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978-1-107-06153-8 - Causation and Creation in Late Antiquity

Edited by Anna Marmodoro and Brian D. Prince

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**Anna Marmodoro and Brian D. Prince*

How did the cosmos come into existence? Is it eternal? Was it created *ex nihilo*? If so, how? Or was it created from something that already existed? But then what was it created from, and by whom or what? Further, was this creation an instance of the same kind of causation we observe in the world we inhabit? Or was it another, special type of causation instead? Throughout the late antique period, from roughly the third through the seventh centuries CE, philosophers of all schools had something to say on these questions.

Friction between Christian and pagan philosophers produced many of the new ideas of this period, some of which disappeared from history after a short time, while others enjoyed centuries of currency. The philosophical community on which this book focuses is a loosely knit group of thinkers in mutual conversations, overlapping both geographically and temporally, from Gaza in the east, to North Africa in the south, to Italy in the north and west. Christian philosophers faced a particular difficulty with questions about creation, as their commitments bade them reconcile the emerging doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in the Church with the strenuous denial of this – even as a metaphysical possibility – by the Greek philosophical heritage that they also wanted to accept. Since these thinkers had been educated in the tradition of Greek philosophy as well as in their (relatively) new religion, the issue was one of pressing urgency, and they had no choice but to try out innovative solutions, since there were simply no predecessors similarly situated to whom they could look.

The picture that emerges is of two partly overlapping communities of thinkers grappling with many of the same issues, drawing on the same philosophical heritage but applying different further assumptions. Readers will find some well-known debates and views in this volume, but also, we trust, many that are less familiar because they were dropped rather than developed in the history of Western thought, and which therefore come to us as new thoughts after centuries of dormancy.

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We can think of the choices involved in reaching a philosophical view in this area as beginning with the choice between a universe that has always existed and one that has been created. For those choosing creation, the next step is to opt for creation from nothing or from something, and then to describe the process or mechanism by which creation was accomplished. For all Christian and at least some Neoplatonic philosophers, the cosmos was brought into existence by a divine being's creative act. The Neoplatonic thinkers especially drew on Plato's views in the *Timaeus*, which can be read with equal plausibility as endorsing either creation from pre-existing stuff or a non-creation account. The Christian thinkers, of course, do not take Plato as an authority on the question of how the universe was created, but nevertheless respond to him indirectly when engaging with Neoplatonists who do.

Viewed in one way, causation is a genus including creation as a special case; on this view, causation is the more basic concept, because more general. But conversely, creation may be taken as the more basic notion, either because creation happens first temporally or because it is prior in a metaphysical sense. From this perspective, understanding creation is the more basic task, on which explanations of *intra-cosmic* causation will be built afterward. From either perspective, though, causation and creation are closely linked. For example, if God creates the cosmos in a certain way, certain implications will follow about the nature of that cosmos (see Chapter 5), and thus for the behaviour of its inhabitants (see Chapters 10 and 11), including both (merely) physical objects (see Chapter 1) and human (and other) agents (see Chapters 12 and 13). Thinkers in both traditions, Neoplatonist and Christian, were concerned to understand the human situation in a certain light, and to produce corresponding prescriptions that would be grounded in their picture of the cosmos. We thus also reach questions about human agency and willing, as species of causation, familiar to other philosophical ages. Where does the human soul come from as an embryo/foetus grows and is born (see Chapter 9)? What is the (eventually) resulting human agent (see Chapter 11)? What can we learn about human agency by comparing it with the agency of God and that of angels? What allows humans to be morally responsible for their actions? How is evil possible, compatible with the assumption that God is the cause of everything in creation, without attributing evil to God? As with creation, we see both pagan and Christian thinkers grappling with similar issues, and offering a variety of paths into and out of them.

This volume divides its contributions into two groups: as focusing more on the creation of the cosmos, or more on issues of human agency and

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responsibility, although the close connections between these issues lie on the surface of many chapters. The volume does not aim to offer an exhaustive treatment of any of the subjects addressed, but rather to demonstrate that many important questions from this period remain unexplored. Our larger goal is to excite further interest, both in the particular thinkers discussed here and in their peers who cannot be included. Perhaps the most glaring omission is the third-century Christian philosopher Origen, whose views on the creation of the universe and on the causation involved in moral agency would be prominent in any complete treatment of these issues. These topics are too vast for a single volume to deal with adequately; the richness of material included here should not be taken to suggest that we have told the whole story.

Six chapters in Part I of this book examine questions about *the origin of the cosmos*. Chapter 1 looks at early Stoic accounts of how the cosmos begins, focusing on the genesis of the four basic elements. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss different aspects of Plotinus' startling view that the demiurge creates the cosmos without any conscious planning. Chapter 4 looks at arguments formulated by three Christian philosophers to the effect that the world has been created, drawing from their work many insights into their society, education and relations to other thinkers. Chapter 5 takes up a problem examined by the Christian Gregory of Nyssa: if God is immaterial, how does He create a material world, given that causation seems to involve the widely held principle that 'like causes like'? Finally, Chapter 6 shows how Simplicius used his predecessors from the whole earlier philosophical tradition to arrive at his own views about creation. Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 6 examine their subjects more by looking at historical developments, while Chapters 3 and 5 focus on giving philosophical analyses.

In Chapter 1, 'Two early Stoic theories of cosmogony', Ricardo Salles looks at the Stoic view that the cosmos is periodically destroyed by fire, and then recreated. Salles focuses on the creation of the basic elements (earth, water, air and fire). Two competing accounts arose, Zeno and Chrysippus teaching that the fire which engulfs a cosmos at the end of its life is completely extinguished before the next cosmos comes to be, but Cleanthes arguing that the fire is never completely put out, so that at least some portion of fire exists continuously from one cosmos to the next. Salles traces these differences to differing views about the four elements. Finally, he examines how the two accounts explained the creation of the sun.

In this chapter we have a link between Greek philosophy of the classical period – since the Stoics built their theory of creation by developing ideas

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from Plato's *Timaeus* – and the late antique period – since Stoic views remained a strong influence throughout this period. Philoponus, for example, has sometimes been characterised as a Christian Stoic (Sorabji 1983: 34). In addition, Stoicism took a different path from other schools in its choice to advocate creation, but a creation from pre-existing stuff in which both the 'before' and 'after' stages are material. This can be profitably set beside both the Neoplatonic and Christian accounts of creation. As the following chapters show, Plotinus faces the difficult issue of how to describe the creator's intentionality, while Christian accounts were sometimes felt to run into a problem because God seems to be creating something – matter – which is completely unlike Himself. The Stoic account described in Chapter 1 holds out an alternative on which *these* problems are minimised, although others may be rendered more grave. In spite of the temporal distance from the thinkers of other chapters, Salles' new account of classical Stoic ideas about creation forms an important counterpoint for the rest of the volume.

Plotinus' thought permeates the late antique period because of its originality and depth. His influence is also due to the manifold ways he could be, and was, read. For example, one might justifiably read Plotinus as holding that creation was a sort of 'automatic' process, devoid of intentionality yet still teleological. Riccardo Chiaradonna discusses this view of Plotinus in Chapter 2, 'Plotinus' account of demiurgic causation and its philosophical background', looking back at the debates to which Plotinus was responding as he formulated his views about the creation of our world. Did Plotinus adopt this view mainly because he wanted to reject Gnostic views, according to which the world was created by a god, but one who was either incompetent or malevolent? Chiaradonna argues that this is not Plotinus' principal motivation (but cf. Chapter 7), and that he was instead responding to debates between Platonists and Aristotelians from the second century.

In Chapter 3, 'Creation and divine providence in Plotinus', Christopher Isaac Noble and Nathan M. Powers analyse the premises that Plotinus relies on in order to clarify his innovative and influential account of creation without deliberation or planning – an account that represents a remarkably austere reinterpretation of the 'providential agency' of Plato's divine craftsman.

In Chapter 4, 'Waiting for Philoponus', Richard Sorabji expounds and examines the arguments produced by three mostly forgotten Christian philosophers from Gaza between 485 and 529 CE. Aeneas, Zacharias and Procopius respond to Proclus' arguments for the eternity of the world,

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trying out responses that Philoponus would refine and use to better effect. The exchange is illuminating partly for the ways in which Philoponus' precursors fail to find the more penetrating arguments he would employ, but also yields a wealth of detailed observations about the philosophical training and religious surroundings of the Christian thinkers. Because these thinkers knew and borrowed from one another, we can also, to some extent, watch their arguments grow from initial ideas to more refined and effective presentations, as each learns from his predecessors and takes some steps beyond what they had accomplished.

Meanwhile, in the late fourth century the Christian philosopher Gregory of Nyssa was running into a similar puzzle in his thinking about creation. If an immaterial God creates a material cosmos, then it looks as if either the causal principle that 'like causes like' isn't true, or else the intuitive and plausible view that the world is material turns out to be false. Since the principle that like causes like enjoyed a broad consensus in antiquity, neither horn of this dilemma was attractive. Gregory shows us one way of denying both theses, as we see in Anna Marmodoro's Chapter 5, 'Gregory of Nyssa on the creation of the world'. Gregory's discussion of the intelligibility of the qualities of material objects addresses the same thorny problem that Plato's puzzle of the self-predication of the Forms had first raised in philosophy, albeit in a different context. Gregory's contribution reveals intuitions about the individuation of abstract entities that have only recently resurfaced in the metaphysics of abstraction. Gregory's philosophical work does not tower over later centuries in the way that Plotinus does, but he draws our attention in this volume for equally good reasons. He exercised significant influence on later thinkers, even enjoying some continuing influence in the Latin west via John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century. Gregory's philosophical ability and innovations have been too often overlooked or dismissed: his thought contains views that have not so far been sufficiently appreciated, and contribute interesting new possibilities to debates about creation. Other Christian thinkers of late antiquity are capable of furnishing further examples of overlooked philosophical views; here we offer Gregory as one case among others worthy of re-examination.

Part I closes with 'Simplicius on elements and causes in Greek philosophy: critical appraisal or philosophical synthesis?' by Han Baltussen (Chapter 6). Baltussen shows how Simplicius' astoundingly ambitious project in authoring commentaries led to the development of his own views about creation and causal principles: Simplicius wanted to produce nothing less than a synthesis of *all* previous Greek thinking, and not just a

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synthesis, but one that would show how all previous thinkers had been in harmony with one another. The result is a version of Aristotle's views, and yet also belongs distinctively to the sixth century CE.

Part II turns the focus to human agency in seven chapters examining how humans – and other agents – are able to bring about various causal results, including their own actions, their status as unified agents, and evil. Chapter 7 returns to Plotinus to examine three kinds of causation: creative contemplation, non-deliberative demiurgic production (for which cf. Chapters 2 and 3) and the relation of agency to divine self-causality. Chapter 8 is also concerned with Plotinus' view of agency; it argues that Plotinus introduces an unprecedented degree of inwardness as he claims that the principles of reality are located *in us*. Chapter 9 examines Neoplatonist theories of embryology, showing a fascinating parallel in explanations of plant life and of the growth of unborn animals. In Chapter 10 we look at fragments from an otherwise lost work of Porphyry of Tyre; unlike some portraits of Porphyry, which attribute views to him that seem to block freedom of action for humans, this work shows him taking human freedom seriously. Chapter 11 shows how Proclus' version of Neoplatonism furnishes him with a ready solution to a problem about ethical self-constitution raised recently by Christine Korsgaard. Chapter 12 looks at Augustine's account of the creation of angels, in particular what about that creation made evil possible. Finally, Chapter 13 examines Augustine's views about the connections between sin, guilt and desire.

Kevin Corrigan offers a subtle and wide-ranging study of Plotinus' developing views about creative agency in Chapter 7, 'Divine and human freedom: Plotinus' new understanding of creative agency'. Corrigan locates the heart of Plotinus' concerns in the relation between creation and production, arguing that in response to this basic preoccupation Plotinus developed three new theoretical models: first, a theory of creative contemplation or insight; second, a model of non-deliberative demiurgic production; and third, a view about agency and divine self-causality. Corrigan not only analyses Plotinus' development of these models but at the same time draws many illuminating comparisons with Plotinus' predecessors and successors.

In Chapter 8, 'Consciousness and agency in Plotinus', D. M. Hutchinson argues that Plotinus' views license and require a greater degree of inwardness than those of any of his predecessors. Hutchinson shows how Plotinus' account of consciousness produces the need to 'turn inwards and ascend upwards' in order to achieve full agency: awareness is a *sine qua non* for initiating actions and unifying our bodies. But of course Plotinus

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does not mean awareness of physical surroundings: instead of this, we must become aware of the higher principles in us and in the universe. Only this consciousness can form the basis for truly free actions. Hutchinson concludes that this is a greater demand for, and theory of, inwardness than was available in earlier thinkers.

James Wilberding examines the fascinating connections between theories of planthood and of developing embryos in Neoplatonic thought in Chapter 9, 'Neoplatonists on the causes of vegetative life'. Many philosophers had drawn this analogy previously, but the Neoplatonists take it in a new and surprising direction. Since the embryo is dependent on its mother not only for nourishment but also in order to remain alive, the Neoplatonists concluded that the vegetative soul of a plant exists not in the plant itself, but in the earth.

Chapter 10, 'Astrology and the will in Porphyry of Tyre', by Aaron P. Johnson, aims to balance a certain picture of Porphyry as granting too much credence to the 'sciences' of his day such as astrology. Johnson argues that, on the contrary, fragments of one of Porphyry's works show him firmly committed to enough freedom of action for humans to render us moral agents. Moreover, we can discern Porphyry's attempt to give an account consistent with Plato's Myth of Er, that is, with the idea that we arrive in our present lives by making a choice in the interim following a past life – a choice that is not perfectly free or informed, but nevertheless gives us enough freedom that our current lives are our own responsibility.

In Chapter 11, 'Proclus on the ethics of self-constitution', Michael Griffin looks at how we become moral agents from a different perspective. He connects this problem with recent discussions by Christine Korsgaard and others of a seeming paradox: in order to become moral agents we must achieve a kind of unity in our agency. But such unity can only be produced by an agent who is sufficiently unified to act in a unified way. Since we do not begin life as agents meeting this standard, it is puzzling how we are ever able to achieve it. Griffin, however, shows how Proclus' version of Neoplatonism has resources to solve this puzzle by appealing to the real self that exists already, even while one's phenomenal self is not yet unified.

The final two chapters turn to the other giant of late antique thought, Augustine. Augustine commands the attention of later thinkers in a way similar to Plotinus. His thinking about creation prioritises the origin of evils, and consequently also the nature of the will. How can God's creation of everything in the universe be consistent with the existence of evils within that universe? What sort of thing is a will, such that it can both

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be created by God, who creates only good things, and yet also be capable of turning away from God to produce evil?

Gillian Clark is the author of Chapter 12, 'Deficient causes: Augustine on creation and angels'. Here she explicates Augustine's answer to the question of the origin of evil. Evil is able to exist, Augustine decides, because the angels (as well as the rest of creation) were created *from nothing*. Thus the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* returns here from Part I (especially in Chapter 5), this time explaining the origin and possibility of evil.

Mark Edwards brings this volume to a close with Chapter 13, 'Willed causes and causal willing in Augustine'. Edwards gives a nuanced examination of three areas of Augustine's thought, in each comparing the saint with the sources on which he drew and was most familiar. First, Augustine is a subtle philosopher of the will but relies in the first instance on theological, not philosophical, principles. Second, while Roman history in particular offered Augustine the example of a people with a habit of attributing bad acts to their own ancestors, Augustine's careful treatment of sin and evil is nevertheless unprecedented. Finally, earlier ideas about the generation of embryos had sometimes included claims that physical or psychic characteristics could be inherited; Augustine contributes a new kind of argument, however, to justify his view that the very *will* to sin is heritable.

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PART I

The Origin of the Cosmos

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