

2.4 Proving the Existence of God (a) (p. 58)

ACCORDING TO JOHN ALLEN Paulos,

The cogency of Russell's reply to the first-cause argument is indicated by Saint Augustine's reaction to a version of it. When he was asked what God was doing before He made the world, he answered, "He was creating a hell for people who ask questions like that."¹

Well, that's a good laugh at St. Augustine's expense, but it's not exactly what Augustine said. Here's what he said:

How, then, shall I respond to him who asks, "What was God doing *before* He made heaven and earth?" I do not answer, as a certain one is reported to have done facetiously (shrugging off the force of the question). "He was preparing hell," he said, "for those who pry too deep." It is one thing to see the answer; it is another to laugh at the questioner—and for myself I do not answer these things thus. More willingly would I have answered, "I do not know what I do not know," than cause one who asked a deep question to be ridiculed—and by such tactics gain praise for a worthless answer.

So Paulos has it exactly backward. But what exactly is Augustine's answer?

Rather, I say that thou, our God, art the Creator of every creature. And if in the term "heaven and earth" every creature is included, I make bold to say further: "Before God made heaven and earth, He did not make anything at all. For if He did, what did He make unless it were a creature?" I do indeed wish that I knew all that I desire to know to my profit as surely as I know that no creature was made before any creature was made.²

Sharon Kaye explains:

As a matter of fact, it is clear that Augustine was much exercised by the question. He is unable to come up with an answer to it in the *Confessions*. He indicates, after chastising the jokers, that it is important to be humble in the presence of God's mysteries. (This is a common theme throughout the *Confessions*.) What he is getting at in that second paragraph, though, seems to me to be this: Well, if "heaven and earth" includes all of creation, then we can be sure

¹ *I Think, Therefore I Laugh* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 71.

² Augustine, *Confessions*, Chap. 12, Sec. 14.

that God was not creating before He made heaven and earth. After all, it would be a logical contradiction to create before creation. So, we may not know what God was doing, but at least we can be certain what He was *not* doing. Augustine seems to recognize that his answer is partial and inadequate.

But in *City of God* bk. XII, ch. 15 he comes up with a better answer. He argues that the question is moot because God created time when He created the world. So there was no “before” creation. He writes: “For where there is no creature whose changing movements admit of succession, there cannot be time at all.” Russell might still say this constitutes “changing the subject.” Maybe, maybe not.

We shouldn’t be too hard on Paulos, though, for calling the joke “Augustine’s reaction.” I have heard it presented as Augustine’s many times. And I don’t think this is too unfair. One way to read the text is to say that Augustine repeats the joke precisely because he is tempted by this response himself. It would be very like him to use a rhetorical device to avoid answering a question. He did it all the time. In this case, however, he doesn’t really want to dismiss the question. He wants an answer, and it takes him some nine years [between *Confessions* and *City of God*] to find it.¹

Augustine’s eventual answer, that there was no before creation because that’s when time started, might not seem to be very good to you. But Augustine is in good company when he gives this answer. It’s exactly what many contemporary astrophysicists say when asked what was going on before the Big Bang, which they now consider to be the first event that started things off.

¹ Her email to me, 3 May 2001. Sharon M. Kaye is co-author (with Paul Thomson) of *On Augustine* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001).