God's Eternity in Creation in Augustine's *De Genesi ad Litteram*

Monica POP[*]

ABSTRACT. For Augustine, eternity holds a special significance, because understanding this concept correctly enabled him to understand God as he truly is: eternal, stable, unchangeable. For this reason, eternity is a key point in understanding how God created all things. God is eternal, and yet he created a world that is not eternal. How is this possible? Augustine attempts to answer this question, *inter alia*, in his extensive commentary on Genesis, *De Genesi ad Litteram*. Following the first chapter of Genesis, Augustine presents God as the eternal being who speaks, acts, and knows everything, but who in no way diminishes itself in the process of creating the *caelum et terram*. This paper aims to present specifically the way Augustine understood divine eternity in the creation process.

Keywords: Augustine, De Genesi ad Litteram, eternity, creation, Genesis.

Introduction

For Augustine, God is eternal and unchangeable, and nothing can be co-eternal with him. Furthermore, although he exists in eternity, he moves creation in time and place.[1] The aim of this paper is to examine the passages in which Augustine discuss God's eternity in the process of creation in his commentary, *De Genesi ad Litteram*.[2] In the first five books, we find explicit treatment of themes that

---

[*] PhD Student, Doctoral School of Philosophy, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. Email: monica.oboroceanu@ubbcluj.ro.

[1] Saint Augustine, "The Literal Meaning of Genesis," in *On Genesis*, trans. by Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2017), VIII.23.44 (CSEL, 23:1-8). For primary works I have followed the standard title abbreviations.

[2] Secondary literature on my topic that has appeared in the last four decades is relatively scarce. I have been especially helped by the following four works: Robert Dodaro, Cornelius Mayer and Christof

are of interest for this study, where Augustine presents the creation narrative of the six days followed by the seventh day of rest. While the entire commentary addresses the doctrine of creation based on the first three chapters of Genesis, the first book focuses on God's speech at creation and the manner in which the creator brought all things into being, whereas the fourth book examines how the divine being operates by first creating all things and then sustaining them. In the fifth book, Augustine analyzes God's knowledge and how all things are known by him even before they are created.

Did God know the things he intended to create before he created them, or did he create all things and then come to know them? How does the eternal God create "in the beginning" and then govern creation by sustaining it without undergoing any change? What does the speaking of God mean in eternity? Did God speak creation into being in eternity or in time? These important questions guide the present study, which follows Augustine's interpretation of biblical expressions that describe how God knows, speaks, and acts in the process of creation.

To Augustine's Christian mind, God is the creator of the whole world, unchangeable and eternal. Augustine's theology is thoroughly trinitarian.[3] See for example the following statement in *De Civitate Dei*, which reflects Augustine's doctrine of God along Nicaean lines and the way he links such belief with his doctrine of creation:

> We believe [...] the Father has begotten the Word, that is, the Wisdom by which all things have been made, his only-begotten Son [...]. And we believe that the Holy Spirit is at the same time the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, himself consubstantial and co-eternal with both, and that this totality is a Trinity in respect of the distinctive character of the persons and is also one God in respect of the inseparable omnipotence.[4]

In the same work, when touching upon the concept of creation, Augustine uses the Platonic idea of a benevolent creator bestowing some of his attributes to his product. Plato, in Augustine's reading, looking around at the goodness in the

---

Müller, eds. *Augustinus-Lexikon*. Basel: Schwabe, 1986-., esp. "Genesi ad litteram (-De)," "Manichaei," "Genesi ad litteram liber unus imperfectus (-De)," "Genesi adversus Manicheos (-De)"; *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), esp. "God," "De Genesi ad litteram," "Creation," "Eternity"; *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); *Augustinus De Genesi ad litteram. Ein kooperativer Kommentar*, ed. by Johannes Brachtendorf and Volker Henning Drecoll (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

3   Michel R. Barnes, "God,", in *Augustine through the Ages*, 384.

4   Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson. (Londra: Penguin, 2003), XI.24.

world around him, concluded that it has a good creator, since nothing less than him could have produced such good.[5] If the creator and, consequently, creation are good in nature, next it must be seen how the creation itself unfolds according to Augustine.

When considering creation in Augustine's treatise on Genesis, as Gilson highlighted, God's actions are described as being coordinated by foreknowledge. God already knew everything even before creating. According to Augustine, the act of creation unfolds in a chronological manner, i.e., can be explained as an action performed in different successive stages, but is described in Genesis in such a way that human nature, with its limited epistemic capabilities, can understand it by rendering this act in language (the verbs that describe this are *fecit*, then *creavit*, which is *dixit*).[6] But God's creative act was in fact simultaneous. God did not follow some order but brought all things into being at once.[7]

This paper will address the problem of divinity creating the universe through a two-step approach. The first part will begin by tracing Augustine's spiritual and intellectual journey, with particular emphasis on his ideas in theology proper, and then will briefly discuss his attempts to analyze the Christian doctrine of creation as it appears especially in the first three chapters of Genesis. The constructive part of the paper proposes an interpretation of eternity in relation to divinity within this context, with special focus on Augustine's largest commentary on Genesis, *De Genesi ad litteram*. The chapter is divided into three parts corresponding to the three actions God undertakes in Augustine's reading of creation: knowing, creating *per se*, speaking.

Augustine's way to the eternal God

The life of Augustine revolves around numerous questions about God and his relationship with his creatures, as we see repeatedly in the *Confessions*.[8] His life demonstrates that answers can indeed be glimpsed, but only after laborious searching. He followed many paths before arriving at the truth that transformed his

---

[5] *Civ. Dei.*, XI.21. The referenced Platonic text is Tim. 29e-30a.

[6] Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch. (Providence: Cluny, 2020), 297. This is most important especially for the *carnales*, i.e., those which cannot understand the spiritual things of God (*Gn. litt.*, IV.35.56).

[7] *Gn. litt.*, IV.33.51.

[8] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Pine-Coffin. (London: Penguin, 1961), I.III.3.: "What, then, is the God I worship?"; *Conf.*, I.V.5 Why do you mean so much to me?"; *Conf.*, I.VI.10 "Where could such a living creature come from if not from you, o Lord?".

life completely.[9] While studying rhetoric, he encountered a book by Cicero that introduced him to philosophy and the quest for truth.[10] Cicero's words urged Augustine to devote himself to the search of truth, and thus he turned to Scripture.

Yet his first encounter with Scripture was disappointing, for that seemed to him "unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero."[11] He abandoned it at first because of its apparent simplicity, and because he was not yet prepared to penetrate its deeper meaning, as he later confessed.[12] He likely read the first chapters of Genesis, but was not ready to understand the profound notion of an eternal God creating a temporal universe. As a result, he "fell in with a set of sensualists, men with glib tongues who ranted and raved and had the snares of the devil in their mouths"[13] – the Manichees.[14] Their doctrine offered him a distorted

---

[9] Some relevant places where this journey is described are *Conf.*, III.IV.7; III.V.9; III.VI.10; III.VII.12; V.III.3; V.VI.10; V.VII.12; V.XIII.23; V.XIV.24; VI.III.3; VI.IV.5; VI.V.7; VII.IX.13; VIII.XII.28.

[10] *Conf.*, III.IV.7 "The prescribed course of study brought me to a work by an author named Cicero, whose writing nearly everyone admires, if not the spirit of it. The title of the book is Hortensius and it recommends the reader to study philosophy. It altered my outlook on life. It changed my prayers to you, o Lord, and provided me with new hopes and aspirations". *Inter hos ego imebecilla tunc aetate discebam libros eloquientiae, in qua eminere cupiebam fine damnabili et ventoso per quadia vanitatis humanae, et visitator iam discendi ordine perveneram in librum cuisudam Ciceronis, cuius linguam fere omnes mirantur, pectus non ita. Sed liber ille ipsius exhortationem continent ad philosophiam et vocatur Hortensius. Ille vero liber mutavit affectum meum et ad te ipsum, Domnie, mutavit preces meas et vota ac desideria mea fecit alia.*

[11] *Conf.*, III.V.9.

[12] *Conf.*, III.V.9: "So I made up my mind to examine the holy Scriptures and see what kind of books they were. I discovered something that was at once beyond the understanding of the proud and hidden from the eyes of children. Its gait was humble, but the heights it reached were sublime. It was enfolded in mysteries, and I was not the kind of man to enter into it or bow my head to follow where it led. To me they seemed quite unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero, because I had too much conceit to accept their simplicity and not enough insight to penetrate their depth."

[13] *Conf.*, III.VI.10.

[14] Mani (born c. 216) was originally from Babylonia, which was at that time controlled by Persia. He received two revelations through which he was given a mission to spread what he called the "Religion of Light," and he considered himself a "follower of Jesus." This religion spread throughout the world and eventually reached North Africa, where Augustine encountered Mani's followers. Augustine describes them as heretics because they proposed a dualistic cosmology based on two principles: good, associated with Light, which is God, and evil, associated with darkness, which is matter. In the first phase, these two principles were separate. In the second phase, however, darkness invaded the Light, and as a result the visible world became a mixture of light and darkness. Their sect was divided into two groups: the Elect and the Hearers. The former strictly followed Mani's teachings, observing from their specific practices, prohibitions, and abstentions. The latter followed the doctrine more loosely, as they were subject to fewer restrictions; for example, they were permitted to marry, although this practice was discouraged. For more details about Mani's life, their practices and Augustine's relations with them see J. Kevin Coyle, "Mani, Manicheism,", in *Augustine through the Ages*, 520-524; Volker Henning Drecoll, "Manichaei," in *Augustinus-Lexikon*; Johannes van Oort, "Mani(chaeus)," in *Augustinus-Lexikon*.

perspective on how Scripture should be read and understood, for they "are in the habit of casting slurs on the scriptures of the Old Testament, which they have next to no knowledge of, and mocking and deceiving with their gibes the weaker brethren and the little ones among us, who cannot then find any way of answering."[15] From their teachings he learned what he will consider to be a false notion of God, because they consider that he is a material entity with bodily parts, and not a pure spirit. Augustine thus was troubled by their statements and tries to find answers to his problems concerning the nature of God, and the nature of evil.[16]

In the period when he was a "hearer" in the sect, Augustine could not perceive God as an eternal being who is distinct from the creature he creates. Moreover, he could not understand how God, who is good, could create something evil (*unde malum*?). He notes in the *Confesssions*:

> When I tried to think of my God, I could think of him only as a bodily substance, because I could not conceive of the existence of anything else. This was the principal and almost the only cause of the error from which I could not escape. For the same reason I believed that evil, too was some similar kind of substance, a shapeless, hideous mass, which might be solid, in which case the Manichees called it earth, or fine and rarefied life air. This they imagine as a kind of evil mind filtering through the substance they call earth. And because such little piety as I had compelled me to believe that God, who is good, could not have created an evil nature, I imagined that there were two antagonistic masses, both of which were infinite, yet the evil in a lesser and the good in a greater degree.[17]

What aided Augustine in approaching the Christian doctrine of the eternal and incorruptible God was his first encounter with Ambrose in Milan as he listened to his sermons.[18]

---

[15] Saint Augustine, "On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees," in *On Genesis*, trans. by Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2017), I.1.2.

[16] *Conf.*, III.VII.12. "There is another reality besides this, though I knew nothing of it. My own specious reasoning induced me to give it to the sly arguments of fools who asked me what was the origin of evil, whether God was confined to the limits of a bodily shape, whether he had hair and nails. [...] My ignorance was so great that these questions troubled me, and while I thought I was approaching the truth, I was only departing the further from it. I did not know that evil is nothing but the removal of good until finally no good remains. How could I see this when with the sight of my eyes I saw no more than material things and with the sight of my mind no more than their images? I did not know that God is a spirit, a being without bulk and without limbs defined in length and breadth."

[17] *Conf.*, V.X.19-20.

[18] *Conf.*, V.XIV.24 "I had heard one passage after another fairly be maintained, especially since I had heard one passage after another in the Old Testament figuratively explained. These passages had been death to me when I took them literally, but once I had heard them explained in their spiritual meaning, I began to blame myself for my despair."

Ambrose helped Augustine understand that the mysteries of the Old Testament should be interpreted allegorically, following Paul's dictum that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."[19] Augustine considers God as the eternal being a more functional concept for explaining theological matters as the origin of evil and the nature of God than the latter Manichean one.

Augustine rejects at this point the "the shape of a human body" when thinking of divinity. Pushing away the Manichaean vision of God, Augustine proclaims to adopt a vision of divinity inspired by Platonism. According to it, God can be conceived as unchangeable, stable, and the one who brought everything into existence.[20] Augustine confesses that platonic books turned him to himself and helped him saw the unchangeable light.[21] From this time on, understanding God as he is, i.e., eternal, stable and unchangeable, uncorrupted by anything corporeal and unlimited in time and space, became crucial for interpreting the first chapter of Genesis, where God as creator brings the whole world into being.

Augustine and his writings on Genesis

According to Christian the passage on creation from Genesis is one of the most visited and revisited passage in Augustine works.[22] The interpretation of Genesis was a constant preoccupation for Augustine, from his early period to the end of his life.[23] This concern is evident in the five books in which he discusses the doctrine of creation. He was interested in solving, or at least attempting to understand, the problems that Genesis presents: the relationship between God and creature, time and eternity, the creation and fall of human beings. In the final book of *De Genesi ad litteram*, he states that he affirmed and defended what was certain to him, while acknowledging that he encountered many uncertainties. He sought to

---

[19] 2 Cor. 3:6; *Conf.*, VI.IV.6. See Michael Cameron, "Augustine and Scripture," in *A Companion to Augustine*, eds. Mark Vessey and Shelley Reid (Malden: Blackwell, 2012), 203.

[20] *Conf.*, VII.I.1.

[21] *Conf.*, VII.X.16 "reminded me to return to my own self [...]. I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw the Light that never changes."

[22] William A. Christian, "The Creation of the World," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Roy W. Battenhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 315. "Few other passages of Scripture intrigued Augustin as much as the first sentence of the book of Genesis. In the Confessions, in his treatises on Genesis, in the City of God, and elsewhere he dwells on it and recurs to it, as though he felt he could not exhaust its suggestions and implications His reflections on this sentence are ample evidence of the acuteness, force, and fecundity of his mind."

[23] St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, vol. 1 (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1982), 1.

address these either through inquiry or by proposing alternative interpretations, refraining from making definitive claims when the text appeared obscure.[24]

In his commentaries on Genesis, Augustine employs a variety of interpretative methods to understand the words of Scripture: an anti-heretical commentary against Manicheans using the allegorical method; an unfinished attempt at a literal commentary on Genesis; an autobiographical work concluding with an allegorical contemplation of the first chapter of Genesis; a fully developed literal interpretation in *De Genesi ad litteram*; and finally, an analysis of the beginning of history as presented in the opening chapters of Genesis.[25] Karla Pollmann remarks that Augustine did not consider the various possible interpretation of the text to be of superior or inferior value.[26] Proof are Augustine's words himself, as the following two passages from the *De Civitate Dei* mentioned by Pollmann clearly state: "Rather we are to believe that the writing of this account had a wise purpose; that the events recorded are historical; that they have a symbolic meaning also, and that that symbolic meaning is intended to prefigure the Church"[27] or "there were real events, but they were prophetic also: earthly, but heavenly too; human, but divine! And if we were to investigate all their aspects, so fruitful of great mystery, we should fill many volumes."[28]

The first commentary written by Augustine on Genesis is *De Genesi adversus Manicheos* (388/389), in which Augustine debates with Manicheans in an allegorically manner on the first three chapters of Genesis. According to his *Retractationes*, on the one hand, Augustine aimed to defend the Old Testament against the Manichean theory of creation, which held that the world was composed of two opposing forces, Good and Evil, in constant conflict. On the other hand, Augustine sought to offer Christians around him the perspective that God is the sole good creator, and the world was made by him through his will:

---

[24] *Gn. litt.*, XII.1.1. "I have discussed the text and written down as best I could in eleven books what seemed certain to me, and have affirmed and defended it; and about its many uncertainties I have inquired, hesitated, balanced different opinions, not to prescribe to anyone what they should think about obscure points, but rather to show how we have been willing to be instructed whenever we have been in doubt about the meaning, and to discourage the reader from the making of rash assertions where we have been unable to establish solid grounds for a definite decision."

[25] Karla Pollmann, "Augustine, Genesis, and Controversy," in *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 205.

[26] Pollmann, "Augustine, Genesis, and Controversy," 205.

[27] *Civ. Dei*, 15.27: *sed magis credendum est et sapienter esse memoriae litteris que mandata et gesa esse, et significare aliquid, et ipsum aliquid ad preaefigurandum ecclesiam pertinere*.

[28] *Civ. Dei*, 16.37: *o res gestas, sed prohpetice gestas; in terra, sed caelitus; per homines, sed divinitus! Si excutiantur singula tnatis fecunda mysteriis, multa sunt implenda volumina*.

> After I was now settled in Africa, I wrote two books, *On Genesis, against the Manichaeans*. Although whatever I discussed in earlier books in which I showed that God is the supreme Good and the unchangeable Creator of all changeable natures and that no nature or substance, insofar as it is a nature and substance, is an evil, was intentionally directed against Manichaeans, yet these two books very manifestly were published against them in defense of the Old Law which they attack with the vehement intensity of frenzied error.[29]

In 393, Augustine returned to this subject, this time with the intention of writing a literal interpretation:

> After I had composed the two books of *On Genesis against the Manichaeans*, and had explained the words of Scripture according to their allegorical meaning, not presuming to explain such great mysteries of natural things literally, that is, in what sense the statements there made can be interpreted according to their historical signification – I wanted to test my capabilities in truly most taxing and difficult work also.[30]

However, as he later recalls in *Retractiones*, he never finished the book because he was yet inexperienced and "collapsed under the weight of so heavy a load."[31] In 426, he rediscovered this work and gave it the title *De Genesi ad litteram liber imperfectus*.

His third attempt to write about Genesis is found in the last three books (XI-XIII) of the *Confessions* (397-401). While in the first ten books Augustine narrates his conversion to God, in the last three books he praises the God he has encountered and presents the creator of his soul as the creator of the universe as well. He does this by analyzing the first chapter of Genesis allegorically, discussing time, which can be known and measured only in the soul, creation, and the Trinity.[32] In this commentary, Augustine was not compelled to adopt a defensive hermeneutics; instead, he proposed the "sweetness of the allegorical method" to present the relationship between human beings and God, in which human beings are dependent on God for their existence.[33]

The fourth and most complex attempt is Augustine's major book about Genesis, *De Genesi ad litteram* (401-415), in which he interprets, verse after verse, the first three chapters of Genesis *ad litteram*, that is, as historical events that truly

---

[29] St. Augustine, *The Retractations*, trans. by M. Inez Bogan, (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 1.9.

[30] *Retract.*, 1.17.

[31] *Retract.,* 1.17.

[32] Frederick Van Fleteren, "Confessiones," in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 232.

[33] Pollmann, "Augustine, Genesis, and Controversy," 208.

occurred, but which can also signify future events or bear figurative meaning.[34] In the *Retractationes*, Augustine notes that he interprets "not according to the allegorical significations, but according to historical events proper."[35]

Although this work represents the *summa* of Augustine's reflections on creation and constitutes his most extensive treatment of the doctrine, he acknowledges that he posed questions rather than providing definitive answers. Moreover, many dilemmas were not resolved conclusively but remained open for further investigation.[36] According to Augustine, a literal interpretation affirms what really happened, even when this sometimes requires reading the text in a spiritual sense.[37]

In *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine addresses cosmological questions regarding the beginning of creation and defends the creation *ex nihilo*. He also identifies the *principium* in Genesis 1:1 with the Son of God from John 1:1 and equates heaven with the spiritual world and earth with the corporeal world. There he supports the idea of simultaneous creation, and examines the creation of angels, who are the light created before the seven days (Gen. 1:2). He further analyzes the creation of man and woman, the creation of the souls, and the fall that followed the sin of the first humans. Toward the end, Augustine moves beyond Genesis to discuss Paradise, as described by Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2-4.

Augustine's final attempt to interpret Genesis at length is found in *De Civitate Dei* (413-427), where Augustine, in books XI-XIV, analyzes the origin of the two cities, tracing their beginning back to the angels. In this work, he addresses the opening of Genesis, focusing on specific themes such as the creation of angels, their

---

[34] *Gn. litt.*, VIII.4.8: "What comes next, certainly, and the tree of life in the middle of Paradise and the tree of knowledge of discerning good and evil (Gen. 2:9), calls for more careful consideration, to avoid its forcing us into allegory and having to say that these were not real trees, but that they signify something else under the name of tree. [...] However, while there is an eternal Jerusalem in the heavens, there is also the city founded on earth by which that one is signified; and although Sarah and Hagar signified the two covenants, they are also nonetheless two women; and while Christ waters us with a spiritual stream through his suffering on the tree, he was also nonetheless the rock which poured out water to a thirsty people when struck with a wooden rod, and about which it is said, *now the rock was Christ* (1 Cor. 10:4). All these things stood for something other than what they were, but all the same they were themselves bodily realities." See also IX.11.22 and XI.1.2.

[35] *Retract.*, 2.50.

[36] *Retract.*, 2.50 "In this work, many questions have been asked rather than solved, and of those which have been solved, fewer have been answered conclusively. Moreover, others have been proposed in such a way as to require further investigation."

[37] *Gn. litt.* VIII.1.1: "There are, however, three generally held opinions about this topic [Paradise]; one held by those who think Paradise should only be understood in the literal material sense, another by those for whom only the spiritual sense is true, the third by those who take Paradise in each way, differently though in the material, differently, in the spiritual sense. So then, in a word, I admit that it is the third opinion which I favor." Cf. Pollmann, "Augustine, Genesis, Controversy," 206.

rebellion and fall, and the sin of Adam and Eve. Augustine also discusses the nature and origin of death, the consequences of the first human's sin, and the spiritual body that human beings will possess in eternal life. He concludes the books dedicated to the origin of the world by examining how God can bring good out of evil and, simultaneously, how grace restores what sin has destroyed.

At this point, it may be noted that Augustine returns to creation time and again for a very personal reason. Evolving from Manichaeism to Neoplatonism, and finally to the Christian faith, the theologian becomes convinced at an existential level that his own being exists only in relationship with the creator God who is Being itself. Because independence of creature from creator is thus impossible, creatures either turn to God or turn away from him. For Augustine, the only alternative that leads to true fulfillment is the former. Herein lies Augustine's theological interest for creation.[38]

Considering these, let us now turn to discuss how Augustine specifically discusses creation in relation with God's eternity in *De Genesi ad litteram.*

Creation and God's mind

According to Augustine, the creation can be understood as an act of bringing into being that which already exists in God's mind. God knows all things before they exist, through unchanging and eternal reasons, a conclusion drawn from John 1:1-3.[39] Everything exists noetically in God: "He has a steady and unchanging knowledge of all things."[40] He knew all things before he created them, so that Augustine can say that all things were in him eternally.[41] Yet, once they were created, things existed independently of God's mind in the way we know them, each according to its own kind.[42]

---

[38] Augustine, *On Genesis*, 14-15.

[39] *Gn. litt.*, V.13.29: *illis divinis incommutabilibus aeternisque rationibus, quoniam ipsa Dei sapientia, per quam facta sunt omnia, priusquam fierent, ea noverat, sicut scriputura testator* [...]. (CSEL 13:9-12).

[40] *Gn. litt.*, V.19.37.

[41] *Gn. litt.*, V.13.29. Cf. *Civ. Dei.*, XI.21: "It is not that God's knowledge varies in any way, that the future, the present, and the past affect that knowledge in three different ways. It is not with God as it is with us. He does not look ahead to the future, look directly at the present, look back to the past. He sees in some other manner, utterly remote from anything we experience or could imagine. He does not see things by turning his attention from one thing to another. He sees all without any kind of change. Things which happen under the condition of time are in the future, not yet in being, or in the present, already existing, or in the past, no longer being. But God comprehends all these in a stable and eternal present."

[42] *Gn. litt.*, V.15.33.

For Augustine, the things that will undergo the process of divine creation can be distinguished according to three distinct moments: before creation, in the Word of God, second, during creation, and third, after the creation, in God's works as we can perceive them.[43] Augustine affirms that we can know only the third one "through the sense of the body and our familiarity with this life," but for the first two moments, we can obtain only a limited understanding because "they are so far removed from our sense and from what ordinary human thought is used to."[44] He proposed that we "believe them on divine authority, and then to come to some kind of knowledge of them from the things we already know."[45] Therefore, things exist in God's knowledge before they are created, and exist in themselves after they are created.[46] In God's knowledge things were "better" and "truer," because there they were "eternal and unchangeable:"[47]

> All this should be enough for anyone to know, or at least to believe unshakably, that God made all these things; and I do not imagine anyone could be so witless as to suppose that God made anything he did not know. Accordingly, if he knew them before he made them, it follows that before they were made, they were known "with him" in such a way as to be eternally and unchangeably alive and to be life, while once made they existed in the way all creatures do, each according to its kind.[48]

In the Word of God, all things are eternal, existing simultaneously. God knows all things at once, for to him there is no past and future: "[God] always is in the same way, and not only never changes but is absolutely incapable of changing. So, without bringing into existence yet any of the things which he made, he has all things primordially in himself in the same manner as he is."[49]

For Augustine, ideas, faithful to his Neoplatonic formation, refer to the unchanging and eternal essence of things.[50] Their existence is simple, without past or future in the divine mind, and the sensible world is created on their basis. When Augustine states that God knows everything in advance and that ideas already existed in his mind from eternity, he grounds his argument in Job 28:23-25: "God

---

[43] *Gn. litt.*, V.12.28.

[44] *Gn. litt.*, V.12.28.

[45] *Gn. litt.*, V.12.28.

[46] *Gn. litt.*, V.12.28: *aliter se habeant omnium creaturarum rationes incommutabiles in Verbo Dei, aliter eius illa opera.* (CSEL 12:25-26).

[47] *Gn. litt.*, V.15.33: *et utique ibi meliora, ubi veriora, ubi aeterna et incommutabilia.* (CSEL 5:26).

[48] *Gn. litt.*, V.15.33.

[49] *Gn. litt.*, V.16.34.

[50] Rowan Williams, "Creation," in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 253.

understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, for he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens." These words demonstrate to Augustine that God knew all before he brought them into being. If he knew all before things took physical form, it follows that they existed *in* him: "So then it is things he knew that he made, not things he made that he knew."[51]

Creation and God's action

When it comes to how God made all things Augustine asks: how can the immutable and eternal God create changing things and yet not diminish Himself in the process?[52] Augustine states that God does not work through movements of temporal things (*temporalibus*), but through his eternal unchanging and stable Word.[53] God works in all the things he created, yet without any movement of his own (*sine ullo tali suo motu*) and without time being applied to him (*non enim et ipsi accidit tempus*).[54]

Further on, the difference between time and eternity should be sought for understanding God's eternity. Time requires change, whereas God is unchangeable, that is, eternal. Time applies to the world of corporal parts, which is subject to change. God creates everything simultaneously, without changing himself.[55] For the theologian, creation is twofold: first, God create "in the beginning," and then, after resting of all his works, God still works "until now," but in another way. Augustine tries to reconcile the two modes in which the eternal God works. First, he works *in principio*, creating the whole world in the beginning; then he works in the world, *until now*, sustaining it continuously.[56]

---

[51] *Gn. litt.,* V.18.36: *nota ergo fecit, non facta cognovit. Proinde, anequam fierent, et errant et non erant: erant in Dei scientia, non erant in sua natura.* (CSEL 18:9-10).

[52] *Gn. litt.,* 1.1.2: *et quomodo possit ostendi Deum sine ulla sui commutatione operari mutabilia et temporalia?* (CSEL 1:7-8).

[53] *Gn. litt.,* 1.18.36: *Sed ante omnia meminerimus, unde iam multa diximus, non temporalibus quasi animi sui aut corporis motibus operari deum, sicut operatur homo vel angelus, sed aeternis atque incommutabilibus et stabilibus rationibus coaeterni sibi verbi sui et quodam, ut ita dixerim, fotu pariter coaeterni sancti spiritus sui.* (CSEL 1:20-25).

[54] *Gn. litt.,* V.11.27: *Quis enim operator ista nici Deus etiam sine ullo tali suo motu? Non enim et ipsi accidit tempus.* (CSEL 5:9-11).

[55] Simo Knuuttila, "Time and Creation in Augustine," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 104.

[56] *Gn. litt.,* IV.11.21. "So it is that we are forced by the most compelling of reasons to work out, if we are able to, and to state how each can be true: both what is written here that God rested on the seventh day from all his works which he had made, and what he himself through whom they were made says in the gospel: My Father is working until now, and I myself am working (Jn. 5:17)."

In analyzing the first verse of Genesis "in the beginning God created heaven and earth," Augustine debates with the Manicheans, in *De Genesi adversus Manicheos*, affirming that their two questions, if God created in the beginning of time, what was he doing before creating, and respectively, what was the rationale for him creating out of a sudden,[57] are not properly posed. This is because God creates "not in the beginning of time but in Christ." Yet even if we are to believe that God creates at the beginning of time, that implies that before "the beginning of time there was no time."[58]

In *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine understands this expression in two ways: first, "in the beginning" can be understood literally, as the beginning of time, and second, can be understood figuratively, as the Word of God through which all things are made.[59] What is important for Augustine's theology in the interpretation of the first verse of Genesis is the fact that it reveals the Trinity in the act of creation in a figurative way:

> [W]e understand the Father in the word 'God' and the Son in the word 'beginning'; the beginning, not for the Father but for the creation created at the start through himself, and chiefly for the spiritual, and consequently for the totality of creation; while with scripture saying: *And the Spirit of God was being borne over the water* (Gen. 1:2), we recognize the complete indication of the Trinity being converted and perfected in order to be distributed into its various species.[60]

Because God is eternal and creation is the act of his will, Augustine concludes that "the beginning of the universe and of time, that is, the creation of changing beings, was not itself in time, nor did it take time."[61] God created heaven and earth in the beginning, and this act of creation does not imply any temporal duration.[62] The event takes place, as must be obvious, in eternity, in the sense Augustine uses the term.

The expression that God works "until now" signifies that he governs and sustains the creation he has made, but without creating anything new that was not created in the beginning (*non condidit aliqua genera nova*).[63] If God "did not work until now," creation would be destroyed: "the world will not be able to go on standing

---

[57] *Gn. adv. man.*, I.2.3.

[58] *Gn. adv. man*, I.2.3.

[59] *Gn. litt.*, I.1,2.

[60] *Gn. litt.*, I.6.12.

[61] Christian, "The Creation of the World," 319.

[62] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 197.

[63] *Gn. litt.*, IV.12.22;

for a single moment, if God withdraws from it his controlling hand."[64] What makes all things endure is the power of God: "it is the creator's power, after all, and the virtuosity, the skill and tenacity of the almighty, that causes every created thing to subsist."[65] If God were to distance himself from his creation, it could not sustain itself.

Augustine reconciles God's rest on the seventh day with the idea of a God who is still working in his creation. God finished creating all things in the beginning. Of these, he created some things in perfect form from the outset,[66] and others he created as "hidden seeds" in the form of *rationes seminales* which would evolve at the right time and moment. So, even though God no longer creates anything new, he sustains the entire creation, governs it, and guides it with his wisdom, causing the seeds he created to achieve the development he intended.[67]

Creation and God's utternace

For Augustine, creation is a simultaneous act of an eternal and almighty creator: *creavit omnia simul*.[68] This way of reading the beginning of Genesis allows him to understand that the creation of the universe cannot be described properly using human language. Yet, in order for us to understand the way God creates, he employs human language: "The transference [...] of words from human matters to express things divine is common form with the divine scriptures."[69]

---

[64] *Gn. litt.*, IV.12.22: "But he rested like this in such a way as to continue from then on and up till now to operate the management of the things that were then set in place, not as though at least on that seventh day his power was withheld from the government of heaven and earth and of all the things he had established; if that had been done, they would forthwith have collapsed into nothingness"; V.20.41: "These, however, would not go on being unwound along their tracks, if the one who set them going stopped moving them on by his provident regulation."

[65] *Gn. litt.*, IV.12.22.

[66] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 298-299.

[67] *Gn. litt.*, V.11.27 "That he then worked at making all things simultaneously, without any intervals or periods of time between, while now he works through periods of time. Thus we see the constellations being moved through such intervals from their rising to their setting, the sky being changed from summer to winter, plants budding after so many days, growing bigger, turning green, withering; animals also at definite turning points in the course of time being conceived and fully formed and born, and running their course through every age until old age and death; and all other such temporal processes. Who but God, after all, works these things, even without any such movement on his part? Time, I mean, does not happen to him." See Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 300.

[68] *Gn. litt.*, VIII.20.39. The quote is from Sir. 18:1.

[69] *Gn. adv. man.*, I.14.20.

In the first book of *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine analyzes the act of speaking of God from Gen. 1:3: "God said: Let light be made." Augustine wonders if this act is temporal, i.e., take place in a definite time, or in eternity, meaning in the Word itself.[70] If it were in time, it would involve change, yet God is unchangeable. Nor was it the voice of God an "audible sound," for there was no one to hear.[71]

God did not say *fiat lux* in time. If he had spoken in time, he would have been shown to be changeable by using physical instruments of speech. Therefore, God's speech is an eternal act, not a temporal one: "God's saying *Let light be made* is something eternal, because the Word of God, God with God, the only Son of God, is co-eternal with the Father."[72] God does not speak through a voice that can be heard physically. Rather, his speech is the eternal expression of divine reason, the eternal Word. Augustine understands this speech as metaphysical or spiritual communication that takes place outside of time.[73] When God says "let it be," he does so not with a voice, nor with words heard in time, but through the wisdom that is co-eternal with him, through his co-eternal Word.[74]

The divine utterance can be understood as God calling to himself the creation that is imperfect and yet unformed to become formed and perfect: "it is when it turns everything, in the way suited to its kind, to that which truly and always is, that is, to the creator of its substance, that it really imitates the form of the Word which always and unchangingly adheres to the Father, and receives its own form, and becomes a perfect creature."[75] In the first sentences of Genesis, *in principio fecit Deus caelum et terram*, *caelum* refers to the intelligible, yet unactualized and unformed matter, while *terram* refers to physical matter not yet formed. By God's utterance in the second verse, Augustine understands the perfection of matter.[76] The sky is the *creatura spiritalis*, and light represents the formation of matter. When God says "let there be light," he calls the *creatura spiritalis*, which already exists, and gives it perfection. Thus, when the spiritual creature turns to God, it recognizes its creator and perceives the eternal plan, which is the Word that was in the beginning.

Augustine observes that this utterance, and implicitly God's whole act of creation, "must not be understood in a childish way, as if God were weary in this work, seeing that he spoke and things were made by a word that is intelligible and

---

[70] *Gn. litt.*, 1.2.5: *utrum temporaliter, an in verbi aeternitate.* (CSEL 1:14-15).

[71] *Gn. litt.*, I.2.5.

[72] *Gn. litt.* 1.2.6.

[73] Johannes Brachtendorf, "*De Genesi ad litteram* 1: Himmel und Erde, Licht und Finsternisder erste Schopfungstag," in *Augustinus De Genesi ad litteram. Ein kooperativer Kommentar*, 5.

[74] *Gn. litt.*, I.2.4.

[75] *Gn. litt.*, I.4.9.

[76] *Gn. litt.*, I.5.10.

eternal, not vocal and temporal."[77] Even though God spoke in a way that could be perceived, he did so only for the *carnales* and *parvuli* to be able to understand the creation.[78] The *spiritales*[79] knew that God is eternal, unchanging, and immaterial, and therefore, they understand that God's voice was not something audible, like a human voice, nor did it have a beginning or an end.[80]

Conclusion

Augustine made multiple attempts to understand the text of Genesis accounting for God creating the universe. For him, it was crucial to know how God can be understood and, subsequently, the reasons that can be employed for explaining the act of creation. For this reason, I examined his complex *De Genesi ad litteram*, focusing on the ways in which God creates "in the beginning" and showing that Augustine emphasized the eternity of the true Being, distinct from the world created. Thus, I have shown how eternity functions for Augustine's understanding of the process of creation.

First, the paper showed the role God's knowledge plays in the process of creation, as he knows all that is in him, where things are present in the unchangeable ideas (*rationes aeternae*). God knows everything in the Word before he creates anything. Moreover, God's knowledge is not successive, but simultaneous. Second, this study discussed how God is working in creating all things, resting on the seventh day from all he created, and the way Augustine reconciled this with the expression of the Apostle that God works "until now," meaning that he sustains and governs

---

[77] *Civ. Dei.*, XI.8.

[78] Johannes Brachtendorf, "Einleitung," in *Augustinus De Genesi ad Litteram*, 37.

[79] The distinction between *carnales* and *spiritales* is to be understood in a Platonic-Pauline key. Augustine is inspired by the Platonic doctrine according to which those who are philosophically educated, i.e. *spiritales*, possess a deeper understanding of eternal realities and are able to comprehend invisible and more profound truths that cannot be perceived by the senses, whereas the *carnales* can perceive only material realities. A similar idea appears in Paul who called the latter *parvuli* (infants in Christ): "But I, brothers, could not speak to you as to spiritual people; you were still fleshly (carnal), like infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, for you were not yet able to bear it" (1 Cor 3:1-2). For a large discussion on this distinction see the section 7.3, "Augustins platonisch-paulinische Hermeneutik der Genesis", in Johannes Brachtendorf, "Einleitung," 30-35.

[80] *Gn. litt.*, I.4.9 "God eternally says everything, not with the sound of a voice nor with thoughts running through the time which sounds take, but with the light, co-eternal with himself, of the Wisdom he has begotten. [...] Where scripture states, God said, Let it be made, we should understand an incorporeal utterance of God in the substance of his co-eternal Word." See Brachtendorf, "Einleitung," 37.

everything he has created. God created all things simultaneously in the *rationes seminales*, and then, as each thing developed in time according to its proper nature, God maintained and sustained his creation. The two modes of action do not diminish God's eternity and unchangeability.

Third, I showed that God's speech should be understood in an "eternal manner," because God cannot speak in time, being outside of it. Through God's speech, creation receives its form from him. If God did not call the heaven and earth back to himself, they could not be perfected by him and would therefore remain unformed, imperfect, and incomplete.

Augustine underlines in *De Genesi ad litteram* the idea that all creation is made by an eternal and good creator, who in no way diminishes itself in the process of making heaven and earth. It is worthy to note that Augustine analyzes the narrative of creation verse by verse, attempting to understand, defend, and affirm that the eternal God is the author of the whole creation. This doctrine of creation was important for his theological and philosophical conviction that the universe has an eternal, unchangeable, and stable God – distinct from the doctrine of the Manicheans and from the gods of the polytheistic world. His doctrine of creation would prove important to subsequent generations of Christian thinkers up to the present period.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Brachtendorf, Johannes. "*De Genesi ad litteram* 1: Himmel und Erde, Licht und Finsternisder erste Schopfungstag." In *Augustinus De Genesi ad litteram. Ein Kooperativer Kommentar*, ed. Johannes Brachtendorf and Volker Henning Drecoll, 73-101. Leiden: Brill, 2021.
2. Brachtendorf, Johannes. "Einleitung." In *Augustinus De Genesi ad litteram. Ein Kooperativer Kommentar*, ed. Johannes Brachtendorf and Volker Henning Drecoll, 1-42. Leiden: Brill, 2021.
3. Cameron, Michael. "Augustine and Scripture." In *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey and Shelley Reid, 200-214. Malden: Blackwell, 2012.
4. Christian, A., William. "The Creation of the World." In *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Roy W. Battenhouse, 315-342. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979.
5. Dodaro, Robert, Cornelius Mayer and Christof Müller, eds. *Augustinus-Lexikon*. Basel: Schwabe, 1986-.
6. Fitzgerald, D. Allan, John Cavadini, Marianne Djuth, James J. O'Donnell, Frederick Van Fleteren, eds. *Augustine Through the Ages*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
7. Gilson, Etienne. *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*. Translated by L. E. M. Lynch. Providence: Cluny, 1988.

8. Knuuttila, Simo. "Time and Creation in Augustine." In *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump, 2nd edition, 102-120. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

9. Plato. *Timaeus and Critias*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

10. Pollmann, Karla. "Augustine, Genesis, and Controversy." In *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007), 203-216.

11. Saint Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Pine-Coffin. London: Penguin, 1961.

12. Saint Augustine. *On Genesis*. Translated by Edmund Hill. New York: New City Press, 2017.

13. Saint Augustine. *The City of God*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. Londra: Penguin, 2003.

14. Saint Augustine. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. Translated by John Hammond Taylor, vol. 1. Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1982.

15. Saint Augustine. *The Retractations*. Translated by M. Inez Bogan. Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968.

16. Sancti Aureli Augustini. *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*. Ed. J. Zycha. CSEL 28,1. 1894.