

Retrieving Augustine's Doctrine of Creation

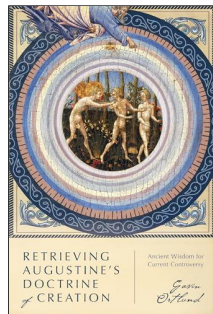
Gavin Ortland

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/ortland-augustine/>



How might Augustine's doctrine of creation influence the current creation debate? Here are three possibilities. First, Augustine helps us wonder at sheer createdness. Creation is not a necessity. It reflects the generosity of God. As Augustine prays, "You created, not because you had need, but out of the abundance of your own goodness."¹

Related to this, creation is, for Augustine, an emotional doctrine. He engages it at a deeply existential level. Specifically, he holds that the human soul was made for God, and thus every facet of human existence is dynamically oriented toward God. At every moment and in all that we do, we are constantly upheld by God, relating to God, and in need of God. He is the constant fact with which all existence has to do. Life and happiness are fully and only from him. As Augustine writes, "Even when all is well with me, what am I but a creature suckled on your milk and feeding on yourself, the food that never perishes?"²



Augustine's vision of creaturely dependence on God extends not only to the human soul but to the entire created universe. The whole world is reverberating with imperfection, longing to share with the angels in

divine immutability—like a piece of pottery that has been constructed but has not yet gone through the firing and glazing stages. It awaits its final confirmation in God. Augustine may as well have prayed, "You have made all creation for yourself, and it will find no rest until it rests in you." This is why the *Confessions* ends with Genesis 1, and why Genesis 1:1-2 sets Augustine's heart throbbing.³

Augustine's reminder of the miracle of creatureliness makes it more difficult to take this doctrine for granted, or to put all our focus on simply *how* it happened. Creation is not a speculative topic but vitally concerns human happiness. Even secular people involved in the conversation may be intrigued by Augustine's insights into the craving of the human heart.

Second, Augustine's humility concerning the doctrine of creation encourages irenicism, particularly in the relation of theology and (what we would call) science. Now, this is not to say that Augustine is unwilling to debate about creation. He is deeply concerned to affirm the goodness of creation, for example, in response to Manichaean errors. We feel from Augustine the importance of creation and its foundational significance for the doctrines of sin and redemption. He is always willing to reject overreaching claims from philosophers, particularly when they threaten orthodoxy.

At the same time, within the rule of faith, Augustine is remarkably circumspect. His great concern is to avoid rashness (*temeritas*). He has enormous respect for the work of *philosophi* and *medici*, and is horrified at anti-intellectual dismissals of genuine discovery. He insists on the complete trustworthiness of Scripture, but remains keenly alert to his fallibility as an interpreter. He works hard to harmonize biblical texts with each other and with other fields of knowledge. He often functions with approximate or provisional views. He is willing to reconsider his claims.

Augustine's presence in the current creation debate would encourage a more complicated view of the relation of Scripture and science, and more care in relating them. I can well imagine Augustine at the table, holding up his hands in protest, urging caution, listening, and

Gavin Ortland (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) serves as senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Ojai in Ojai, California. He is the author of several books, including Retrieving Augustine's Doctrine of Creation and Finding the Right Hills to Die on. You can follow him on Twitter here. This article is an excerpt from his new book, Retrieving Augustine's Doctrine of Creation. We also recommend the article The Contemporary Relevance of Augustine's View of Creation by Davis A. Young.

1. *Confessiones* 13.4 (CSEL 33, 348).

2. *Confessiones* 4.1 (CSEL 33, 64).

3. *Confessiones* 12.1 (CSEL 33, 310).

patience—or, to use his terms, calling for less “obstinate wrangling” and more “diligent seeking, humble asking, persistent knocking.”⁴

In both of these first two points—Augustine’s expansive vision of creation and his humble method of engaging it—he may remind us that the most important aspects of the doctrine of creation are not those typically disputed among Christians, but those held in common (such as creation *ex nihilo*). To put it colloquially, he might help us major on the majors, and minor on the minors.

Third, Augustine helps us to appreciate the complexity of interpreting Genesis 1. Having felt Augustine’s anxiety over this passage, and having traced the development of his views throughout his five commentaries, it will be more difficult to rebuke all those who can’t see its obvious “plain meaning.” Augustine may prompt us to deeper hermeneutical considerations when he suggests that the days function as an act of divine accommodation, “as a help to human frailty . . . to suggest sublime things to lowly people in a lowly manner by following the basic rule of story-telling.”⁵ He will certainly complicate our terminology, since he regards a “literal” interpretation of Genesis 1 as concerning historical referentiality without excluding allegorical meaning or various kinds of figurative language. Some of his views on Genesis 1 may prompt quizzical looks, like his claim that the ordering of events is according to angelic knowledge. Yet the influence of Augustine’s exegesis of Genesis 1, particularly through the medieval era, discourages us from simply writing him off as an eccentric. Recall that Andrew Brown calls Augustine’s interpretation

“the defining statement with which every medieval and Renaissance commentator on Gen. 1:1–2:3 would wrestle.”⁶

In the current creation debate, the vigor of Augustine’s rejection of twenty-four-hour days will certainly be felt. For Augustine, “it can scarcely be supposed” that light turned on and off on days one to three before the creation of the sun;⁷ it is “beyond a shadow of doubt” and “limpidly clear” that Genesis 2:4-6 confirm non-ordinary days;⁸ it is “the height of folly” to read day seven in a literalistic way.⁹ If all this fails to convince, there remains the challenge of squeezing the events of day five into twenty-four hours: “Here, surely, anyone slow on the uptake should finally wake up to understanding what sort of days are being counted here.”¹⁰

The force of these rebukes is partially explained by the fact that Augustine associates literalism with the Manichaeans. Yet his views still undermine the claim that all rejection of twenty-four-hour days in Genesis 1 is motivated by scientific discovery. If we appeal to twenty-four-hour days as the “plain reading,” we must reckon with the towering fact that the greatest theologian of the early church found the opposing view equally “plain.” This would seem, at the very least, to encourage more space for legitimate disagreement concerning the interpretation of Genesis 1.

6. Andrew J. Brown, *The Days of Creation: A History of Christian Interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2:3*, *History of Biblical Interpretation* (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo, 2014), 53.

7. *De Genesi ad litteram* 1.11.23 (CSEL 28:1, 17).

8. *De Genesi ad litteram* 5.1.3 (CSEL 28:1, 138).

9. *De Genesi ad litteram* 4.8.16 (CSEL 28:1, 104).

10. *De Genesi ad litteram liber unus imperfectus* 15.51 (CSEL 28:1, 495).

4. *De Genesi ad litteram* 10.23.39 (CSEL 28:1, 326).

5. *De Genesi ad litteram liber unus imperfectus* 3.8 (CSEL 28:1, 463).

References

<https://peacefulscience.org/books/retrieving-augustines-doctrine-creation/>

<https://peacefulscience.org/books/hills-to-die-on/>

<https://twitter.com/gavinortlund>

<https://www.ivpress.com/retrieving-augustine-s-doctrine-of-creation>

<https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1988/PSCF3-88Young.html>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irenicism>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manichaeism>