporal reality, which is to treat timelessness as if it were temporal. Can God's *initial causal state* count as a *beginning*? Oppy might appeal to our acceptance of Craig's definition, earlier, that '*beginning to exist* logically entails *only* that there is no immediately prior time in which it existed.'[164] Is it not reasonable to say that with respect to God's eternity, no immediately prior time exists? It is not, because an immediately prior time to eternity is nonsense; the statement would have no meaning. In Craig and Grünbaum's discussion, it is very clear what is meant by a prior time to the first instants: just more of the same. But Oppy's identification of eternity as a *beginning*, because it is original, is incoherent. It has no meaning on Craig's conception of *beginning*. Therefore, Oppy cannot make any use of Craig's argument with respect to a *beginning* that is radically unlike the concept used by Craig.

Oppy's relational view, as he amends it, is nearly consistent with Augustine. As Oppy observes, timelessness, and a timeless God, must represent that which is original in reality. Oppy's description of original reality as an *initial state* cannot be quite right, however, because *state* implies something *static*. It also implies the possibility of alternate *states*. He is also wrong to suggest that this reality includes only God, for if that were the case, creation would have to be a change from a previous state, and this would describe time. It is not surprising, then, that Oppy's analysis of eternity comes to conclusions that would only be appropriate in a temporal

---

[163] Oppy, *Describing Gods*, 124.
[164] See section V: "Adolf Grünbaum."

system. Timelessness cannot be conceived as a static first instant, but must include the whole of all reality that it relates to: what Aquinas calls a "simultaneous whole."[165] This means quite the opposite of Oppy's picture of a beginning of reality, devoid of all save God; it means a reality fully realized, including everything that was, is, and will be.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered challenges to the rational coherence of *creatio ex nihilo*, all focusing on alleged difficulties surrounding the act of creation. As an act that is claimed to be the origin of all contingent reality, conceptual difficulties are unsurprising. One is required to conceive of a timeless cause of temporal reality: a kind of causation we are unfamiliar with in a temporal world. One of the main conclusions in this chapter is that timelessness is a difficult concept. Both Wolfe and Grünbaum exclude timelessness from their critique of the creation hypothesis without adequate reason. They both take temporality to transcend the material universe (if anything does), leaving them unable to conceive of timeless causation. But this only leaves them unable to comment on a doctrine that has been widely held for over eighteen centuries, and as a result, their challenges to the coherence of the act of creation miss the mark. Even Craig and Oppy, both of whom exhibit strong familiarity with the concept of timeless eternity, fail to maintain a coherent conception of eternity free of temporal implications. Craig's conscious use of temporal concepts to talk about eternity fails to coherently map onto timelessness. He describes a changeless God who nevertheless changes at a time before time exists. These statements do not gain meaning simply by recognizing their incoherence and seeking to conceptually rise above that incoherence. Finally, even while

---

[165] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1920), Ia, q. 10, art 1. See also: Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.11.13.

correcting Craig's error and moving to a more atemporal conception of eternity, Oppy also falls into illegitimate applications of temporality to timelessness. Oppy seeks to re-interpret atemporal reality in terms of a pseudo-temporality that *begins to exist*. However, he fails to adequately show that original atemporal reality is anything like a *beginning*.

The challenges brought against *creatio ex nihilo* in this chapter are far from sustained. Wolfe's attempt to demonstrate that *creatio ex nihilo* entails the possibility of an infinite past would force an incoherent understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*. Due to the circularity in his reasoning, this incoherence is easy to resist. Grünbaum's challenge denies the rational coherence of the idea that *creatio ex nihilo* entails a *beginning* of the existence of the universe. Like Wolfe, Grünbaum is guilty of circular reasoning: his conclusion that a beginning to exist entails prior time depends on his earlier unjustified disqualification of timeless causation as incoherent, which is just to say that causes are essentially temporal. As a result, his challenge to *creatio ex nihilo* never amounts to more than a bare assertion. Craig's attempt to defend *creatio ex nihilo*, as an attempt to explore the hypothesis comprehensively, becomes a liability when both of the models he appeals to seem unable to avoid incoherence. However, Oppy shows that a more consistent defense of *creatio ex nihilo* is possible by clearly differentiating the temporal and the eternal. Oppy's challenge, however, fails to maintain this separation. As a result, the conception of *creatio ex nihilo* defended by Augustine is not contradicted by any of the arguments put forward in these challenges.

Chapter 3

Incoherence Between Eternity and Creation

In the previous chapter we addressed problems said to arise from the very idea of creation itself. We found that Augustine's conception of God, as eternal, was key to negotiating these problems. We turn now to a related class of coherence challenges to *creatio ex nihilo*: those arising from supposed contradictions in the nature of an eternal God and his relation to the temporal world. For *creatio ex nihilo* involves a conception of God in which God continues to actively engage the world – sustaining it, willing it, knowing it, and so forth. But can an eternal God relate in any of these ways with a temporal world that he created? In this chapter, our focus will be on the special problems that seem to arise from the claim that God – the ultimate cause of all that is - is eternal and omniscient. We will begin by taking up the reconciliation of human free will with a conception of God in which God can be said to have knowledge of what, for us, is yet to come. We will follow Nelson Pike's presentation of the problem and attempted resolution by the idea of God's timelessness. While Pike's resolution is not quite right, we will see, once again, that Augustine's conception of God's timelessness plays an essential role in resolving the apparent conflict. Pike will then lead the second challenge: that timelessness is incompatible with the abilities necessary to be considered a *person*, as God is normally regarded. I will show that Pike's argument is far from adequate. Finally, because all of our challenges have centred on the difficult concept of timeless eternity and its mysterious on-going relationship with the temporal world, I will take on the positive burden of showing that *creatio ex nihilo* is coherent by identifying a coherent model of characterizing that relationship. I will argue that despite some serious problems in their presentation of *eternity* and the eternal-temporal relationship, Eleonore

Stump and Norman Kretzmann's *ET-simultaneity* model does succeed in coherently characterizing that relationship.

VIII. Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will

In *God and Timelessness*, Nelson Pike raises the classic problem that the existence of a God who infallibly knows the future implies that all events, including human actions, are determined beforehand, from which it seems to follow that there is no human freedom to act other than God foreknows. This problem – if it goes through – does not necessarily preclude *creatio ex nihilo* as such, as the notion of *determination* need not contradict the doctrine of creation or of any of the necessary attributes of God that follow from that doctrine. Determinism would be a problem, however, for one particular conception of *creatio ex nihilo* – namely, the one involved in the orthodox Christian position, to which Augustine is committed. This is because free will is assumed in both the central problem in Christianity – the universal human willful rejection of God – and its solution – the free act of receiving God's reconciliation. If the only way to consistently hold to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is to reject human freedom, this will be a cost too great for Augustine, the modern church, and all those who view freedom as an ineliminable feature of human experience and existence.

It might be thought that, given the conception of God developed thus far, the problem of foreknowledge should not arise in the first place. In fact, Pike does conclude that a timeless conception of God successfully avoids the problem. While I agree with his conclusion, I find his reasons do not sufficiently justify that conclusion, meaning that on his telling a timeless God does not avoid the problem. Therefore, another explanation is required to show that the problem can be resolved. Pike does not begin with a conception of God as *timeless*, however, but concludes that such a conception is desirable for reconciling free will with the existence of a God

who knows the future. Therefore, in order to follow his analysis, we will have to temporarily suspend the Augustinian view we have built up regarding God's nature.

The Problem

Imagine that God knew, a thousand years ago, that tomorrow Jones would mow his lawn.[166] Assuming that God's knowledge is infallible, we should conclude that Jones will certainly mow his lawn tomorrow. Tomorrow, then, when Jones is making up his mind, is he free to either mow or not mow? It would seem that we must conclude that not mowing will not be possible. Now, such an oddity could perhaps be accommodated. In ancient stories, the characters sometimes find themselves tossed about by fate, but they usually remain free to think and act as they choose. In fact, we might suppose Jones unfree in this situation in the same sense that he is unfree to fly away. He is free to will that he should fly away, but outside factors constrain his freedom to act. It might be that he chooses not to mow, but in the end does mow out of habit or while sleepwalking. In situations like these, we could conclude that Jones had the kind of freedom that matters – the freedom to choose or will – but that he lacked some power to carry out that will. However, if God knew a thousand years ago that Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow – because he knows all things – then he also knew when and how Jones would mow, and precisely what his thoughts would be. In short, there is no single act, or even a thought, that Jones might produce other than those which God knew a thousand years ago. This implies that even an appeal to his *free will* as the cause of his actions does not escape the problem, because if God knows what the *free will* does, then *free will* is simply a misnomer for something that is not, in fact, free.

---

[166] Example adapted from Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 56.

As Pike sees it, the challenge involves two key premises: "(1) the claim that God is infallible, and (2) the claim that God knows the outcome of human actions in advance of their performance."[167] The following is a slight simplification of Pike's presentation of the argument:[168]

(1) 'God is omniscient and God exists at T1' entails 'if Jones does A at T2, then God believes at T1 'that Jones does A at T2.''
(2) If God is omniscient, then 'God believes P' entails 'P.'
(3) It is not within one's power to act so that both 'P' and 'not-P' are true.
(4) It is not within one's power to act so that something that was true at an earlier time was not true at that time.
(5) If God believes at T1 'that Jones does A at T2,' then if it is within Jones' power at T2 to not do A, then it was within Jones' power to: (a) act so that God believed P at T1 and 'P' is false; (b) act so that God did not believe as he did at T1; or (c) act so that God did not exist at T1.
(6) If God is omniscient, then (a) is false (from line 2 and 3).
(7) (b) and (c) are false (from line 4).
(8) Therefore, if God is omniscient and believes at T1 'that Jones does A at T2,' then it was not within Jones' power at T2 to refrain from doing A (from lines 5-7).
(9) Therefore, if God is omniscient and exists at T1, then it was not within Jones' power at T2 to refrain from doing A (from lines 8 and 1).

In his formulation, Pike expands the 'power to refrain from A at T2' as the power to act such that (a) God's belief at T1 is false; (b) God did not hold the belief at T1 that he held; or (c) God did not exist at T1.[169] Clearly, if we start with the premise that God is infallible, then (a) is false; for if God's belief at T1 is false, then he is not infallible. Additionally, if we start with the premise that God held a belief at T1, then (b) is a straightforward contradiction, and therefore also false. Likewise, if we start with the premise that God exists at T1, then (c) is false. It follows, therefore, that Jones' power to refrain from A at T2 is incompatible with the premises that God exists at T1 and believes at T1 'that Jones does A at T2.' And this is simplified in (9) to the premises that God is *omniscient* (taken as including knowledge about future events) and exists at

---

[167] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 54.
[168] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 59-60.
[169] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 58.

T1. For if God exists at T1 and is omniscient, then God will have beliefs at T1 of the type,

"Jones does A at T2."

Thus, if one is to maintain belief in both the existence of God and human free will, one

will need to deny one of the two premises in (9).[170] Therefore, Pike offers two positions that he

takes to successfully, and coherently, resolve the problem, involving a rejection of each of the

premises, respectively. The first involves a rejection of the claim 'God exists at T1' and an

affirmation of a conception of God as existing timelessly – an affirmation that he attributes to

Boethius; and the second involves a rejection of the claim, 'God is omniscient,' which he

attempts to draw implicitly from Augustine.

Boethius

In the Boethian view, we are told, God is not temporal, so it is inaccurate to say that he

exists at T1, or at any time.[171] Pike explains that the way God relates to things he knows, in the

Boethian view, is comparable to the way we relate to things that we know in the present.[172] In

order to show how this comparison makes sense and solves the problem of determinism, Pike

seeks to re-create a thought process that might have suggested this model.[173] Pike asks us to

consider the original problem from two alternate standpoints: first, in which God's knowledge

'that Jones does A at T2' is located in the future (at T3), and second, in the present (at T2).[174] In

each case he asks whether Jones has the power at T2 to refrain from doing A, understood as the

power to act such that either (a) God's belief is false, or (b) God does not hold the belief that he

---

[170] Cf. Molinist or Calvinist solutions, which do not necessarily reject either of these premises. See Owen Anderson, "Divine Foreknowledge and Freedom of the Will: Contemporary Work Revisits Calvinism," *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 11, no. 4 (August 2004): 459-465.

[171] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 74.

[172] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 75.

[173] As far as I can tell, this is not Boethius' actual thought process, but rather Pike's attempt to contextualize his eventual position.

[174] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 72.

does.[175] In both cases, Pike argues, we would not describe Jones as having the former power, but we would describe him as having the latter power. This means that either of these kinds of relations between a knower and what is known – as either knowledge of the past or knowledge of the present – may be suitable as a kind of analogy to some other means of knowing. In other words, if there were some different way of knowing that was always sufficiently like either of these scenarios, and never like the original problem, then this different way of knowing could be proposed as the normal way that God knows things in order to avoid the determinism problem implied by foreknowledge.

In the future case, Pike says, we may say that God *will believe* at T3 'that Jones did A at T2,' and that Jones does A at T2. But if Jones had refrained from A at T2, then it would be the case that God *will believe* at T3 'that Jones refrained from A at T2.' Thus, even though Jones does not refrain from A, and God knows at T3 'that Jones does A at T2,' Pike argues that we should consider Jones free at T2 "to perform an act the performance of which would require that [God] not believe as He will believe at T3;" and all that is needed to make this judgment is that we stipulate that Jones does not *actually* exercise this power.[176] Therefore, given that God knows at T3 'that Jones does A at T2,' Pike considers Jones free to refrain from A, only so long as he does not *actually* refrain from A.

Something seems wrong here. If Jones is free to refrain at T2, then this must mean that it is possible for him to refrain at T2. And if it is possible for him to refrain, how can Pike justify the stipulation that he does not exercise this freedom? If this is a real freedom, we must be able to account for the contingency that he exercises that freedom. The only justification Pike offers is

---

[175] The third option discussed earlier: (c) the power to act such that God does not exist, is reasonably excluded as an intellectually unpromising alternative.

[176] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 72-73.

the intuition that "we feel no hesitation" in our judgement.[177] Given the apparent contradiction just affirmed, perhaps we ought to feel hesitation. What is going on here is that Pike is working within a stipulation that God knows at T3 'that Jones does A at T2.' Given this stipulation about God's knowledge, we are already committed to the stipulation that Jones *does not actually* refrain from A at T2, whether or not he was free to do so. Therefore, it makes sense that Pike stipulates that Jones actually acts the way that God knows he acted at T3.

However, that stipulation only makes sense when we are focused on God's knowledge at T3, but it makes no sense to link God's knowledge at T3 with Jones' action at T2 when we evaluate whether Jones is free at T2. The difficulty is in how Pike wants us to conceive of the power to refrain from A. He wants us to conceive of it as the power to act such that either God's belief is not what it is, or that God's belief is false. This creates a paradox. If we are talking about God's belief at T3 as future to Jones' act at T2, then at T2 – the point at which we are evaluating Jones' freedom – it is not clear that 'God's belief at T3' has any meaning whatsoever. As far as Pike's scenario goes, we need not think that God has any belief at T3 until T3 occurs. Would it not be better to simply point out that knowledge of the past implies no determinism, regardless of how and when that knowledge arises? It is not quite clear why Pike includes the T3 scenario, other than for the sake of thoroughness. However, having seemingly secured a relation that avoids the problem of determinism, he drops it and does not come back to it, preferring instead the relation found in the *present case*, which Boethius adopts.

Moving on to the *present case*, then, Pike describes God's belief at T2 as simultaneous with Jones' act. In this case, the belief is described as *seeing*, just as if God were an ordinary observer, witnessing the events as they occur. Once again, Pike concludes that Jones has the

---

[177] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 73.

59

power at T2 to perform an action "the performance of which would require that God 'see' and thus believe something other than what He in fact 'sees' and thus believes."[178] In this case, Pike makes no qualifying statement about Jones' actions. He apparently sees no need to restrict Jones's actual actions to that which God believes at T2, fully endorsing that Jones has the power to act such that God's belief at T2 is other than what it is. From this conclusion, Pike endorses the Boethian position. If we take God as timeless, and if we understand his beliefs about the world as a kind of present *seeing*, then, says Pike, we may consider humans to have the power to act such that God's beliefs are other than what they are.

There is something troubling in Pike's analysis. In discussing the future case, Pike said that Jones has freedom, but that we must stipulate that he does not use it. This is because we've already stipulated what God's belief will be at T3. In the *present case* (T2), Pike does not make the stipulation, treating the scenario as if God were an ordinary observer, witnessing whatever choice Jones makes and simultaneously believing whatever he sees. However, when he summarizes the Boethian view later on, Pike *does* insert the stipulation with respect to God's timeless knowledge:

> We are thus invited to conclude that Jones has the power at T2 to refrain from doing A. It is the power at T2 to perform an action (a refraining action) the performance of which would require that God 'see' and thus believe something other than what He in fact 'sees' and thus believes. Of course, by hypothesis, this power is one that Jones does not exercise.[179]

What are we to make of the stipulation in reference to a timeless knower? It seems that Pike is concerned with the language that implies that Jones has a power, the use of which would be "absolutely, totally and in all other ways *inconceivable*,"[180] for whatever Jones does is what is

---

[178] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 73.
[179] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 75.
[180] William Goldman, *The Princess Bride: S. Morgenstern's Classic Tale of True Love & High Adventure* (NY: Harcourt Inc., (1973) 2007), 110.

believed by God, and it is nonsensical to talk about acting such that God not believe what he believes, if God's belief can only be defined by the act in the first place. A different action than the one known would not involve any such contradiction. In fact, the stipulation is only needed because we stipulated the content of God's belief in the first place; and this applies equally to beliefs situated in the future, the present, and even the past (the original problem). It appears that timelessness does not really solve the problem of determinism *for Pike*, because in no way does it grant Jones the power that Pike claims is necessary to avoid determinism. Rather, Pike avoids determinism in his analysis of the T3 and T2 scenarios, not because Jones possesses a power to act such that God's belief is other than what it is (whether in content or truth), but because in those scenarios the belief can be understood as being dependent on Jones' action. We will come back to this. In the meantime, let us consider Pike's second option.

Augustine

The second position that Pike takes as successfully and coherently reconciling the existence of an omniscient God with human freedom takes Augustine as implicitly rejecting God's infallibility. Addressing this argument involves two distinct considerations. First is the argument Pike attempts to draw out of Augustine's actual argument. Since Pike acknowledges that Augustine would certainly deny the conclusions of this argument[181] – that God is fallible – and because this position would not be of any use to the orthodox Christian view, I will not focus much on the argument itself. Second is the question of Augustine's actual, explicit position. As demonstrated in the first chapter of this paper, and recognized by Pike,[182] Augustine's view involves a denial of the premise that God exists in time. Inasmuch as we find this position to

---

[181] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 81.
[182] In fact, during his explanation of Boethius' argument, Pike quotes nearly double from Augustine than he does from Boethius.

successfully avoid the conflict between God's knowledge and human free will, another solution

is not necessary. But where Pike's reasoning about a timeless God's knowledge is inadequate to

resolve the conflict, Augustine is more than capable.

To advance his pseudo-Augustinian argument for resolving divine foreknowledge and

human free will, Pike draws on an excerpt from *De Libero Arbitrio*. In it, Augustine considers

how foreknowledge might function for a human; and, finding that we could not conclude that the

foreknowledge was the cause of the actions known, he argues that God's foreknowledge, too,

would not entail a loss of freedom.[183] Pike draws a distinction between the way foreknowledge

would function in a human and the way it would function for an infallibly omniscient God. It is

important that for Pike, human *foreknowledge* is a fallible thing. He evidently has something like

'justified true belief about the future' in mind as the requirement for counting as

foreknowledge.[184]

Pike argues that in human foreknowledge there is no contradiction between knowing

what a person will do and the freedom with which they act. This is because human

foreknowledge would involve two distinct contingencies: the belief itself, and whether the belief

is true (and, therefore, counts as knowledge).[185] Therefore, he argues, while we would not be

able to attribute to a human the power to act such that a human did not hold the belief that they

held, we would be able to attribute a power to act such that the belief was false, provided, says

Pike, that we stipulate that they do not act this way. Recall Pike's conditions for freedom: he said

that the power to refrain from a foreknown act could be interpreted as the power to act such that

---

[183] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 76. See Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Anna S. Benjamin and L.H. Hackstaff (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, (1964) 1986), Book III.IV.
[184] See his example: Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 77. The following discussion of contingencies shows that Pike takes the belief to be knowledge (and therefore, *foreknowledge*) if and only if the belief is true. Therefore, Pike takes *human foreknowledge* as 'beliefs that could have been false, but are, in fact, true.'
[185] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 79.

either (a) what is believed is false, or (b) what is believed is not believed. What he is arguing here is that the reason that human foreknowledge would not entail determinism is that it is *possible* for human beliefs to be false, therefore we can consider a person to possess the power to act such that what is believed is false. However, this reason is not available to an infallibly omniscient God. Therefore, argues Pike, in order for Augustine to maintain his argument by analogy – that because human foreknowledge does not contradict human freedom, therefore God's foreknowledge also does not – Augustine will be forced to deny that God's knowledge is necessarily infallible.[186] Pike even suggests that this denial would be a good move for Augustine, allowing him to retain *divine foreknowledge* as well as a *weaker infallibility*, in which God's knowledge is only accidentally infallible.

This suggestion would, of course, have been outrageous to Augustine, as it would contradict the doctrine of divine simplicity, which holds that there is nothing that God possesses which is not essential to his being.[187] Therefore, the suggestion of an accidental property of God would have been anathema to Augustine. But this solution also fails to uphold the necessary distinction in *creatio ex nihilo*, between an eternal God and temporal creation. Therefore, it cannot be a solution to the problem of determinism implied by *creatio ex nihilo*.

Thus, in Pike's Boethian position, he purports to find in the analogy of God's beliefs *as seeing*, a power to act such that what is believed by God is not believed. This position involves the denial of the premise that God exists at T1 (or, in time at all), and the problem of determinism is avoided. While his analysis of knowledge at T3 seems equally serviceable as a potential analogy to God's knowledge, as determinism is also avoided in that scenario, Pike drops that thread, preferring the analogy with the Boethian *present* analogy. Secondly, in his

---

[186] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 81.
[187] Augustine, *City of God*, XI.10.

pseudo-Augustinian position, Pike purports to find in the analogy between God's foreknowledge and fallible human foreknowledge the power to act such that what is believed by God is false. This position involves the denial of the premise that God is infallibly omniscient. By endorsing a *weaker infallibility* – one in which God's beliefs are incidentally, but not of necessity, always right – Pike argues that one would be able to reconcile the existence of an omniscient God with human free will. However, as we have seen, the first option fails to secure the power required, according to Pike, to avoid determinism – a power that turns out to be incoherent. As for his second option, it is utterly at odds with the God of *creatio ex nihilo* and need not be considered further in this study.

Why God Knows

The main problem with Pike's analysis is with his definition of *freedom*. In setting up the problem, Pike defined Jones' freedom as the power to defy God's knowledge - either by contradicting its veracity, or by causing it to be other than it is. But this is not what anyone means when they speak of human freedom. What is the connection between God's knowledge and Jones' actions? All that really matters is whether or not Jones can act as he pleases. The connection in Pike's analysis is an implicit, but inconsistently applied, causal relation between Jones' action and God's knowledge. Pike takes Jones' actions as necessarily affecting God's knowledge, implying that God's knowledge is dependent on Jones' actions in the first place. In the original problem, Jones is considered unfree because his action, if contrary to God's belief, would require an impossible backwards causation with respect to the truth of the belief. But, since God is taken as infallibly omniscient, any implications affecting the truth of the belief would necessarily affect the belief as well. Therefore, if we conceive of Jones as free, it would

follow neither that he could act such that God's knowledge would be other than it was nor that

God's knowledge would be false.

Throughout his analysis, Pike has been careful to avoid mention of causation, preferring

to simply talk of the 'power to act such that God's knowledge might be other than it is.' He even

excludes attempts to resolve the problem by Cicero and Arthur Prior as strategies that fail due to

being sidetracked by questions of causation.[188] However, in Pike's own rationalization of the

problem revisited in the present (the T2 scenario), he asks us to "suppose that God holds his

belief at that time *because* he 'sees' Jones doing A at T2."[189] Thus, Pike is at least relying on a

causal dependence that he has tried to distance himself from. And interestingly, in the one

instance that he does invoke this causal dependence, he finds that he is able to resolve the

conflict and avoid determinism, at least intuitively.[190] However, when he attempts to put the

scenario in terms of the power to act such that God's belief is other than what it is, we find his

language utterly incoherent. And this is because the free will power, as he has defined it, is

incoherent. If X at time t is true, then by the law of non-contradiction, there is no possible power

to act such that X at time t is not true.

Augustine's own thoughts on the problem account for *why* God knows what he knows.

Pike notes that in *De Libero Arbitrio*, Augustine argues that the content of God's knowledge

with respect to human actions is "what you are going to do 'with your own free will.' "[191]

Augustine makes the same argument in *City of God*.[192] Essentially, if God knows that the will is

the cause, then God's knowledge cannot be taken to invalidate that cause. However, Pike

---

[188] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 64, 72.

[189] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 73; emphasis added.

[190] He also seems to have a resolution in the T3 scenario, again intuitively, without invoking a causal relation. Arguably, the only reason we intuitively agree that Jones is free in the T3 scenario is because we assume that God's knowledge depends on Jones' actions in that scenario.

[191] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 76. See, Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, Book III.

[192] Augustine, *City of God*, Book V.10

65

counters that it is incoherent that God should know *in advance* how someone will act with their free will, because Pike believes he has established that Jones cannot be free without the power to contradict God's belief. He argues:

> If God knows (infallibly believes) at T1 that Jones does A at T2, it follows that Jones is not able at T2 to do other than A at T2 (for reasons already given). Thus, if God knows (infallibly believes) at T1 that Jones does A at T2, it follows that Jones does A at T2, but *not freely*. If God believed at T1 that Jones does A at T2, it follows that Jones' action at T2 is not free; and if God *also* believed at T2 that Jones acts freely at T2, it would follow that God holds a false belief – which is absurd.[193]

Pike's argument does seem to work, but only if we assume that the truth about Jones' belief exists prior to his action. For if it is true at T1 that Jones does A at T2, then it follows that Jones is not free; but this is the case regardless of whether there exists an infallibly omniscient God. Therefore, it appears that *we do* need to deny the premise that God has beliefs in time (at T1) about the future (at T2), but not, as Pike argued, because this allows us to grant Jones the power to invalidate God's belief. It does not do this, and cannot, because this power is incoherent. We need to deny that God has beliefs in time because in order to avoid determinism we need to deny that *any facts* about the future exist in time.

Conclusion

The problem of divine foreknowledge turns out to be much more than just a problem for reconciling human freedom with divine foreknowledge, but with the very possibility of a *fore*knowledge that implies the existence of present truth about the future. Incidentally, this is precisely what Augustine addresses, in *The Confessions*, when he concludes that there is no future, and that God's foreknowledge is about what is present.[194] Therefore, Augustine's understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* precludes the problem of divine foreknowledge because in this

---

[193] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 78.
[194] See section II: "God's Eternal Nature."

view God is not in time. The problem simply does not arise with respect to God's knowledge. While Pike identifies this solution, his position remains problematic, as the version of the problem that he raises is defeated by its own definition of free will. The power 'to act such that God's beliefs are either false or other than what they are' is not a power that is even conceivably reconcilable with the existence of an omniscient God because it is itself inconceivable.

IX. Against Divine Personality

Having granted the efficacy with which divine timelessness is able to resolve the apparent conflict between divine knowledge and human free will, Pike nevertheless sees timelessness as a greater liability to the "systematic theologian."[195] He advances an argument that a timeless God cannot be conceived of as a *person* in any meaningful sense, because of a supposed incoherence between timelessness and the ability to act. He concludes:

> A timeless being could not deliberate, anticipate, or remember. It could not speak or write a letter, nor could it produce sounds or written words on a piece of paper. It could not smile, grimace or weep. Further, a timeless being could not be affected or prompted by another. It could not respond to needs, overtures, delights or antagonisms of human beings . . . In addition to this list of inabilities, there now appears to be a conceptual difficulty involved in the idea of a timeless knower. It is not at all clear that we really understand what it would be for a timeless being to know, believe or be aware of something . . . An individual that is (in principle) incapable of all of these things could not be counted as a person.[196]

If Pike is correct, the timeless God of *creatio ex nihilo* cannot be the personal God of the Bible. Further, if Pike's conclusions about timeless acts are right, *creatio ex nihilo* itself is incoherent.

Timeless Activity

Pike's argument purports to flesh out implications from the analysis of the relationship between timelessness and omnipotence from 19th century theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher.

---

[195] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 119.
[196] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 128.

According to Pike, Schleiermacher denied the possibility of God's active involvement in the world because causing an effect in time would require that God's creative activity occurred at some specific time.[197] Pike explores this claim through a linguistic analysis of production verbs. Earlier, he had analyzed production verbs in an effort to isolate a coherent meaning in the claim that God created the world. He found sufficient room to avoid certain implications by appealing to the meanings of certain related verbs.[198] To avoid the implication of a need for a material implied by *built*, he appealed to production verbs such as *conjured* (as in, a mental image) or *uttered*. To avoid the need of a body for *uttered*, and the implication of the action as being identical with the effect in *conjured*, he appeals to *uttered* and *conjured* to each supply part of the meaning. However, when Pike now attempts to look for ways around the temporal implications, he finds them inhering in every production verb. We need not require an exhaustive analysis, for surely we can see that every verb used to describe temporal actions will have a temporal component. Pike concludes from this that the temporal implications "seem to be part of the 'essence' of 'produces,' " and suggests that this was the realization that caused Schleiermacher to reject the idea that anything could arise through omnipotence.[199]

Although he stops short of endorsing Schleiermacher's claim here, he does endorse the conclusion several times, stating in his conclusion to the chapter that "we have found reason to think that a timeless being could not create or preserve a temporally extended universe."[200] His linguistic analysis, however, is not sufficient to demonstrate this limitation. No contradiction is implied when we talk of *creatio ex nihilo*. This is evidenced even through Pike's analysis in the fact that he knows precisely what he is looking for: a production verb that lacks temporal

---

[197] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 105.
[198] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 101-104.
[199] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 107.
[200] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 118.

implications. If all of our existing verbs that describe temporal actions are insufficient to fill this need, it does not follow that no such verb is possible. We might create one now, to suit our purpose, and it will not be a liability that such a verb will have no examples in temporal experience – in fact, we must know it will not and cannot have such an example. Pike's expectation of an analogous verb found in temporal experience is illicit; he has looked for evidence in the only place he is sure never to find it.

Consider what an incoherent example would be like. Take the problem commonly raised when we first start thinking about omnipotence. 'Can God create a rock so heavy that even he cannot lift it?' Do we know what we are looking for? At first glance, it seems so: a rock of sufficient mass that it cannot be moved by a being with unlimited power. We are tempted to think that omnipotence must be capable of both creating and moving such an object; thus, omnipotence is thought to be exposed as incoherent. On a more thoughtful examination, however, it is quite clear that there is no possible value of the mass of an object that would render it immovable by a being with unlimited power. We are as well to ask how purple an object must be to make it immovable by an unlimited power. Since we cannot even conceive of the task challenged, it is not the failure of omnipotence to be unable to accomplish what turns out to be nonsense.

Is this the situation Pike has identified? Certainly not. He has exposed no incoherence. In fact, we have no need to create a new verb to describe the activity Pike is thinking of. He has been using *create* all throughout his discussion to specify just what kind of productive activity he has in mind. *Create* is perfectly suited to timeless activity; it has no necessary temporal implications. The requirement that we find an analogy of timeless creation in everyday temporal experience is arbitrary and irrational.

69

Omniscience

Following his argument against timeless activity, Pike utilizes that conclusion, along with additional arguments supplied by Robert Coburn, to press an argument against the identification of a timeless God as a *person*. Coburn argues, according to Pike, that in order to be a person, one must at least have some of the mental abilities we are familiar with in persons; but a timeless God has none, and is therefore not a person.[201] Accepting Coburn's arguments against the capability of a timeless God to possess these mental abilities, Pike suggests that omniscience alone could possibly justify the assignment of personhood.[202]

Pike then shifts from the question of whether a timeless being can possess omniscience, to whether it could express that it possesses omniscience, or any knowledge. He considers how we would determine that an ordinary knower has knowledge, concluding that an ordinary knower would have to demonstrate with some action – such as making a statement, or writing a letter, or placing a bet – that he has knowledge. Given Pike's earlier conclusion that a timeless being could not perform any kind of action whatsoever, the implication is that we cannot possibly determine whether a timeless being has knowledge or not. And if a timeless being cannot perform any kind of action that would indicate awareness, Pike is right to wonder "what the difference would be between a timeless being that does *not* have knowledge (e.g., the number two) and a timeless being that does have knowledge."[203] What would it mean to 'possess knowledge' if one was incapable of acting in any way that could demonstrate that knowledge, or even think or reflect on that knowledge?

---

[201] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 122.
[202] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 125.
[203] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 127.

Mental Abilities

Now, we've already seen that Pike's reasons for considering a timeless being to be incapable of action are insufficient; therefore, his argument against the intelligibility of a timeless knower does not succeed. However, the analysis of omniscience was merely an attempt to (possibly) salvage the idea of a timeless person incapable of other important mental abilities we expect of persons. Let us now consider these abilities.

Pike groups Coburn's list of mental abilities indicative of personhood into three categories: (1) reflecting and deliberating; (2) anticipating and intending; and (3) remembering.[204] Pike argues that a timeless being cannot reflect or deliberate, because these are actions that take time. Anticipating and intending are ruled out because they require a temporal location relative to the thing anticipated or intended. Finally, remembering is excluded because it, too, requires temporal location, but also because it requires that the person remembering have temporal extension to have experienced the thing remembered.

Even with omniscience, a being incapable of any significant mental abilities – or some suitable replacements – will not be acceptable for Augustine, or anything like an orthodox Christian view. The God of the Bible is not merely a knowing God, but is frequently and significantly described as deliberating,[205] intending,[206] and remembering.[207] Therefore, a successful defense of a timeless being's inability in these respects will constitute a refutation of the coherence of Augustine's view.

---

[204] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 122-123.
[205] See Genesis 18:17.
[206] See Isaiah 25:1, Jeremiah 29:11, Luke 13:34.
[207] See Genesis 8:1, Exodus 2:24; That "God remembered Noah" In Gen. 8:1 is arguably the whole point of the narrative; situated as the focal point of one of the most obvious and extensive chiasms in the Bible.

Do reflection and deliberation take time? They certainly do for you and me. But we are temporal creatures: everything we do takes time. The question is whether they *necessarily* take time. To reflect is to think carefully, to consider all variables. Likewise, to deliberate is to consider one's options and judge between them. I think we can safely assume that if a timeless being has thoughts, they are careful thoughts, and all-encompassing of variables, for such a being has unlimited attention for each and every thought. Reflecting and deliberating take time for us because our minds have limited attention and our contingent nature cannot exist in its changing states all at once. However, no such limits exist for an eternal being, whose whole being is fully present without succession.

Anticipating seems to require time, but Coburn and Pike are certainly mistaken about intending. Intentions about the future certainly require time, but we will not get anywhere if we limit ourselves to a decidedly temporal use. Intentions need not be about the future at all; we can have intentions that go no further than the present, such as the intention to do nothing at all. Why should a timeless being be incapable of having intentions timelessly? Pike would have reason to limit intentions to the temporal because of his earlier dismissal of timeless action. A being without the ability to act would also lack the ability to intend. However, since that argument has been rejected, there seems to be no good reason to believe that a timeless being cannot intend.

Finally, let us consider the ability to remember. Remembering, like anticipating, has a definite temporal position. As such, we can dismiss it as irrelevant to a timeless being, along with anticipation. On the other hand, remembering is a form of knowing, and it seems that nothing is lost, except the temporal relation, in reducing it to timelessly knowing. As for the biblical references to God 'remembering,' the temporal sense of reminiscence is never the

relevant sense. It is the sense of retaining knowledge, and acting on that knowledge, that is intended.

Conclusion

Pike's argument against the coherence of a timeless person is much too ambitious. His critical premise – that a timeless being cannot possibly act – is not sufficiently demonstrated. He relies on a linguistic analysis of production verbs to establish the lack of a coherent concept - a concept he ironically clearly defines and maintains throughout the analysis. Similarly, the rationalization for ruling out the possibility of a timeless being possessing mental abilities is superficial. An otherwise methodical and thoughtful analysis of timelessness rushes quickly and uncritically through the arguments.

However, there is a legitimate challenge that seems to motivate Pike's analysis. In questioning the idea of a timeless and inactive knower, he asserts: "it seems to me that we are due something in the way of an explanation."[208] This is no less the case for an active timeless knower, perhaps even more so. Even if we cannot conclude that timeless activity is incoherent, it is surely still deeply non-intuitive. We should like to know at least vaguely how a timeless being, understood to have created things out of nothing, might relate to the temporal world. In fact, this supposed relation is one of the great questions that religion, in general, is all about. In the next section, we will take up this question: what model can we produce to suggest the plausibility of a timeless God who acts in time?

---

[208] Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 127.

X. Relating Eternity and Temporality

By this point we have seen that *creatio ex nihilo* can stand up to various challenges that it is incoherent. Contrary to Wolfe and Grünbaum, *creatio ex nihilo* does not entail the existence of time prior to creation. Neither does it entail the incoherent idea of a *timeless beginning*, as Oppy argues. We have seen that the implications of *creatio ex nihilo*, God's knowledge and power, do not necessarily lead to contradictions when God is understood as timeless and, contrary to Pike, that timelessness itself creates no barrier to understanding God as acting or knowing. Thus far, *creatio ex nihilo* can be seen as avoiding specific charges of incoherence related to the concept of *eternity*.

What remains to be seen, however, is whether a positive case can be made for the intelligibility of *creatio ex nihilo*. Central to the difficulties we have examined is the idea of an eternal God interacting with temporal reality. Perhaps a contradiction cannot be sustained, but it does not follow from this that the idea really is coherent. What we need now is a coherent way of understanding what it really means for atemporality and temporality to relate. In order to show that this relation is coherent, it is not necessary that we correctly identify how that which is eternal does relate, or must relate, to that which is temporal. It is only necessary to find a possible way to characterize this relation. In their article, "Eternity," Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann attempt to develop just such a model. I will argue that their attempt is successful despite some serious problems with their understanding of *eternity*. I will first lay out their model, keeping in mind the Augustinian sense of *eternity* we have been working with. I will then take up challenges from Graham Oppy and Paul Helm. Oppy argues that the model developed by Stump and Kretzmann is not the kind of relation that is needed because it lacks

objectivity. Helm argues that Stump and Kretzmann's attempt fails because it tries to relate eternity temporally.

ET-Simultaneity

In their article, Stump and Kretzmann develop a model to characterize the way that which is eternal relates to that which is temporal. Although we will later explore some problems with their understanding of *eternity*, it should be understood that they explicitly affirm the atemporal sense of *eternity*, stating that "because an eternal entity is atemporal, there is no past or future, no earlier or later, *within* its life."[209]

In order to speak about any kind of relation, we expect some kind of coincidence between the related parties. Suppose Jones builds a rocket at location *x* and launches an explosive to location *y*. Now suppose that Smith has a house at *y*: what do you suppose will happen to the house? It will depend on how they are related temporally. If the rocket is launched at T1 and strikes at T2, and the house is not built until T3 – say, one year later – then there is no coincidence between the rocket and the house. Or rather, there is coincidence in space (relative to the Earth), but not in time. If Smith's house exists during the explosion at T2, however, then there is coincidence between the rocket and house in space and time and the house will almost certainly not exist at T3. On the other hand, all things that exist eternally necessarily coincide with each other. Stump and Kretzmann affirm this consequence of eternity in their affirmation of Boethius' definition: "*Eternity is the complete possession all at once of illimitable life*."[210] This means that there is no part of one's being that can fail to be realized, and thus no possibility of sequentially ordered states. Eternity, in their understanding (and mine), is explicitly atemporal.

---

[209] Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, no. 8 (August 1981): 434.

[210] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 431.

Therefore, it is conceptually impossible for there to be different eternal states that could potentially fail to coincide.

What Stump and Kretzmann want to do, however, is express a relation in which an eternal being (God) coincides with a temporal state. But this is a puzzle. They cannot coincide temporally, because that which is eternal cannot have a temporal position; but they cannot coincide eternally because that which is temporal cannot fail to have a temporal position. If such a relation cannot be coherently expressed, it is feared, it would imply that there is no such possible relation. And if there is no possible relation of coincidence between God and the world, it would seem that we will have to give up certain theological ideas – such as that of an active, relatable God who brings about *creatio ex nihilo*. Therefore, the success of this endeavor – of finding a way to relate the eternal and the temporal – is extremely important for the purpose of a positive assurance of the coherence of *creatio ex nihilo*. It is not important that the proposed relation be the correct one – only that it is possible to conceive of a relation between the eternal and temporal without contradiction.

Stump and Kretzmann begin by defining two relations of coincidence, which they put in terms of *simultaneity*. Within temporality, they define *T-simultaneity* (T) as "existence or occurrence at one and the same time," and within eternity, they define *E-simultaneity* (E) as "existence or occurrence at one and the same eternal present."[211] For the desired relation between eternity and temporality, what "one and the same *something*" can we find to express coincidence? According to Stump and Kretzmann, we cannot find such a *something* because this "would be to specify a single mode of existence in which the two *relata* exist or occur together," and this is "theoretically impossible."[212] Since the eternal cannot exist temporally, the temporal

---

[211] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 435.
[212] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 436.

cannot exist eternally, and there is no third mode of existence,[213] they reason that there is no "one

and the same *something*" that can relate the two. Rather, the relation they produce must be put in

terms of *two somethings*, neither of which can be reduced to the other.

> The relation Stump and Kretzmann propose – *ET-simultaneity* (ET) – is stated as:
>
> (ET) For every *x* and for every *y* [ranging over entities and events], *x* and *y* are ET-simultaneous iff
>> (i)   either *x* is eternal and *y* is temporal, or vice versa; and
>> (ii)   for some observer, *A*, in the unique eternal reference frame, *x* and *y* are both present—i.e. either *x* is eternally present and *y* is observed as temporally present, or vice versa; and
>> (iii)   for some observer, *B*, in one of the infinitely many temporal reference frames, *x* and *y* are both present—i.e. either *x* is observed as eternally present and *y* is temporally present, or vice versa.[214]

Simply put, ET states that any eternal *relata* will be ET-simultaneous with every temporal *relata*.

This adjacency reflects the idea that an eternal God may act timelessly to cause an effect to occur

at any point in time. It suggests a kind of logical access, given sufficient power to act in ways

that are not logically impossible (i.e., omnipotence).

One obvious concern with suggesting a coincidence between the eternal and every

temporal *relata* is that it implies coincidence between every temporal *relata*. So, if yesterday and

tomorrow are both ET-simultaneous with God, we would not want to conclude any coincidence

between yesterday and tomorrow. However, in (i) we see that ET can only obtain when one

relata is eternal and the other is temporal. This is significant, because it means that the relation

lacks transitivity. Thus, if *x* and *y* are ET-simultaneous, and *y* and *z* are ET-simultaneous, we

cannot conclude that *x* and *z* are ET-simultaneous. In fact, this is impossible, because *x* and *z* will

---

[213] Stump and Kretzmann limit their consideration to the medieval view of eternity ("Eternity," 431); thus, they rule out a third mode of existence here based on the authority of those "medieval adherents of the concept of eternity" ("Eternity," 436).

[214] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 439.

be found to belong to the same mode of existence; but ET can only obtain between two different modes of existence.

The strength of Stump and Kretzmann's model is that it allows for a coherent way of speaking, as temporal beings, about an eternal being. For example, suppose Smith says, 'God, who is timeless and omniscient, knows whether or not Jones will mow his lawn tomorrow.' What does Smith's utterance mean? If God is timeless, then it cannot be that he knows today (in time) what will happen in the future, so we can assume that Smith is only referring to his own perspective in time and claiming that God has knowledge about what is future for Smith. So far, so good. However, supposing that God has timeless knowledge about something that is future for Smith, we might ask when – or rather how – does he have that knowledge? The question is important because Smith is reporting it as a matter of fact from his own perspective in time. Is God's knowledge coherently reportable in time? How can it be true at a particular time that something is known timelessly? Stump and Kretzmann's ET relation appears to resolve this problem by allowing for eternity to match up with temporality in such a way that eternal truths can be reported temporally. In ET Smith can say that God's eternal knowledge of T2 exists *now*, at T1, because it is ET-simultaneous with all times. Therefore, ET allows us to say that it is *always* (temporally) the case that God *eternally knows* (atemporally) the events at T2.

Oppy's Challenge: Observers and Reference Points

Graham Oppy challenges ET on the basis that it is unnecessarily concerned with observers and reference points.[215] He argues that it entails that the only times that can be ET-simultaneous with an eternal entity are those in which an observer is present. Even if we take the requirement of an observer to require merely a *possible observer*, Oppy presses, we should find

---

[215] Oppy, *Describing Gods*, 110.

that there are some temporal events, such as the centre of a black hole, in which no possible observer can exist, or at least that God could create such conditions. But we would expect that even in such conditions, an eternal being would not lack the same relation to temporal events involving possible observers. It would be very strange to suggest that an omnipotent God was logically restricted from affecting a black hole simply because no possible observer could be situated there.

However, Oppy's reliance on the possibility of unobservable conditions is dubious. Why couldn't God create a temporal observer capable of being present at the centre of a black hole? There is no logical barrier. Furthermore, appealing to God's omnipotence to account for a situation in which no possible observer could exist does not help his case, because an equal appeal can be made to omnipotence to allow a possible observer. In short, we do not know whether the situation Oppy needs in order to press this challenge is logically coherent or not. Thus, Oppy's argument against ET on this basis falls short.

Additionally, Oppy argues that the relation between eternity and temporality needs to be independent of observers – or, coordinate-free – in order to represent an objective relation. He argues that the reliance on subjective reference points calls into question the genuine nature of simultaneous-type relations.[216] For example, when the theory of relativity is put in coordinate-free terms, no account of simultaneity is possible, because it only has meaning from a given frame of reference.

Stump and Kretzmann are aware of the subjectivity of simultaneity, and they see this as a strength rather than a weakness. Using an example of a fast moving train being struck by lightning on both ends, they point out that if an observer on the ground could observe both

---

[216] Oppy, *Describing Gods*, 111.

strikes as occurring simultaneously, then an observer on the train could not, because the movement of the train would cause the front lightning bolt to appear earlier.[217] They suggest that this 'relativity of simultaneity' sets a precedent that can help us understand ET. They explain: "if we persist in asking whether or not the two lightning bolts are *really* simultaneous, we are asking an incoherent question . . . there is no such feature of reality."[218] Thus, the temporal simultaneity in T must be understood in reference to some observer or reference frame. And ET functions analogously; in both cases it is understood that there is no single frame of reference to fit the 'at once' relation implied by simultaneity. The resolution in both T and ET relations, therefore, is to be found by putting the relation in terms of a frame of reference.

However, when we talk about lightning strikes as being simultaneous, we do not really mean that there is any coincidence between them. We mean that from a certain perspective, they appear to coincide in time. However, the two strikes have no effect on one another, and so the denial that there is any objective relation between them should not surprise us. But Stump and Kretzmann's appeal to a similar move to subjectivity in characterizing ET is misleading. The subjectivity we find in T does not carry over to ET. With T, Stump and Kretzmann found that two events both are and are not simultaneous, depending on the frame of reference, meaning that we could not treat it as an objective relation. However, this does not occur with ET, because one of the *relata* is fixed. If we ask whether an eternal God would *really* be ET-simultaneous with the battle of Waterloo, there is no perspective from which ET could be denied.

Therefore, Oppy's worry that ET will fail to be a genuine relation is misplaced. He focuses far too much on problems with simultaneity in physics – problems which do not, in the end, affect Stump and Kretzmann's model.

---

[217] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 437.
[218] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 438.

Helm's Challenge: Temporal Implications

An additional challenge comes from Paul Helm, a fellow proponent of divine eternity.

Helm takes issue with Stump and Kretzmann's claim that if an eternal being is to relate to any

temporal being, "we need to be able to consider an eternal entity or event as one of the *relata* in a

simultaneity relationship."[219] Helm argues that there are other ways to be related than a

simultaneity relationship – for example, in terms of knowledge. He argues:

> Suppose it is denied that God's knowledge is simultaneous with my typing, why should it
> follow from this that God cannot know that I am typing? What is the argument? Of
> course the proposition has to be present to the mind of God, that is, God has to know it,
> but something being present to his mind has not to be confused with God being
> temporally present with anything.[220]

However, Helm's characterization of ET as requiring that God be temporally present is

objectionable. In ET, an eternal observer is not temporally present; it is eternally present and

observed temporally as eternally present. Helm appears to misinterpret ET throughout his

analysis as a fundamentally temporal relation. Still arguing against Stump and Kretzmann, he

contends that "God's eternal existence has no temporal relations whatever to any particular thing

which he creates."[221]

There are several good reasons for taking ET as a temporal relation, although I think he is

still wrong to do so. The first is the unfortunate word choice, *simultaneous*. Although Stump and

Kretzmann do specify several species of *simultaneity*, including one (E) that is fundamentally

atemporal, it is questionable whether they ever successfully remove the temporal implications of

the term. *Simultaneity*, as Stump and Kretzmann recognize, naturally means "existence or

---

[219] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 434.

[220] Paul Helm, "A different modern defence of divine eternity," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 523.

[221] Helm, "A different modern defence," 528.

occurrence at one and the same time."[222] This prompts them to look for different species of *simultaneity* that are not limited to time, but it is questionable whether anything else can be properly thought of as *simultaneous*. Two trains following the same track, but separated by an hour, would not count as *simultaneous*, although they certainly share "one and the same *something*," which Stump and Kretzmann take as the essence of *simultaneity*. For this reason, I have preferred the use of *coincide* and *coincidence* to describe Stump and Kretzmann's model. *Coincide* captures the sense of 'one and the same,' without committing to a temporal use. Such a replacement of terms is not necessary, of course. If no better word can be found, we are certainly free to use a temporal one in a non-temporal sense if we are clear about it – and Stump and Kretzmann *are* clear about their use.

Secondly, Stump and Kretzmann characterize eternity as "an infinitely extended, pastless, futureless duration."[223] This includes two terms that are controversial in the context of atemporal eternity: *infinite extension*, and *duration*. Stump and Kretzmann sufficiently justify their use of *duration* in an atemporal sense:

> Whatever has atemporal duration as its mode of existence is 'such that nothing future is absent from it and nothing past has flowed away,' whereas of everything that has temporal duration it may be said that from it everything future is absent and everything past has flowed away.[224]

Stump and Kretzmann argue that the atemporal sense of *duration* has a more natural claim to the term than the temporal sense. Whether or not we accept the argument, this explanation should be sufficient to accept Stump and Kretzmann's atemporal use of *duration* as an atemporal use. This is overshadowed, however, by the other controversial term. Stump and Kretzmann defend their characterization of eternity as entailing *infinite extension* by appealing to the collective

---

[222] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 435.
[223] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 435.
[224] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 445.

agreement of Boethius, the Platonic tradition, and the Medieval tradition – including Augustine –

as all affirming that eternity entails "beginningless, endless, infinite duration."[225] This certainly

sounds like temporality. *Beginningless* and *endless* suggest a temporal context, and *infinite*, in

this context, suggests sempiternity (i.e. temporal endlessness) rather than eternity.

Finally, Stump and Kretzmann argue that ET is needed to relate the *illimitable life* of

eternity with temporality "unless its life consists in only one event or it is impossible to relate an

event in its life to any temporal entity or event."[226] Helm questions how a timeless being's life

could *not* consist of only one event. He argues that the idea of multiple events requires that we

conceive of those events as temporally ordered.[227] Stump and Kretzmann might argue that we

can conceive of multiple events as simultaneous, and therefore allow for an atemporal sense

here, but in order to understand events as *multiple*, there must be something that differentiates

them. Two lightning strikes may be observed as simultaneous and also multiple, only because

they exist in different locations, but if they were observed as existing in the same location, they

could be observed as either simultaneous or multiple, but not both. They might rely, therefore, on

an analogous idea of extension in (atemporal) space to differentiate these atemporal events,

thereby giving an atemporal explanation of the *infinite extension* above. It is not clear if any of

this would be coherent, but what is clear is that none of it is necessary. What is wrong with

taking *illimitable life* as consisting of a single eternal event?

For these reasons I think Helm is wrong to see ET as a temporal relation, but not because

Stump and Kretzmann's presentation avoids temporal implications. While it might be possible to

interpret every use of temporal language atemporally, and thereby distance their view of eternity

---

[225] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 432-433.
[226] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 434.
[227] Helm, "A different modern defence," 522-523.

from temporal implications, Stump and Kretzmann do not sufficiently undertake this effort. It is clear, however, that they do not intend for their conception of eternity to include temporal implications and that such implications are accidental. Thus, when it comes to their formulation of ET, Helm is wrong to take it as a fundamentally temporal relation. Stump and Kretzmann specifically stress the importance of a species of simultaneity that is not "altogether temporal."[228] And while Helm is right to argue that no *simultaneous* relation is needed, or even possible, he fails to recognize that ET is not really a *simultaneous* relation at all, but a *coincidental* one.

Conclusion

Stump and Kretzmann's model for relating eternity with temporality is, overall, an excellent candidate for demonstrating the positive case that an eternal being can coherently be thought of as relating to the temporal world. Contrary to Oppy, it is not a liability that ET is observer-dependent, because one of those observers (God) occupies a privileged frame of reference. This results in an observer-dependent relation that is nevertheless objective. Thus, Oppy's concern for a *genuine* relation can be adequately addressed by the model provided by Stump and Kretzmann.

Helm's concern, on the other hand, is justified, but misdirected. There is certainly a deficiency in Stump and Kretzmann's characterization of eternity. At best, they have not sufficiently distanced their conception of eternity from the temporal language they use to describe it; at worst, it inconsistently includes temporal features. But even if we take their view of eternity to be rife with inconsistencies, their proposed ET relation does not rely on any of these inconsistencies. We can agree with all of Helm's criticism of Stump and Kretzmann's conception of eternity, while still taking ET as a plausible relation between eternity – *properly*

---

[228] Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," 435.

understood – and temporality. Helm's own suggestion for establishing a relation between eternity and temporality, through knowledge, is insufficient for our purpose. For as Pike demonstrates, divine omniscience alone does not entail an active relationship.[229] What is needed to demonstrate the coherence of an eternal being acting in time – as required by the *creatio ex nihilo* account – is a coherent way of characterizing an active relation. ET succeeds in doing this.

---

[229] See section IX: "Omniscience"

Conclusion

The question taken up in this paper is whether the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* – specifically, the view outlined by Augustine – is coherent. Is it internally consistent? Does it entail any contradictions? We have considered several challenges to its internal consistency surrounding the idea of creation itself and have found none that can be sustained. Further, as an historical Christian doctrine, does it create any contradictions within that tradition? Again, the challenges considered on this front do not succeed. But beyond simply a defense against the challenges that it is *not* coherent, can it be shown to be positively conceivable – not simply in a vague analogy to the production of some artifact, but all the way through? In this analysis we have found that it can.

Augustine's conception of *creatio ex nihilo* is inherited jointly from the early Christian theological tradition and the philosophy of the Middle Platonists. As one acutely aware of incoherence in his former religious beliefs as a Manichaean, Augustine's defense of *creatio ex nihilo* is a thorough philosophical analysis of the Christian doctrines surrounding the nature of God and his act of creation. Augustine's defense of the doctrine centres on the nature of God as *eternal* in sharp distinction with the temporality inherent in the world. The eternal nature of God is described by Augustine as a kind of whole existence, undivided by the sequential changing of states that characterizes temporality. To Augustine, therefore, God is absolutely immutable, undergoing no alteration.

The idea of a timeless being that is anything like a person is a hard idea to wrap our minds around, and many serious attempts to understand it – whether sympathetic to the notion or not – run aground on the rocks of inconsistency and illegitimate assumptions. Thinking in terms consistent with timelessness requires a constant vigilance against temporal language and

implications, a practice fundamentally unnatural to the human mind. There is, however, a certain elegance in the concept of eternity found in *creatio ex nihilo*, which makes it possible to conceive of a creator–creation relation that would otherwise be found, on serious scrutiny, less than intelligible. It should come as no surprise, then, that this relation is often taken to be incoherent. But, in this analysis we find that this conclusion is unwarranted.

The challenge Wolfe brings against the Cosmological Argument fails to consider the atemporal implications that such arguments typically make, and, as a result, he misses the single most important feature of the view he is challenging: the timeless nature of the being who caused time to begin. Grünbaum, on the other hand, is dimly aware of this notion, but he is apparently not able to make any sense of it. As a result, Grünbaum assumes that the ubiquitous temporality in temporal examples of things *beginning to exist* represents an essential feature of reality. But there is absolutely no warrant for this assumption. With both Wolfe and Grünbaum's challenges, the heavy work is done by assumptions that are not granted by Augustine. Thus, failing to demonstrate that *creatio ex nihilo* entails any tangible incoherence, they can only maintain that they find the doctrine unintelligible.

The work of Craig and Oppy demonstrate a higher awareness of the concept of timelessness and its place in *creatio ex nihilo*, but they each run into problems due to a failure to maintain consistency. Although Craig agrees that God is by nature immutable, he contradicts this judgment by allowing a change in the way God is related with the creation, once it begins. Craig does maintain that nothing changes with respect to God's immutable nature, but that it is only the relation to a new reality of changing things that causes God to exist "in time" subsequent to creation.[230] Despite his insistence that no mutability is to be attributed to God, however, it is

---

[230] *Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 151.

evident that Craig's conception of timelessness is modeled on temporality, such that he describes God as having different relations at temporally subsequent points. Craig's inconsistency only reinforces the sense expressed by Grünbaum and suggested by Wolfe, that a relation between a timeless God and the temporal world is at least unintelligible, and quite possibly incoherent.

Ironically, after pointing out Craig's error, Oppy makes the very same mistake. Although he takes care to avoid temporal implications while discussing eternity, Oppy nevertheless represents creation as temporally subsequent to God's eternal state because in the original state of existence, he says, "God exists alone."[231] This has temporal implications, one of which is that eternity is a *beginning to exist*. Thus, if God's existence begins, it follows that either God began to exist or that things begin to exist without a cause – in both cases suggesting that the creation hypothesis offers no improvement in terms of answering questions about the origins of the world. This argument is simply a sophisticated version of the naïve challenge: 'if God made the world, then who made God'?[232] Both the naïve and sophisticated version of this challenge make an illicit jump from the claim 'the world has a cause' to 'therefore, God has a cause,' failing to observe the simple distinction: *God* is not identical with *the world*.

In Augustine's defense of *creatio ex nihilo*, however, the distinction between God and the world cannot be overstated. To Augustine, God is a necessary being. The creation of the contingent world, then, is a fundamentally new substance: it is *ex nihilo* (from nothing). But this discontinuity has troubling implications for a view that expects ongoing interaction between God and creation. Difficulties abound in trying to understand how such interaction between two radically different substances is not only possible, but intelligible.

---

[231] Oppy, *Describing Gods*, 122.
[232] Cf. Grünbaum, "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation," 390.

The problem of determinism, as an implication of the existence of an omniscient God, is one such difficulty. Pike's handling of this difficulty, though he accepts the timelessness defense, is troubling for an Augustinian (or Boethian), because in Pike's version of the problem, it is impossible to reconcile free will and God's knowledge, Pike's defense notwithstanding. But Pike's analysis fails because the way he sets up the problem is incoherent. His definition of *freedom* calls for a self-contradictory power to cause God's beliefs to be either false or other than what they are. The problem of determinism in foreknowledge turns out to really be a problem with a certain conception of time, not God. If facts about a time, *t,* exist in time prior to *t*, then this is what entails determinism, and whether or not anyone knows the contents of such facts is beside the point. But Augustine denies the present reality of future truths, so on his view the problem of determinism cannot arise.

Additional difficulties are presented in the various aspects of God's personality that are traditionally – and very strongly by Augustine – associated with a creator. While it is readily apparent that timeless activity is difficult to understand, Pike's argument that it is positively incoherent is extremely weak. After sufficiently explaining the concept of timeless creative activity, Pike argues that the concept is incoherent on the basis of a dictionary survey. But while Pike's case against the coherence of *creatio ex nihilo* is inadequate, he joins the growing list of those who find or present the doctrine as something incomprehensible.

Although the suspicions of Wolfe, Grünbaum, Oppy, and Pike – that *creatio ex nihilo* is incoherent – have not been sufficiently demonstrated, this alone is not sufficient to conclude that it *is* coherent. In the texts we have focused on, Augustine does not quite explain how the relation between eternity and temporality might be conceived. If no such relation *can* be coherently proposed, then the doubts about the coherence of *creatio ex nihilo* would seem justified.

However, the *ET-simultaneity* relation proposed by Stump and Kretzmann does offer a plausible model of how eternity and temporality can relate. ET provides a coherent way to characterize statements about God's knowledge of the future, for example, despite difficulties that such statements often invoke. If there is no future, then how can God know what it is? ET helps us avoid category errors that tend to characterize analyses of timelessness. Thus, we can rephrase the question: 'if there is (presently) no future, then how can God (eternally) know what is eternally true about what (presently) will be true?' When asked this way, the implied contradiction disappears. There is no reason that the present lack of a future time should suggest that God does not have eternal knowledge of what will be true at that future time. The only caveat we must make is that statements about what God does, or has, or is, should be understood as expressing a present truth, but one that is not necessarily *about* a present reality. What God is or knows or does eternally is true presently if true at all, but it does not follow from this that what is true about God, or known or caused by God, is itself temporally present.

We can conclude, then, that Augustine's conception of *creatio ex nihilo* can be shown to be positively coherent. This means simply that it makes sense to talk about a creator of the universe: a God that does not exist in time, yet can be in relation to creatures in time. It does not follow from this, of course, that *creatio ex nihilo* is actually true. The question of whether there is a God who created the universe is not within the scope of this paper. However, while other difficulties are certainly involved in the raising of that question, this analysis strongly suggests that the question makes sense. Therefore, the findings here remove one significant barrier to considering the question of the existence of a creator God.

Bibliography

Anderson, Owen. "Divine Foreknowledge and Freedom of the Will: Contemporary Work Revisits Calvinism." *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 11, no. 4 (August 2004): 459-465.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. 1.10.1.

Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway (1948). *Rules: Operating Department*. p. 7 (Quoted in "Train." *Wikipedia*. Accessed June 6, 2020.) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Train#cite_note-3).

Augustine. *On Free Choice of the Will*. Translated by Anna S. Benjamin and L.H. Hackstaff. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, (1964) 1986.

―――. "On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees." In *On Genesis: The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, edited by John E. Rotelle, 25-102. Translated by Edmund Hill Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002.

―――. *The City of God*. Translated by Marcus Dods. New York: Random House, 2000.

―――. *The Confessions*. Translated by Maria Boulding. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

―――. "The Literal Meaning of Genesis." In *On Genesis: The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, edited by John E. Rotelle, 155-506. Translated by Edmund Hill Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002.

―――. "Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis." In *On Genesis: The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, edited by John E. Rotelle, 105-151. Translated by Edmund Hill. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002.

Barr, Stephen. *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003.

Carter, Jason W. "St. Augustine on Time, Time Numbers, and Enduring Objects." *Vivarium* 49, no. 4 (2011): 301-323.

Clark, Mary T. *Augustine*. London: Continuum, 2005.

Craig, William Lane. "God, Time, and Eternity." *Religious Studies* 14, no. 4 (Dec. 1978): 497-503.

―――. "Julian Wolfe and Infinite Time." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11 (1980): 133-135.

―――. *Kalām Cosmological Argument*. London: The Macmillan Press, 1979.

⸺. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. Revised edition. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994, 110.

⸺. "The Origin and Creation of the Universe: A Reply to Adolf Grünbaum." *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 43, no. 2 (1992): 233-240.

Davison, Andrew. "Looking Back toward the Origin: Scientific Cosmology as Creation *ex nihilo* Considered 'from the Inside.' " In *Creation ex nihilo: Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Gary A. Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl, 367-389. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017.

Gerson, Lloyd. "Plotinus." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Fall 2018 Edition. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/plotinus/.

Gilson, Étienne. *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*. Translated by L. E. M. Lynch. New York: Random House, 1960.

Goldman, William. *The Princess Bride: S. Morgenstern's Classic Tale of True Love & High Adventure*. NY: Harcourt Inc., (1973) 2007.

Grünbaum, Adolf. "Creation as a Pseudo-Explanation in Current Physical Cosmology." *Erkenntnis* 35 (1991): 232-254.

⸺. "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation in Physical Cosmology." *Philosophy of Science* 56, no. 3 (Sept. 1989): 373-394.

Hawking, Stephen. *A Brief History of Time: Updated and Expanded Tenth Anniversary Edition*. New York: Bantam Books, 1998.

Helm, Paul. "A different modern defence of divine eternity." In *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, edited by Brian Davies, 519-530. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Hill, Edmund. General introduction to *On Genesis: The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, 13-22*, Edited by John E. Rotelle. Translated by Edmund Hill. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002.

Hillar, Marian. "Philo of Alexandria." *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by James Fieser and Bradley Dowden. ISSN 2161-0002. Accessed November 16, 2019. https://www.iep.utm.edu/philo/.

Hincks, Adam D. "What Does Physical Cosmology Say about Creation from Nothing?" In *Creation* ex nihilo: *Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Gary A. Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl, 319-345. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017.

Krauss, Lawrence. *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing*. New York: Free Press, 2012.

Leclerq, Henri. "The First Council of Nicea." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11044a.htm.

Loughlin, James. "St. Ambrose." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01383c.htm.

Markus, R. A. "Augustine: God and Nature." In *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, edited by A. H. Armstrong, 395-405. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.

McSorley, Joseph. "St. Basil the Great." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02330b.htm.

Moore, Edward. "Middle Platonism." *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by James Fieser and Bradley Dowden. ISSN 2161-0002. Accessed November 16, 2019. https://www.iep.utm.edu/midplato/.

Oppy, Graham. *Describing Gods: An Investigation of Divine Attributes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Pike, Nelson. *God and Timelessness*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.

Poncelet, Albert. "St. Irenaeus." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08130b.htm.

Prat, Ferdinand. "Origen and Origenism." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11306b.htm.

Rist, John. *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Seddon, Keith H. "Epictetus." *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by James Fieser and Bradley Dowden. ISSN 2161-0002. Accessed November 16, 2019. https://www.iep.utm.edu/epictetu/.

Sorabji, Richard. *Time, Creation, and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and Early Middle Ages*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Soskice, Janet. "Why *Creatio ex nihilo* for Theology Today?" In *Creation* ex nihilo: *Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges*, edited by Gary A. Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl, 37-54. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017.

Spade, Paul Vincent. "Medieval Philosophy." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Summer 2018 Edition. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/medieval-philosophy/.

Stump, Eleonore, and Norman Kretzmann. "Eternity." *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, no. 8 (August 1981): 429-458.

Torchia, N. Joseph. *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaean Polemic and Beyond*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999.

Wolfe, Julian. "Infinite Regress and the Cosmological Argument." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2, No. 4 (Winter 1971): 246-249.

⸻. "On the Impossibility of an Infinite Past: A Reply to Craig." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 18 (1985): 91.