
Augustine's Understanding of Creation

Augustine's understanding of creation and its centrality to his thought fit into a larger pattern of fourth-century Christian theological development. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was the nexus in which Christians during the first three centuries articulated their understanding of God as radically transcendent from and therefore immanent to the world; it is where they articulated their bold Christology which claimed that the Son was ontologically equal to the Father without dividing the Godhead; it is also where they forged a distinctive Christian anthropology.¹ *Creatio ex nihilo* was not a readymade Jewish idea which the early Christians simply borrowed, but a hard-won doctrine which emerged from controversies with gnostic groups and Greek philosophers.² By Augustine's time, the

1. See, respectively, Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 36–41; as well as two fine articles by Frances Young: "Creation and Human Being: The Forging of a Distinct Christian Discourse," *Studia Patristica* 44 (2010): 336, and "'Creatio ex Nihilo': A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991): 139–51.

theology of creation was well-developed, though its implications were still being worked out. Augustine's understanding of creation, then, is first and foremost the faith of the church, though as we will see in the next chapter, he arrived at this understanding rather circuitously. In the *Confessions*, Augustine is expounding a traditional Christian inheritance, while also developing it in distinctive ways.

Augustine uses a variety of Latin terms to express different aspects of what we are calling "creation." Sometimes, he uses *facere* and *creare* interchangeably to mean the divine activity which introduces being from nothing.³ Other times, he distinguishes these words: *facere*, in a more technical sense, can refer to creation from nothing, while *creare* is used to refer to the "constituting and ordering" (*condere et ordinare*) of things already made.⁴ Augustine uses the word *creatura* to refer to all the things God has created, all of material and spiritual reality, what I will often simply call "creation" or "the world." For Augustine, God is the "Creator of all creation" (*creator universae creaturae*),⁵ the one invoked as "he who made all things" (*qui fecit omnia*).⁶ Creation is an act of the whole Trinity. In an early work, Augustine says, "It is said, in accordance with Catholic teaching, that creation (*creatura*) is whatever God the Father has made and established (*fecit et condidit*) through the only-begotten Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit."⁷ Augustine will argue that just as the persons of the Trinity can be

2. See Young, "'Creatio ex Nihilo,'" 142 and 150. Young insists that the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* is distinctively Christian and completely "unhellenic" ("Creation and Human Being," 335). Augustine, though, argues in a number of places that the Platonists did hold to a doctrine of creation from nothing and that he learned this truth from reading their books. See the discussion of this point in Chapter Two below.

3. Compare, for example, "You made (*fecisti*) us toward yourself" (*conf.* 1.1.1) with, "Thus man is renewed in the knowledge of God according to the image of him who created (*creavit*) him" (*conf.* 13.22.32, quoting Col. 3:10).

4. Augustine makes this distinction in *mor.* 2.7.9. See *conf.* 7.5.7 for this use of *creare*.

5. *conf.* 13.5.6.

6. *conf.* 2.4.10.

7. *div. qu.* 67.1.

distinguished, so too can their involvement in the one creative act.⁸ In relation to the persons of the Trinity, Augustine uses *creatio* in a more specific sense to refer to the Father bringing formless matter into being from nothing.

All these senses of creation are present in the *Confessions* at different times, but there is also a deeper sense in which creation is present—creation as revelation. In this, Augustine is explicitly following Paul in Rom. 1:20: “Your invisible things are understood through that which has been made.”⁹ That which God has made is a whole, a coherent world of creatures which operates as a harmonious system. It is a cosmos, a beautifully ordered hierarchy of things, each of which has its own integrity but which also mutually depends on other things. Augustine’s world is dynamic: all things are in purposive motion.¹⁰ God is the Creator of this whole and therefore cannot be a part of it. For Augustine, this means that creation itself—its very existence—is revelation. “With the whole creation testifying together,” Augustine says, “I found You, our Creator and Your Word, God with You and with You one God, through whom You created all things.”¹¹ All of creation unfailingly proclaims that it is not

8. See discussion of *creatio, conversio, formatio* below.

9. Augustine uses some form of Rom. 1:20 six times explicitly in the *Confessions*, four of which occur in Book Seven when he comes to the proper distinction between God and the world for the first time. See *conf.* 7.10.16; 7.17.23 (2x); 7.20.26; 10.6.10; 13.21.31. The version here is translated from *conf.* 7.17.23: *invisibilia tua per ea quae facta sunt intellecta.*

10. See the excellent discussion of this in Rowan Williams, “Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation,” *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994): 11–16.

11. *conf.* 8.1.2. See the section entitled “How Creation is Perceived as Revelation,” in Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 112–22. Robert Sokolowski calls this understanding of creation “the Christian distinction,” by which he means the thing that sets Christians apart from pagans and other religions as well as the unique way Christians understand the distinction between God and the world. Augustine and Sokolowski diverge somewhat on the matter of what pagans could know. Sokolowski thinks all pagan thought makes God into the highest thing in the world, while Augustine would say all the pagans *except* the Platonists do. See Sokolowski’s *God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 12–19; also, *conf.* 7.9.13–15; *ep.* 118.16–18. Also, see Eugene Kevane, “Christian Philosophy: The Intellectual Side of Augustine’s Conversion,” *Augustinian Studies* 17 (1986): “In the pagan philosophy of the

God, but that God made it.¹² God cannot be identified with any part of his creation, not even the highest part, nor can he be identified with the whole. Rather, the whole made up of parts confesses, "I am not God, but he has made me."¹³ For Augustine, creation as a whole is epiphany. It is an illumination which not only sheds light on, but determines our understanding of the Creator, what and how he creates, and how his creation is distinct from and related to him.¹⁴ Creation, in this deep Pauline sense, is determinative of Augustine's thought and, moreover, it opens up the conceptual space to understand the other Christian mysteries, such as the incarnation and the Trinity.¹⁵

God's Being and Created Being

For Augustine, God is not a part of the world, but utterly transcendent to it. This seeming truism is not as obvious as it might first appear. It certainly was not obvious to the young Augustine when he was struggling to understand God. There is, the mature Augustine thought, a perennial human temptation to reduce God to something within the horizon of the world. This can arise, he says, from identifying God with some part of creation, as he claims

past, even at its best, the mind remained in confinement within the cosmos" (62). See John Peter Kenney's *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the Confessions* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17, for a lucid description of the pagan gods understood as bound by time and space and 18ff for how Platonists offered something different. This question will be revisited in Chapter Two.

12. See *conf.* 10.6.8–10 in particular for Augustine's discussion of this.

13. *conf.* 10.6.9.

14. For an illuminating discussion of the revelatory power of creation, see Robert Sokolowski's "Creation and Christian Understanding," in *Christian Faith and Human Understanding: Studies on the Eucharist, Trinity, and the Human Person* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 38–50, and *The God of Faith and Reason*. Sokolowski is engaged in what he calls a "theology of disclosure," a phenomenological approach to doing theology which, he suggests, Augustine also practices (*God of Faith and Reason*, 139). Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 92, affirms something similar.

15. See, for example, *conf.* 8.1.2.

Anaximenes did when he identified God with the air,¹⁶ but it can also arise from the natural habit of the mind to try to *imagine* God, that is, to make an image of him when thinking of him. Augustine calls this “smacking of the flesh in one’s thoughts” (*carnaliter sapere*).¹⁷

Augustine relates two of these imaginative reductions familiar in his day: when people ask, “What was God doing before he made heaven and earth?”¹⁸ or when they “think of God as a man, or as some immense mass endowed with power, who by some new and sudden decision made heaven and earth outside himself, as it were, in spaces at a distance from himself,”¹⁹ they are imagining God as a being in the world subject to time and space. Instead of understanding God as the transcendent Source of creation, he is understood as the highest thing *in* creation.²⁰ This kind of thinking makes creation ultimate; it makes the stuff of the world all there is. God, in these examples, is only a higher form of what humans are, since time and space would be prior to and therefore more fundamental than God. For the mature Augustine, though, the world is not ultimate, but radically contingent, for God created it from

16. See *conf.* 10.6.9 as well as *ep.* 118.16–20 and 53. In *ep.* 118, Augustine discusses Anaximenes as well as the Stoics and Epicureans who, he says, identify God with mind and body (respectively), that is, as some part of the world.

17. *vera rel.* 20.40. This humorous translation comes from Edmond Hill, *On True Religion* in *On Christian Belief*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2005), ad loc.

18. *conf.* 11.10.12.

19. *conf.* 12.27.37.

20. There seems to be a strand of Augustine scholarship that attributes this very error to Augustine, while claiming that it represents his thought. In the entry on “Wisdom” in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), we read, “Augustine’s ontology consisted of an hierarchical structure of reality with God, its creator, at the apex and the world of bodies at the bottom” (885). Vernon Bourke, *Augustine’s View of Reality* (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1964), speaks of a “triple-layered scheme of reality. At the top is God, in the middle is the human soul, and at the bottom is the world of bodies. Apart from these three levels . . . there are no other general types of beings” (3). See also, Robert O’Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine’s Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 21–68 and *Images of Conversion in St. Augustine’s Confessions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 105–6; Leo Ferrari, “Cosmology,” in *Augustine through the Ages*, 246–48 (hereafter abbreviated *ATA*).

nothing. God is the Creator of all things, not a type of being within the whole. He is ultimate and surpasses time and space, Augustine says, by his “eternally stable abiding.”²¹ This is the great Christian (and, Augustine believes, Platonist) insight: the world is not the ultimate context in which one distinguishes all things, including God; rather, the world is one term in a more fundamental distinction between God and his creation.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine understands God as “Being Itself” (*idipsum*), the “Selfsame,” who is utterly simple, complete, and sufficient unto himself.²² He says in Book 13 that God does “not exist in a certain way, but he is is” (*non aliquo modo est, sed est est*).²³ With this reduplicated *est*, Augustine evokes Exodus 3:14 and suggests that God *is* without qualification.²⁴ God simply is. All creatures exist in a certain way—the way God made them—but God is not a part of creation, so “he exists not in any particular mode nor as any particular kind.”²⁵ God *is est* itself, sheer is.

This understanding of God’s nature means for Augustine that God is utterly transcendent to the world he created while, at the same time, being wholly and intimately present to it without competing with it in any way. There is a sense in which God is “absent” or

21. *conf.* 12.28.38.

22. For Augustine’s use of *idipsum*, see, for example, *conf.* 1.6.10, 7.9.14, 9.4.11, 12.7.7. For Augustine, *idipsum* is “a mystical name for God, equated with Exod. 3.14, ‘ego sum qui sum’” (James O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), <http://www.stoa.org/hippo>, ad loc. 9.4.11). See also *conf.* 7.10.16 for a use of Exod. 3:14. For Augustine’s understanding of God as simple, complete, and sufficient unto himself, see, for example, *conf.* 13.1.1; *vera rel.* 14.28; *ep.* 121.5. Also, Jean-Luc Marion, “*Idipsum*: The Name of God according to Augustine,” in *Orthodox Readings of Augustine*, eds. George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), 167–90.

23. *conf.* 13.31.46. The construction *est est* is odd in Latin, as is “is is” in English. Another possible translation, which brings out the Exod. 3:14 resonances, is O’Donnell’s suggestion, “he is ‘he is’” (O’Donnell, *Confessions*, ad loc.).

24. See Robert Sokolowski, “The Science of Being as Being in Aristotle, Aquinas, and Wippel,” in *The Science of Being as Being: Metaphysical Investigations*, ed. Gregory T. Doolan (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 31.

25. *Ibid.*

“hidden” from the world. Frederick Crosson says that, for Augustine, “God does not belong to the nature of the whole or appear within it because he is not a kind of being.”²⁶ This necessary absence or hiddenness is identical to an understanding of his intimate presence to the world. As Augustine says, God is “most hidden *and* most present” (*secretissime et praesentissime*).²⁷ God is everywhere wholly and intimately present to the world—*ubique totus*, in Augustine’s phrase²⁸—because he is utterly and totally transcendent to it.²⁹

According to Augustine, a true understanding of God inevitably leads to the corollary doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. In the *De libero arbitrio*, he offers a neat argument: God is “omnipotent and not changeable in any particular . . . he is the Creator of all good things, in regard to which he himself stands before as more excellent, the most just ruler of all that he created; nor was any other nature a helper in creating, as if he were not sufficient unto himself. *From this it follows* that he created all things from nothing.”³⁰ Because God “is is” he is perfectly self-sufficient, lacking in nothing. He does not need to create, for need implies lack, of which there is none in God; nor does creation increase God’s goodness, for God is Goodness Itself; nor, finally, when God creates is he aided in any way, neither by a Demiurge or by some pre-existing material, for this, too, would imply a lack or dependence, an insufficiency of power on God’s part. God creates freely and for no further reason than his own Goodness.³¹ “For You made them not out of need of them,” says Augustine,

26. Frederick Crosson, “Structure and Meaning in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*,” in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 28.

27. *conf.* 1.4.4.

28. *conf.* 1.3.3 and 6.3.4; cf., *ep.* 187.5.16: “God is everywhere present through his divinity.”

29. See *lib. arb.* 2.12.33.

30. *lib. arb.* 1.2.5, emphasis added.

31. In *div. qu.* 22, Augustine makes a neat syllogism to show that there is no necessity in God: “Where there is no lack there is no necessity; where there is no deficiency there is no lack. However, there is no deficiency in God, and therefore no necessity.”

“but out of the plenitude of Your Goodness, holding them together and converting them to form, but not as though Your joy was somehow completed from them.”³² Augustine can say this because God is transcendent from the world and in no way depends on it. For Augustine, then, creation from nothing is the logical conclusion from a certain understanding of God. This line of reasoning will have important consequences for how Augustine understands the Platonists.

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* has profound implications for how Augustine views the world and his own existence; it demands that he understand them as a gift, a freely chosen and gratuitously given gift of God, who was under no compulsion to create and gains nothing by creating, but who freely shares his being and goodness with creation and so reveals himself as Love.³³ The being and well-being of creatures is God’s utterly gratuitous gift and their relationship to him is one of utter dependence. The very fact of creation, then, insists on a response of perpetual gratitude (the proper response to a gift) or, more precisely, praise in thanksgiving, what Augustine calls *confessio*.

Trinity and *Creatio de nihilo*

For Augustine, creation from nothing is an act of the whole Trinity.³⁴ “The Father has simultaneously made each and every nature through

32. *conf.* 13.4.5.

33. Thomas Pruffer offers a similar insight: “‘God is all there is,’ although false, is meaningful for a sense of the being of creatures within the context of creation, which is free and out of nothing, that is, creatures are chosen by God as the alternative to there being only God.” See “A Reading of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Book X,” in *Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 28.

34. Augustine understood the importance of the Trinity from the time of his pre-baptismal retreat in Cassiciacum where in his first post-conversion work he shows his mother—as the voice of piety and therefore authority—identify the happy life with the Trinity (*b. vita* 4.35). He reiterates his mother’s opinion in the *lib. arb.* 3.21.60. A full treatment of Augustine’s understanding of the Trinity is beyond our scope. See Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

the Son in the Gift of the Holy Spirit.”³⁵ In the *Confessions*, the word *Trinitas* and the phrase *de nihilo*³⁶ each occur for the first time in the same passage:

And there was not another thing besides You from which You might make them, O God, *one Trinity and threefold Unity*, and therefore, from nothing You made heaven and earth, a great thing and a small thing, since You are omnipotent and good, to make all things good. You were, and nothing else. *From nothing, You made* the heaven [of heavens] and [the formless] earth, these two, one to which [only] You would be superior, the other to which [only] nothing would be less.³⁷

Augustine is careful not to make *Trinitas* and *nihil* the two extremes of being in the created world, the highest and the lowest. Instead, Augustine says that heaven and earth, that is, the heaven of heavens and the original formless matter, are the limits of created being.³⁸ *Nihil* has no ontological status which could be contrasted with God, and God, who is Being Itself, has no contrast.

God is “one Trinity and threefold unity.” In *De doctrina Christiana*, a work contemporaneous or at least contiguous with the *Confessions*, Augustine articulates his dogmatic understanding of this teaching:

Thus, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and each one of them [are] God, and all at once, one God, and each one of them [is] a full substance, and all, at once, one substance. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit; the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son; but the Father is only the Father and the Son is only the Son and the Holy Spirit is only the Holy

35. *vera rel.* 7.13. See also *conf.* 13.5.6–6.7; cf. *Gn. adv. Man.* 1.2.3.

36. Augustine uses both the phrases *de nihilo* and *ex nihilo*. In the *Confessions*, *de nihilo* is used six times (five times in Book 12; once in Book 13), while *ex nihilo* is used only once. He seems to use them without any difference in meaning, though O'Donnell suggests that *de nihilo* somehow helps to rule out Gnostic and Platonic notions of emanation (*Confessions*, ad loc. 12.7.7). See *c. Sec.* 8.9.

37. *conf.* 12.7.7.

38. Heaven and earth will be discussed below.

Spirit: in all three, the same eternity, the same unchangeability, the same majesty, the same power.³⁹

Augustine does not use the language of persons and nature here, but he clearly sees that there is a distinction between what is three in God and what is one.⁴⁰ This three-in-oneness and the one-in-threeness of the Trinity can only be coherent with the understanding of God which arises from the Christian understanding of creation. Within the horizon of the world, it is not possible to speak intelligibly of three persons in one nature. Each person is one substance or one being, an individual distinct from other individuals.⁴¹ But, creation opens up a new way of understanding God's transcendence; the categories of the world do not fit anymore. God's transcendence allows there to be a new and deeper communion of persons. In *De Doctrina Christiana* and in the *Confessions*, Augustine does not go into detail about how the three are one and the one is three—and neither shall this inquiry—but it should be noted how the transcendence of God, the understanding of which is opened up by creation (and, we will see, deepened by the incarnation), opens up the intellectual space for the belief in the simultaneous threeness and oneness of the Trinity. Perhaps this is why *Trinitas* and *de nihilo* each appear for the first time in the same passage.

When discussing the Trinity, Augustine makes a distinction between what "is born from God's substance" and what God "made even from nothing."⁴² What is born of God's substance is equal to God and this is the Word, his only-begotten Son, who is the perfect Image and Likeness of the Father, perfectly reflecting the Father's

39. *doc. Chr.* 1.5.5; cf. *ep.* 11.2; *f. et symb.* 9.20.

40. For an early attempt to find a vocabulary for threeness and oneness in God, see *f. et symb.* 9.20; for a later attempt, see *Trin.* 5.8.9–9.11.

41. See Sokolowski, "Creation and Christian Understanding," 44 for a helpful discussion of this point.

42. *conf.* 12.7.7.

Being.⁴³ The Father has his being from himself, while the Son, being the perfect Likeness, shares the fullness of divinity: “For God is in no need of another’s good, since from his own self he is. Moreover, what is begotten from him, It is him [or, is the Selfsame], since it is not made, but begotten.”⁴⁴ Creation, in contrast, is not born of God’s substance, but is created from nothing. It is therefore distinct and, at least initially, unlike God.⁴⁵ For Augustine, creation can only be like God if it turns toward him, if, in Augustine’s words, it “converts.”⁴⁶

Creatio, Conversio, Formatio

Through a combination of philosophical reflection and Christian exegesis, Augustine discerns a fourfold simultaneous, non-temporal act of creation in the opening verses of Genesis which he describes under the terms *creatio*, *revocatio*, *conversio*, and *formatio*.⁴⁷ This can in fact be reduced to a threefold act because *revocatio* and *conversio* describe two aspects of the same activity of the Word. This pattern of *creatio*, *conversio*, *formatio*, Marie-Anne Vannier argues, “undergirds the thought of Augustine.”⁴⁸

Though the action of the Trinity is one, the persons of the Trinity are involved in the one act in distinct ways. The Father introduces being from nothing: *creatio*. He calls his (at this point) unformed creation back to himself through the Word, *revocatio*, and creation

43. See *vera rel.* 34.63, 36.66, 43.81.

44. *vera rel.* 14.28. One could read *id ipsum* as *idipsum*, hence the bracketed translation.

45. See *conf.* 13.2.3.

46. See *conf.* 13.2.2–3.

47. Augustine exegetically discerns these four “stages” most clearly in the *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* (cf. 1.4.9), where he develops this line of thought most fully, but the pattern is there in principle from the beginning (cf. *mor.* 2.6.8). For *creatio*, *conversio*, *formatio*, see Marie-Anne Vannier, “*Creatio*”, “*Conversio*”, “*Formatio*” chez *S. Augustin* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1997). For this pattern in the early works of Augustine, see Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 74–114.

48. Marie-Anne Vannier, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Cerf, 2007), 47 (my translation).