Divine and creaturely agency in Genesis 1

Nathan Chambers

Clinton WA 98236

nathanjchambers@gmail.com

Abstract

The interaction between God and creatures is central to biblical narratives. There are several possible models for understanding the relationship between divine and creaturely agency. This article argues that a 'non-competitive' model for the interaction of divine and creaturely agency allows for a coherent interpretation of various features of Genesis 1 where alternative models lead to confusion. Since this 'non-competitive' model is historically related to *creatio ex nihilo,* it raises once again the question of the suitability of *creatio ex nihilo* for biblical interpretation.

Keywords: agency, *creatio ex nihilo*, Genesis 1, theological interpretation

Introduction

How does God relate to creatures? When God acts in the world, does this nullify the agency of the various creatures acted on or through? In this article, I take up these questions with reference to Genesis 1. First, I look at several possible models for understanding the relationship between divine and creaturely agency. Then I consider the suitability of these models for interpreting Genesis 1 by evaluating several recent interpretations. Rather than arguing exegetically for a specific model, I engage in a bit of 'reverse engineering' by asking if the various models make sense of the passage. I argue that a 'non-competitive' model for the interaction of divine and creaturely agency makes sense of a specific feature of Genesis 1, namely, the description of the creation of plants (1:11–12), fish and birds (1:20–2) and land animals (1:24–5). This model is entailed in the classic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and so raises the question of the possibility that this oft-dismissed doctrine might be of relevance to Genesis 1 after all.[1] I conclude by addressing several questions related to the reading of Genesis 1 in terms of the non-competitive model and *creatio ex nihilo*.

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[1] Gary Anderson offers a parallel argument for *creatio ex nihilo*, but with reference to the Abraham narratives rather than Genesis 1. See his *Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament: Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), pp. 48–58.

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Models for the interaction of divine and creaturely agency

Various ways of reading Genesis 1 involve implicit understandings of the interaction of divine and creaturely agency. In an attempt to make these implicit understandings explicit, I borrow a threefold typology which John Barclay proposed for the categorisation of Pauline and Graeco-Roman texts.[2] Barclay suggests three possible models for understanding the relationship between divine and human agency: 'competitive', 'kinship' and 'non-competitive'.[3] This typology is perhaps not exhaustive but can be used heuristically as way into the discussion of Genesis 1.

In the competitive model, divine and creaturely agency operate within the same metaphysical continuum and are thus 'in an essentially *competitive* relationship: the more that one is said to be effective, the less can be attributed to the other'.[4] God is an actor on the same stage as creatures. Divine and creaturely agencies are discrete, independent principles. Although they may converge to produce a single effect, the relationship between divine and creaturely agency is inversely proportionate, even within that effect.[5] Since divine and creaturely agency are mutually exclusive, creaturely freedom 'must be understood as freedom from God'.[6] This model tends to be the default in the modern period and is illustrated by Kant's revolutionary 'invention of autonomy' in moral philosophy. For Kant, the axiomatic role of human autonomy in morality is such that he 'does not hesitate to make an explicit comparison between human agents and God' and even suggests that 'we may think of ourselves "as analogous to the divinity"' in terms of our agency.[7]

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[2] 'Introduction', in John M. G. Barclay (ed.), *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and his Cultural Environment* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 6–7.

[3] The second and third models are both, by definition, 'non-competitive' (i.e. they are not the competitive model). The third model is often labelled, following Austin Farrer, as 'double agency'. However, strictly speaking, God and the creature bring about the same *effect*, but are not subjects of identical *actions* in bringing about that effect; cf. Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), p. 145. Lacking a better title for this category, I simply label it 'non-competitive'.

[4] Barclay, 'Introduction', p. 6.

[5] Cf. Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), p. 86.

[6] Barclay, 'Introduction', p. 6.

[7] J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p. 512, quoting Immanuel Kant, 'Concerning the Old Saying: That May Be True in Theory, But It Won't Work in Practice' (1793). Christopher J. Insole offers a nuanced account of Kant's rejection of the traditional Christian doctrine of concurrence in *Kant and the Creation of Freedom: A Theological Problem* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp. 192–223.

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A second model relates divine and created agency 'by kinship'. Here God and creatures are 'within the same spectrum of being', so that 'the agency of one is shared with the other, rather than standing in competition against it'.[8] This model could include various forms of pantheism or panentheism wherein created beings participate in the divine being and the agency of creatures 'is a portion of that of God' and 'is bound up with that of God, because the two are essentially identical when properly aligned'.[9] Plato's *Phaedrus* exemplifies this model. The soul is compared 'to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer'. The wing, 'more than any other thing that pertains to the body … partakes of the divine nature' but can be lost, in which case the soul is conjoined to an earthly body. The philosopher alone has wings, as he is 'in communion through memory with those things the communion with which causes God to be divine'.[10]

Classically, Christian theology has developed a 'non-competitive' model with recourse to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. *Creatio ex nihilo* does not simply provide an orthodox (if perplexing) answer to the question 'Did God use material in creating?' Rather, this doctrine is fundamentally about the distinction and relationship between God as Creator and his creatures and addresses a series of additional questions which together shape an account of the interaction of divine and creaturely agency.

As a claim about God as Creator, the Christian account of *creatio ex nihilo* finds its natural corollary in the claim that God is inherently personal.[11] Thus, from God's point of view, creation is not necessary. In himself, God is perfect and 'did not create under stress of any compulsion, or because he lacked something for his own needs; his only motive was goodness'.[12] Even God's generative capacity, since it is constitutive of his personal nature (in the begetting of the Son and procession of the Spirit), is not a power in reserve that is only realised in the act of creation. That God is inherently personal means that he can enter into personal relationship with creation, but he is

Insole concludes that 'although there is much in Kant that the theologian might find surprisingly illuminating and consoling, this specific issue of the relationship between divine and human action is, and should be, a real stumbling block' (p. 223).

[8] Barclay, 'Introduction', pp. 6–7.

[9] Ibid.

[10] *Phaedrus* 246B–E, 249C; trans. Harold North Fowler. LCL 36 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1904), pp. 471–3, 481–3.

[11] While the early church developed this claim with recourse to trinitarian doctrine, (some) Jewish and Muslim theologies have developed analogous accounts of *creatio ex nihilo* with the resources of their own traditions. Cf. the essays in David Burrell et al. (eds), *Creation and the God of Abraham* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010).

[12] Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. William Babcock (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2013), 11.24; cf. 12.18.

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not personal by virtue of that relationship. Rather, God is self-sufficient (*a se*) and so the act of creation and the resulting relationship between Creator and creatures is entirely gratuitous.

As a claim about the nature of the world, *creatio ex nihilo* maintains that the world has no existence either in itself or in a secondary (material) principle outside of God. The world is distinct from God yet, at every point, finds its existence in its relationship to the Creator.[13] This applies to the agency of creatures as much as to their being. Aquinas argues that God is not 'the immediate cause of everything wrought' since this would remove 'the order of cause and effect … from created things'. Rather, God's power 'bestows active power on its effects' and in this way creatures are purposeful, given an operation proper to their nature. Thus God is at 'work in every worker'.[14] Likewise, Calvin argues that *creatio ex nihilo* does not envision 'an energy divinely bestowed from the beginning sufficient to sustain all things', but rather that God actively 'sustains, nourishes, and cares for, everything he has made, even to the last sparrow'.[15] Thus, 'unless we pass on to his providence … we do not yet properly grasp what it means to say: "God is Creator."'[16] This holds for creatures' actions as well: each 'has by nature been endowed with its own property, yet it does not exercise its own power except in so far as it is directed by God's ever-present hand'.[17]

Creatio ex nihilo carries several implications for the relationship of divine and creaturely agency.[18] First, *creatio ex nihilo* entails a creator–creature distinction, but this distinction must be formulated in 'non-contrastive' terms. God cannot simply be defined over against the world since the world

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[13] Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003–8 (1906–11)), vol. 2, p. 529.

[14] *Summa Theologica*, trans. Dominican Fathers, rev. Daniel J. Sullivan (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 1.105.5.

[15] *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.16.1.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 1.16.2.

[18] While these implications are typically treated under the topic of 'providence' rather than creation, this distinction is heuristic: 'providence … is a continuous or continued creation. The two are one single act and differ only in structure' (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 606). Three aspects of providence are typically distinguished: preservation, concurrence and governance (in addition to Bavinck, cf. John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* [Philipsburg: P&R, 2002], pp. 274–88; McFarland, *From Nothing*, pp. 135–58). On this scheme, the relationship between divine and creaturely agency falls under the heading of 'concurrence' although it cannot be divorced from preservation or governance: they 'are always integrally connected; they intermesh at all times' (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 605).

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comes from him.[19] Furthermore, God's transcendence is not opposed to his presence to the created order but rather implies it: God creates from nothing, and therefore there is *nothing* between God and creation.

Second, this entails that God's agency is not opposed to creaturely agency. Since there is a metaphysical discontinuity between the creator and creation, it is possible to distinguish between two sorts of causes − traditionally 'primary' and 'secondary' − and attribute causation of natural phenomena to either God or a creature.[20] Rather than opposing creaturely agency, 'God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means'.[21] These 'means' or secondary causes are variegated: 'by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently'.[22] God should not be pictured standing outside creation and imposing his will on a recalcitrant world. Apart from the Creator, creation has no integrity to be violated or imposed upon. The integrity of creation is bestowed by the Creator and sustained by his continued presence to and activity within the created order.[23]

Simply put, the non-competitive model maintains that divine and human agency are *directly* proportional: 'so little does the activity of God nullify the activity of the creature that the latter is all the more vigorous to the degree that the former reveals itself the more richly and fully'.[24] Nevertheless, especially when grounded in *creatio ex nihilo*, a sharp distinction is maintained between the agency of the Creator and the creature at every point. This distinction does not denigrate the order of secondary causes, but upholds the coherence and integrity of 'the natural order and the causal nexus of the phenomena'.[25] By his involvement in the natural order, 'God … maintains things in their mutual relatedness and makes creatures subserve each other's

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[19] Tanner, *God and Creation*, pp. 79–80; Robert W. Jenson, 'Creator and Creature', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4/2 (2002), pp. 216–21.

[20] McFarland, *From Nothing*, p. 145.

[21] *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 5.3.

[22] Ibid., 5.2.

[23] Thus, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), p. 146: 'The unconditional and irresistible lordship of God means not only that the freedom of creaturely activity is neither jeopardised nor suppressed, but rather that it is confirmed in all its particularity and variety.'

[24] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 613. That divine and creaturely agency are 'non-competitive' at the level of concurrence does not mean that God cannot be *personally* opposed to various creatures in the course of history.

[25] Ibid., vol. 2, p. 611. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, pp. 136–7: 'Even in the union of the divine activity and creaturely occurrence there remains a genuine antithesis which is not obscured or resolved … There is still a genuine encounter … of two beings which are quite different in type and order.'

existence and life' such that God's providential interaction with the world 'can be called mediate'.[26]

Applying the non-competitive model to Genesis 1

Following Barclay, I have noted several possible models that might by employed (implicitly or explicitly) in an attempt to illuminate the interactions of divine and creaturely agency in various biblical texts. While the non-competitive model and *creatio ex nihilo* may ultimately be rejected as ways of framing our reading of Genesis 1, they cannot be rejected simply because they are 'philosophical' models. Reading Genesis 1 inevitably entails *some* model or framework for making sense of the interaction between God and creatures. I now argue that the non-competitive model best makes sense of the divine address to the earth and waters in Genesis 1:11, 20, 24. To orient my argument, I offer some general observations on the narrative patterning of Genesis 1. I then consider several proposed interpretations of the divine address in Genesis 1:11, 20, 24 before offering a reading in terms of the non-competitive model.

Narrative structure in Genesis 1

Genesis 1 narrates eight acts of creation across six days using a highly stylised pattern. Each day begins with the announcement: 'and God said …' (*wayy'ōmer 'ĕlōhîm*; 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). Second, the content of God's speech is in the jussive: 'let there be …' (*yĕhî*; 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, [26]).[27] Third, the fulfilment is reported with the phrase 'and it was thus' (*wayhî kēn*; 1:3, 7, 9, 11, 15, [21], 24, 30). Fourth, God evaluates the work of the day: 'And God saw that it was good' (*wayyar' 'ĕlōhîm kî-tôb*; 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Each day concludes with a temporal clause: 'and there was evening and there was morning, the *x* day' (*wayhî 'ereb wayhî bōqer yôm …*; 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31).

While this basic pattern is used to structure the narrative account of each day, there are a series of 'non-predictable variations in the literary patterning' of Genesis 1.[28] For example, the fulfilment report (*wayhî kēn*) is absent from

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[26] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 613.

[27] The jussive is a volitive, related to the imperative, which specifies the will or desire of the speaker.

[28] J. Richard Middleton, 'Creation Founded in Love: Breaking Rhetorical Expectations in Genesis 1:1–2:3', in Leonard Jay Greenspoon and Bryan F. LeBeau (eds), *Sacred Text, Secular Times: The Hebrew Bible in the Modern World* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 2000), pp. 57–62.

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the description of the creation of fish, birds and humans.[29] Likewise, the divine evaluation is delayed from the second to third day, where it is repeated twice.[30] Many of these variations are highlighted when the MT is compared to the LXX, where the structure is more predictable.

Of particular relevance for the current argument are certain variations seen in the narrative account of the creation of plants, fish, birds and land animals. First, while the divine command generally takes the form 'let there be' and then specifies an object (e.g. *yĕhî 'ôr*, 1.3; *yĕhî rāqî'a*, 1:6), in several instances God addresses the jussive to a subject who is to perform an action (the waters in 1:9, 20; the earth in 1:11, 24; God himself in 1:26; cf. 1:15). Second, although in some cases the fulfilment report simply consists of the phrase 'and it was so' following the divine command (1:3, 1:9, cf. 1:11), in most cases, the fulfilment report is expanded to describe how God acted in creating the object described in the divine command. That the fulfilment clause does follow directly on the divine command in some instances has led to much reflection on divine fiat as a mode of creating in Genesis 1. A further variation is found in Genesis 1:12 where the narrative describes the earth as fulfilling the divine command by bringing forth vegetation (*wattôṣē' hā'āreṣ* …). It is these variations in particular that open up an interesting avenue for reflecting on the interplay of divine and creaturely agency.

Alternative accounts

Before arguing that the non-competitive model of the interaction of divine and creaturely agency entailed in *creatio ex nihilo* provides a framework for interpreting the above noted variations, I examine several alternative attempts to develop accounts of divine and creaturely interaction based on 1:11, 20, 24. This illustrates how the details of these passages are construed on differing models.

The first alternative account is offered by William Brown, who argues that Plato's *Timaeus* 'provides a helpful point of departure for discerning in Genesis 1 the complex coherence between divine word and creative act and, more broadly, the very relationship between God and creation'.[31] In *Timaeus*, the demiurge shapes matter into a harmonious whole according to an eternal pattern. Plato describes this process: 'while controlling necessity (*anankē*),

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[29] Ibid., p. 57. Intriguingly, these descriptions contain the only uses of the verb *bārā'* in the narrative apart from Genesis 1:1 and 2:3.

[30] Ibid.

[31] 'Divine Act and the Art of Persuasion', in M. Patrick Graham, William P. Brown and Jeffrey K. Kuan (eds), *History and Interpretation: Festschrift for John H. Hayes* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), p. 20.

intelligence persuaded it (*tō peithein autēn*) … and in this way this universe was constructed from the beginning, through necessity yielding by means of intelligent persuasion (*hypo peithous emphronos*)'.[32] Based on a comparison with Plato's fuller discussion of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, Brown proposes the following model:

> Rhetoric … is the art of leading souls towards the good … Thus, persuasion, in its broadest sense, denotes the effective, yet non-compulsive, technique of intelligence to bring about methodically the desired end, viz., the good.[33]

Although Brown recognises that the Platonic theory is not 'directly transferable' to Genesis 1, reading the two accounts together draws attention to certain features of Genesis 1.[34] In particular, Brown argues that 'it is precisely in the repeated use of *Wortbericht* that Plato's concept of persuasion finds striking resonance in Genesis 1 … the divine word provides concrete instances of God's creative rhetoric'.[35] In Genesis 1:11, 20, 24, the command is expressed using a cognate accusative (i.e. the verb and its object derive from the same root), thus linking 'the jussive verb with its object'.[36] For example, the earth is called to 'sprout (*tadšē'*) vegetation (*dēše'*)'. Since this word play is absent in the narrative fulfilment in each instance (1:12, 21, 25), Brown argues that it emphasises the elevated rhetorical quality of the divine command. Moreover, 'the commands exhibit a verbal precision by which the earth and the waters are enlisted to exercise the means appropriate for producing their respective products'.[37]

Brown concludes that Genesis 1 highlights 'the role of God as *creative* speaker' both by 'the overall structural repetition of divine speech through the account' and 'by the verbal identification between the product and its mode of production'.[38] This 'verbal correspondence between the mode of production and product specifies precisely the creative powers or means

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[32] *Timaeus*, 48a, quoted ibid., p. 21. The full passage reads reads: *nou de anankēs archontos tō peithein autēn tōn gignomenōn ta pleista epi to beltiston agein, tautē kata tauta te di anankēs hēttōmenēs hypo peithous emphronos houtō kat'archas xynistato tode to pan.* LCL 234 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), p. 108.

[33] Brown, 'Divine Act', p. 22.

[34] Ibid., p. 23. Brown sees the main differences between the two accounts in that in Genesis God uses but is not limited by the pre-existing material nor does God create following an external pattern comparable to the Platonic forms.

[35] Ibid., p. 24.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., pp. 24–5.

[38] Ibid., p. 27.

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inherent in the earth and waters.'[39] Taking seriously the role of persuasion in Genesis 1 brings to fore 'the cooperative, interdependent relationship between the elements and God in a manner that excludes any implication of coercive force or compulsion … [and] sets in relief the active, independent nature of the elements (earth and water).'[40] Brown clarifies what he sees as the implications of these observations for understanding the interaction of God and creatures: God does not impose order on matter nor does he create *ex nihilo*. Instead, 'the commands to the earth and the waters are invitations to enter into the grand sweep of God's designs'.[41] This is not a God who is 'set *over and against* creation but rather *with* creation'.[42]

Positing that God creates by working with pre-existing matter and claiming that the earth and waters are 'independent' and have an 'inherent' creative power, suggests that God and world interact *within* the same causal nexus (are 'interdependent'). In rejecting *creatio ex nihilo*, Brown apparently assumes the first model of interaction of divine and creaturely agency.[43] The question then is to what extent Brown's rhetorical model for creation can overcome the competition between divine and creaturely agency that is innate in this model. Brown's proposal works best with Genesis 1:11–12: God persuades the earth, the earth responds through its own means, and God evaluates the earth's work as 'good'. Even here a variety of theological questions emerge: Could the earth have failed to respond well? To what extent and in what manner did God have control of the outcome? Cannot rhetoric, too, can be coercive?

The real problem for Brown's proposal, however, is that it makes little sense of the actual narrative describing the fulfilment of the divine commands in Genesis 1:21 and 25. Although God once again calls the earth and sea to participate in the process of creation, the narrative describes *God himself* making creatures to inhabit the sea, sky and land. What can be made of this, given the model of divine and creaturely agency that Brown assumes? In passing, Brown recognises the problem, noting that when 'God's action comes to the foreground … the waters recede into the background without altogether losing their productive capacity'.[44] To the extent that God is at

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., p. 28.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Given the role of Plato in Brown's argument, it may be that he is assuming some form of the second ('kinship') model. At no point, however, does Brown explicitly suggest that the 'inherent' power within creation is an aspect of the divine or comes from God.

[44] Ibid., p. 26.

work, the waters (and earth) are absent. But to admit this, it seems to me, undermines Brown's argument. On these grounds, only in 1:11–12 does the narrative depict a 'cooperative … relationship between the elements and God in a manner that excludes any implication of coercive force or compulsion'.[45] Subsequent acts can only be seen as God doing something while the elements 'recede into the background'. Moreover, when God and creatures are conceived of as 'interdependent', interacting within the same causal nexus, God's acting on creatures becomes problematic, as it is now simply the actions of a more powerful agent on a less powerful agent. And this is the very thing Brown wants to avoid.

Although adopting a different approach, Norman Habel arrives at conclusions broadly similar to Brown's. Habel's basic thesis is that when read 'with ecojustice eyes' – that is, with concern for the earth – 'Genesis 1 is about the origin, appearance and activating of Earth … the story is a "geophany," a manifestation or revelation of Earth.'[46] Again, the divine commands in Genesis 1:11, 20, 24 play a pivotal role in the argument. Genesis 1 begins, on Habel's reading, with 'the primordial Earth', which is not pre-existent 'in some philosophical or scientific sense' but rather is 'present but hidden from view'.[47] I must admit that I do not see the significance of this distinction. At any rate, God sets about preparing for the manifestation of the earth by providing lighting (Gen 1:3–5) and a space (1:6–8) in which the earth can be manifest. Then, on the third day, the earth 'is revealed, the hidden is made visible, the mysterious is uncovered … *erets* rises from the waters, an epiphany from below – a geophany'.[48] The 'integrity of *erets* is a given', discovered by God as the earth emerges into view.[49]

God then addresses the earth 'and summons it to come alive, replete with all the vegetation typical of land'.[50] Although God 'summons' the earth, the 'immediate source of this plant life is not strictly the command of God but *erets* … When God activates *erets*, the potential life forces within Earth emerge … The revealed *erets* is the dormant source of living creatures.'[51] This pattern (God activating dormant potential through verbal summons) is applied to the descriptions of the fifth and sixth days as well. Read as 'the Earth story', Genesis 1 'depicts *erets* as both the source of life and the home

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[45] Ibid., p. 28.

[46] 'Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1', in Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst (eds), *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), p. 35.

[47] Ibid., p. 36.

[48] Ibid., p. 41.

[49] Ibid., p. 42.

[50] Ibid., p. 43.

[51] Ibid.

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of all living creatures. The creation process continues; life is stimulated by the divine word, emerges from the *erets*, and persists through the blessing of pro-creation … Earth is a co-creator with *Elohim*.'[52]

Again, although one may wish to affirm aspects of Habel's reading, his implicit rejection of *creatio ex nihilo* and treatment of divine and creaturely agents as operating on the same plane, such that they can be called 'co-creators', raises a number of problems. Habel passes over the description of God creating the creatures in 1:21 and 25 without comment. Moreover, given that God and creatures (the earth in this case) operate on the same level as 'co-creators', the interaction between divine and creaturely agency must necessarily be conceived as a causal chain: God first 'activates' the earth, the earth in turn brings forth fauna and flora, which persist through procreation. God initiates the process but stands at some remove from its actual unfolding.

By focusing on neglected themes in Genesis 1, Brown and Habel offer a number of significant insights. However, by assuming a model that places divine and creaturely agency on the same level, they undercut their own goals, especially given that Genesis 1:21 and 25 depict God – and not the waters or earth – as making living creatures. Brown and Habel are not alone in assuming this sort of zero-sum account of agency as a sampling of recent work on Genesis 1 illustrates. Werner Schmidt comments that in Genesis 1:11, 'God's word … now *abdicates* its creative power.'[53] Reflecting on what it means for God to bless creatures, Walter Brueggemann states that 'the power-for-life *monopolized* by Yahweh generously is transmitted' to creatures.[54] Bill Arnold sees the word play of Genesis 1:11 as 'the first example of God *handing over* his creative power, encouraging the "land" just created to produce *on its own*'.[55] With reference to Genesis 1:12, Anne Knafl asserts that the use of an 'active, causative verb' implies that the earth exercises 'at least a degree

[52] Ibid.
[53] Werner Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukichener, 1964), p. 106, quoted in Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), p. 124, emphasis added. The original reads: 'Gottes Wort, das zunächst (V 3. 6, vgl. 14) allein wirksam und schöpferisch tätig war, sich dann (V 9) in einen Befehl wandelte, gibt jetzt die Schöpfermacht ab, d.h. Wort wird zur Anordnung an das zuvor Geschaffene, selbst das weitere Neue entstahen zu lassen. Die Erde (V 11, vgl. 24) und später auch das Meer (V 20) werden vom Objekt zum Subjekt der Schöpfung und erfüllen sogleich, wie die unmittelbare Fortsetzung "und es geschah so" betont, den an sie ergangenen Schöpfungsauftrag.'
[54] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Advocacy, Dispute* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), p. 165, emphasis added.
[55] Bill Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), p. 42.

of autonomy and agency'.[56] Andreas Schüle makes a similar observation, but teases out the implications of the subsequent narrative: 'The idea seems to be that the earth and water are vital forces with enough creative power to bring forth certain forms of life … while this suffices for plants, it is not quite enough for more complex being … in these cases God, too, is depicted as the one who actively participates.'[57] We should affirm the basic insight into the dynamic of Genesis 1 that various elements of creation participate in the unfolding process of creation. But assuming a competitive model leads to problematic descriptions of power: for creatures to exercise power, God, who had previously 'monopolized' power, must first 'abdicate' it. Power is something that can be 'handed over' but not exercised together. Rather, its exercise necessarily implies 'autonomy'.

Non-competitive agency and Genesis 1

I now want to draw together the several strands of the preceding argument and contend that although *creatio ex nihilo* is often dismissed as a hierarchical and dualistic relic of Hellenistic thought, in fact the doctrine can frame a reading of Genesis 1 as an account in which creatures play an active and significant role. Dualism, hierarchy, asymmetrical relations and dependence are all problematic when they characterise relationships *within* a system that should comprise a unified interdependence.[58] *Creatio ex nihilo*, however, posits a radical distinction between Creator and creature, such that divine agency is itself the ground of created agency and therefore is not in competition with created agency. God's creative power does not impose upon creatures contrary to their nature (i.e. by 'coercive force' or 'compulsion'), but rather creates an identity or nature for creatures. Prior to God's act, there simply is nothing to impose on.[59]

If this non-competitive model for the interaction of divine and creaturely agency is adopted, how then should the details of Genesis 1 be read? This model is broadly compatible with either the rhetorical reading adopted by Brown or Habel's reading with particular attention to the earth, although in either case the adopted frame of reference affects how the argument is developed. There is no reason to downplay the fact that God addresses the earth and waters at various points in Genesis 1 and calls them to produce.

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[56] Anne Knafl, *Forming God: Divine Anthropomorphism in the Pentateuch* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), p. 51.

[57] Andreas Schüle, *Theology from the Beginning: Essays on the Primeval History and its Canonical Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). Elsewhere, he simply comments that the creation of flora and fauna is 'indirect': *Die Urgeschichte: Genesis 1–11* (Zurich: TVZ, 2009), p. 38.

[58] Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 72.

[59] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 68.

However, on the model advocated here, that the earth produces vegetation in Genesis 1:12 does not mean that God has ceased to act; rather God is 'at work in things in such a manner that things nevertheless have their proper operation'.[60] God's creative power is acting *through* the earth. But this does not deny that the earth plays an active role in the creation narrative.

Notice how Calvin, working within the framework of *creatio ex nihilo*, comments on these verses. Vegetation is created before the sun in order to demonstrate that the 'vigour' which plants usually derive from the sun is ultimately derived from God.[61] Thus, we must acknowledge 'that the First Cause is self-sufficient, and that intermediate and secondary causes have only what they borrow from the First Cause … we may learn from the order of creation itself, that God acts through the creatures, not as if he needed external help, but because it was his pleasure'.[62] That intermediate causes 'borrow' their power is not to their disparagement. It is God's pleasure to work through them.

The singular benefit of reading Genesis 1 in terms of the non-competitive model is that it makes sense of the descriptions of the creation of sea, sky and earth creatures (Gen 1:21–2, 25) in a way that other models cannot. As seen above, although both Brown and Habel draw attention to God's address to the waters and earth (Gen 1:20, 24), assuming a zero-sum relationship between God and creatures, *either* God fulfils the command *or* the waters and earth do. Since the narrative describes God and not the waters or earth as creating sea, sky and land creatures the necessary conclusion, given the competitive model, is that God acts to the exclusion of the waters and the earth.

On the other hand, read in terms of the non-competitive model, this 'peculiar dialectic' that follows from the 'fluctuating ascription of agency' makes perfect sense and a consistent reading can be offered.[63] God is fully at work but this does not necessarily entail a rejection of creaturely agency.

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[60] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.105.5.

[61] John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1948 (1847)), 1.82.

[62] Ibid., 1.82–3. Calvin attributes this immanent divine work within creation to the Spirit, suggesting a way that Genesis 1:2 might be incorporated into this discussion.

[63] John M. G. Barclay, '"By the Grace of God I am What I am": Grace and Agency in Philo and Paul', in *Divine and Human Agency*, p. 151. Westermann does not directly affirm *creatio ex nihilo* in his reading of Genesis 1, but moves in this direction by describing 1:1 as 'a principal sentence' that ascribes the creation of everything to God (*Genesis 1–11*, p. 97). In this light, when he turns to Genesis 1:11, Westermann argues that 'it is just because God's creative action allows for "origin from" that there can be no basic opposition' between God's agency and that of the earth (ibid., p. 124).

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God is named as the agent in Genesis 1:21 and 25. However, since God addresses the waters and the earth in Genesis 1:20 and 24, it is reasonable to infer, given the parallels with Genesis 1:11–12, that Genesis 1:21 and 25 name God as the primary cause who works in a mediated manner, through secondary, created causes.[64] This inference is further supported by the repetition of the verb 'bring forth' (*wattôṣē'*) in 1:12 and 24, further correlating the two creative acts.

Similarly, the divine blessing on procreation is not an 'abdication' or 'handing over' of creative power. Although a pair (human or animal) conceive and bring forth new life, it is through power endowed by God, and the process is sustained by God's creative power. Throughout the Bible, children are a gift from God. God can claim to have formed Jeremiah in the womb (Jer 1:5) while the psalmist praises God who 'formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb' (Ps 139:13).

Adopting a non-competitive model for the interaction of divine and creaturely agency which follows from *creatio ex nihilo* allows Genesis 1 to be read as a coherent whole. Although the narrative sometimes simply states that after the divine speech 'it was thus' (1:3, 9) and at other times describes either God (1:7, 16, 21, 25, 27) or the earth (1:12) as doing something to bring about the effect named in the divine speech, no sharp distinction needs to be drawn between these various modes of creation. On this reading, the 'earth' and 'sea' also participate as agents in the process of creation as God works *through* them. God is at work equally when acting immediately, without secondary causes, and mediately, through secondary causes. The narrative as a whole, then, is about God creating the heavens and the earth.

Revisiting *ex nihilo*

Various readings of Genesis 1 implicitly or explicitly work with an understanding of the relationship between divine and creaturely agency. To illustrate this fact, I have attempted to uncover the models lying under the surface of Brown's and Habel's readings of Genesis 1. Biblical scholars (including Brown and Habel) routinely reject *creatio ex nihilo* as a framework for reading Genesis 1. However, the doctrine provides a theological logic

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[64] The verb šrṣ in 1:20-21 is debated: is it intransitive, meaning 'to teem' or is it transitive/causative, meaning 'to produce'? The LXX takes the verb in the latter, transitive sense which seems plausible given the parallel address to the earth in 1:11, 24 (cf. Exod 7:28, Ps 105:30; Brown, 'Divine Act', p. 24). Calvin (*Genesis*, 1.90) maintains that Genesis 1:20–1 displays 'the efficacy of the word, which the waters hear so promptly, that, though lifeless in themselves, they suddenly teem with a living offspring … fishes innumerable are daily produced from the waters, because that word of God by which he once commanded it, is continually in force'.

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that supports a non-competitive account of the interaction of divine and creaturely agency which, in turn, allows us to read Genesis 1 as coherent account in which God's creative activity is not 'coercive force' and in which the earth and sea play active (but not independent) roles. However, we cannot simply pick and choose interpretations that best fit with our doctrinal assumptions, or that yield a portrait of God suits our fancy. A good reading must attend to the grammar and syntax of a passage, amongst other things. Nonetheless, in significant ways the interpretation of a biblical text is underdetermined by these philological considerations. In this case, the jussive verbs in the divine addresses are open to multiple possible construals, which are influenced by the underlying model of how God and creatures relate. A good reading will attend to the ongoing interplay between the philological issues and the literary and theological issues that pertain to a specific passage. In this case, various (implicit) assumptions about God and his relationship to the world shape the way that we construe the details of Genesis 1. My own attempt to read the relationship between God and creatures by appealing to the non-competitive model that is classically related to *creatio ex nihilo* raises several further issues which I want to address in conclusion.[65]

The syntax of Genesis 1:1–3

First, I have attempted to demonstrate above that, by focusing on the implications of *creatio ex nihilo* for the relationship between divine and creaturely agency, the doctrine may correlate with Genesis 1 as a whole. Traditionally, the focus has been on the relationship of *creatio ex nihilo* to Genesis 1:1–2, especially with syntactic issues that arise from the first two words of Genesis 1:1. The word *rē'šît* ('beginning') is identical in the absolute and construct states, and in Genesis 1:1, *rē'šît* lacks the definite article which might be expected if it is absolute. But *bārā'* ('created') is not pointed as an infinitive (*běrō'*), which would be expected if it is part of a construct chain or an unmarked relative clause. To put the issue another way, the unpointed Hebrew text might be just as plausibly read as 'In the beginning, God created …' or as 'In the beginning of (when) God created … the earth was formless and void.' If *rē'šît* is absolute and Genesis 1:1 is read as an independent clause (as in the early versions as well as in the allusion in John 1:1), then the verse is open to being read in terms of *creatio ex nihilo*. On the other hand, if *rē'šît* is construct and Genesis 1:1 is a dependent

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[65] Further issues also arise when addressing the relationship between divine and *human* agency that are important in their own right but simply fall outside the scope of the current essay.

clause, then these opening verses appear similar to the openings of various ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies which describe the not-yet-formed state of the world. In this case, Genesis 1:2 would apparently describe the world as existing in a sort of primordial, uninhabitable state.

Various arguments for the various positions are laid out in the commentaries. Here, I briefly point out what seem to be some key considerations that suggest that it is plausible to read Genesis 1:1 as an independent clause. First, although the lack of a definite article is often thought to indicate that *rē'šît* is in the construct state, James Barr has pointed out that the definite article is used irregularly with abstract nouns in biblical Hebrew.[66] This especially seems to be the case with various temporal expressions such as *'aḥărît, rō'š, miqqedem, mē'ôlām* and so forth.[67] Second, if Genesis 1:1 is a dependent clause, then either 1:2 or 1:3 must be the main clause which it modifies, but either option raises more problems than it solves. Subordinating Genesis 1:1 to 1:2 is syntactically awkward while subordinating both verses to 1:3 creates a rather long and awkward sentence which stands in marked contrast to the succinct style of the rest of the chapter and would disrupt the formulae which introduces each day's work (noted above). There is no easy resolution to this syntactic issue.

How we resolve the syntactic issue will likely be influenced by how we relate Genesis 1:1 to the narrative as a whole, what context(s) is considered determinative for reading Genesis 1, and to the expectations and assumptions that we as readers bring to the text. That is to say, does the independent (or dependent) reading of the first verse make sense in the narrative progression of the chapter?[68] Is Genesis 1 to be read primarily in the context of other ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, or in the literary-canonical context in which Jews and Christians receive it as scripture?[69] Again, this is not to suggest that the words of the text are a nose of wax that can be made to say anything. Rather, there is a complex interplay between our goals in reading, the contexts in which we read and how we resolve syntactical questions. It seems philologically plausible to read Genesis 1:1 as

[66] '"Determination" and the Definite Article in Biblical Hebrew', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 39/2 (1989), pp. 307–35.

[67] Cf. John Day, *From Creation to Babel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 6–7.

[68] In a forthcoming article in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* ('Genesis 1.1 as the First Act of Creation'), I deal further with the syntactic issues and propose a way of reading Genesis 1:1 as an independent clause.

[69] McFarland, *From Nothing*, pp. 88–107, offers an excellent reading of John 1, in the context of the Gospel as a whole, in support of *creatio ex nihilo*. Given the intertextual relationship between the two texts, John 1 raises further considerations for those who read Genesis 1 in the context of a two-testament Christian canon.

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an independent clause that is at least open to being read in terms of *creatio ex nihilo*, but philology alone will not force us to this conclusion. But if the *ex nihilo* reading and its related non-competitive model can convincingly frame an explanation of subsequent aspects of the narrative, such as the creation of vegetation, fish, birds and land animals, then this should be taken into consideration in the interpretation of Genesis 1:1.

Immediate and mediate creation

Second, it may be the case that *creatio ex nihilo* has been poorly employed in the practice of biblical interpretation, leading many biblical scholars to suspect the category. For example, a tension can be seen in the way *creatio ex nihilo* is used in practice when Theophilus of Antioch's account is compared to that of Irenaeus. Theophilus proposes a two-stage process of creation: first, God in the beginning (*archē*, which is read christologically as the *logos*) 'made all things of nothing; for nothing was coeval with God'.[70] Subsequently, from this created material, described in its unordered state in Genesis 1:2, God shapes the ordered, inhabitable world. Conversely, Irenaeus does not describe God creating formless matter from nothing but rather God using his will and power *as* the material principle of creation.[71] The great strength of Irenaeus' formulation is that it stresses the immediacy of God to his creation. However, in contrast to Theophilus' sustained commentary on Genesis 1, Irenaeus never applies this model to a comprehensive interpretation of Genesis 1. He references Genesis 1:1 and 3 several times and Genesis 1:26–7 is one of his favourite passages. Genesis 1:2, however, is only mentioned once, in the context of reporting on gnostic speculation, while Genesis 1:4–24 are not referenced anywhere in *Against Heresies*.[72] The very stress on the immediacy of creation makes it difficult for Irenaeus to engage Genesis 1 in a sustained manner.

This tension between *creatio ex nihilo* and Genesis 1 has long been recognised and various solutions have been proposed. Aquinas, for example, distinguishes between the works of 'creation' proper (Gen 1:1), 'distinction' (1:4, 7) and 'adornment' (1:14ff.).[73] Others have distinguished between

[70] Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus*, 10.1, in *Fathers of the Second Century*, vol. 2 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999 [1885]), p. 98.

[71] Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, 2.10.2, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999 [1885]), p. 370; cf. Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p. 69.

[72] *Against Heresies*, 1.18. This is based on the index to vol. 1 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

[73] *Summa Theologica*, 1.55.pr.

creatio ex nihilo and *creatio continua*.[74] Charles Hodge distinguishes between 'immediate' and 'mediate' creation: 'one was instantaneous, the other gradual; the one precludes the idea of any pre-existing substance, and of co-operation, the other admits and implies both'.[75] If the doctrine of creation is to be brought into dialogue with Genesis 1, as it should be, some distinction along these lines must be posited. However, for this to be more than an *ad hoc* distinction, its inner logic must be further developed.

Implicit in the argument offered above is the claim that 'mediate' creation (using secondary causes) is logically dependent on the prior 'immediate' creation (*creatio ex nihilo*). If God created using matter, then God and matter must interact within some larger matrix. God and matter would be discrete active and passive principles that together bring about creation. In this case, the effects of secondary causes could not be equally predicated as an effect of God as the primary cause. At best, the relationship between could be construed as God being the first in a long causal chain. On the other hand, if God creates *ex nihilo*, this means that he creates something that is not God. This 'entails the positing of a reality that can change: if so, it entails also the dialectic of the possible and the actual, it entails a world of purposive fluidity, things becoming themselves … over time'.[76] In short, immediate creation also implies subsequent mediate creation. Or, to frame the matter in terms of interpretation, the way Genesis 1:1 is read will affect how the interaction of God and creatures in the remainder of the chapter is construed.

Can God relate to creatures in other ways?

Third, as noted above, the competitive model depicts God as an actor on the same stage as creatures and, in fact, this is the way that many Old Testament narratives depict God. Does adopting a non-competitive model as the basic model for the relationship between God as Creator and creatures confuse our attempts to read these narratives? Not necessarily. There is nothing logically contradictory in suggesting that God relates to all creation in a non-competitive manner, as suggested above, and then 'condescends' (to use Calvin's phrase) to encounter specific creatures as an actor on the same stage. The third model can incorporate key aspects of the first model (and, arguably, of the second model).[77] But if the first model is adopted as the

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74 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, pp. 606–7.
75 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1940 (1871)), vol. 1, p. 556.
76 Williams, *On Augustine*, p. 70.
77 I develop this further in the forthcoming article, 'Reading Joshua with Augustine and Sommer: Two Frameworks for Interpreting Theophany Narratives', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*.

basic model, and God is *fundamentally* on the same ontological continuum as creatures, then he cannot decide at times to act in a non-competitive manner.

Concluding scientific postscript to exegetical fragments

Having already strayed further afield in this essay than a biblical scholar has any right to, I proceed even further. I want to comment briefly on the implications of this reading of Genesis 1 for the 'dialogue' (or lack thereof) between science and theology. If the non-competitive reading is accepted, then the account of creation in Genesis 1 includes God's operation through secondary causes in the process of creation. The significance of this claim can be seen in a brief example from Philip Ball's fascinating work *The Self-Made Tapestry: Pattern Formation in Nature*. Ball argues that 'basic physical laws' can 'by themselves contrive to generate rich and beautiful patterns' such as the recurring spirals, spots, stripes, branches and honeycombs found throughout the natural world.[78] While the book as a whole is delightful, in an early offhand comment Ball suggests that, given the complex patterns found in nature, 'it is scarcely surprising that many theologians throughout time have refused to see anything other than the signature of divine guidance'.[79] But this fails to take seriously the way in which *creatio ex nihilo* opens up the possibility of talking about divine and creaturely agency in a non-competitive manner. That patterns in nature accord to 'physical laws' or result from specifiable creaturely activity does not mean they cannot *also* result from divine guidance. Rather, 'the constant teaching of the Christian church … has been that the [secondary] causes, though they are totally dependent on the primary cause, are at the same time also true and essential causes … they are genuine causes, with a nature, vitality, spontaneity, manner of working, and law of their own'.[80] But by the same token, is it not misguided to search for 'proofs' of creation in apparent absences of specifiable secondary causes? Perhaps both would-be apologists and cultured despisers have misunderstood what it means to say that God is the creator of heaven and earth.[81]

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[78] Philip Ball, *The Self-Made Tapestry: Pattern Formation in Nature* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 4.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 614. Westermann notes that Genesis 1:24 need not be read 'mythically' to indicate that the earth 'gives birth' to the animals but rather simply as indicating that 'the earth with its variety of formations, surfaces and structures provides the living conditions for the different species … certain formations bring forth certain fauna' (*Genesis 1–11*, p. 142).

[81]