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**THE THEOPHANIC WORLD OF GENESIS:  
A NEOPLATONIC FRAMEWORK FOR RECONCILING  
GENESIS AND THE DOCTRINE “CREATION EX NIHILO”**

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Negative theology is often viewed as an analysis of the limits of theological language. But for Dionysius the Areopagite,<sup>1</sup> a central figure in negative theology, language analysis never functioned as a foundation for his arguments, but rather resulted from a series of philosophical arguments. When Dionysian negative theology is understood in its original Neoplatonic setting, negative statements about God will make much more sense. In this paper, I will demonstrate how the Neoplatonic framework for understand being, intelligibility, and language as coextensive and interdependent makes sense of a classic *locus* in negative theology, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The Neoplatonic understanding of the doctrine is more consistent with the biblical text of Genesis 1 than physicalist accounts. Both creation *ex nihilo* and Genesis understand the creation of the world as a theophanic event in which God, who is beyond comprehension, is made intelligible by manifesting himself in being.

As such, this paper deals with three related programs: (1) Following Eric Perl, I argue that Dionysian negative theology is shaped by the Neoplatonic tradition, especially the insight that language is a function of intelligibility and being. (2) This account of language, intelligibility, and being makes sense of the concept of *nihil* in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* more coherently than recent physicalist understandings. Finally, (3) I will examine how Martin Luther, an important interpreter of Dionysius, employs the Neoplatonic understanding of *nihil* in his *Lectures on Genesis*.

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<sup>1</sup> The author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is referred to in this paper simply as “Dionysius” or “Dionysius the Areopagite,” although I have no issues with the usage of “Pseudo-Dionysius.”

## THE NEOPLATONIC STRUCTURE OF DIONYSIAN APOPHATICISM

Eric Perl's work over the past three decades has forcefully argued Dionysius's negative theology "is not fundamentally a theory of theological language but a philosophical position taken over directly from Neoplatonism."<sup>2</sup> As Perl argues, the Dionysian Corpus is predicated on the Neoplatonic axiom "to be is to be intelligible."<sup>3</sup> Being and intelligibility are equivalent predicates because there is not some aspect of being that falls outside of intelligibility, and there is no intelligible thing that falls outside of being; the two are coextensive.

This is because beings (or things) are comprehended by their intelligible qualities. This principal applies to all things, be they physical or imaginary. It applies even to things we cannot know to be "physically real," like Russell's "cosmic teapot."<sup>4</sup> I can make a teapot intelligible even if its physical existence is unverifiable—it is a small, glossy, blue-and-white ceramic teapot with a chip in the handle, orbiting the Sun somewhere between the Earth and Mars, but is unobservable by contemporary telescopes. The teapot's being is revealed in such a description because it can only be known by its intelligible qualities—even if it is not a being in the physical world. This applies even to the quality "unverifiability" (or, if you will, "indeterminacy"). It is by this quality that the teapot is known—it is part of the teapot's being. Perl explains this concept thusly: "To think being is to think it as *thinkable*. Indeed [...] by *being* we can only mean 'what is there for thought.' [...] It would be incoherent even to postulate an unintelligible being, a being

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<sup>2</sup> Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007) 13. This point is the subject of his first chapter, especially pages 5-15. It is a summary of Neoplatonic thought, starting in Parmenides' identification of this principle, recorded by Plato, and picked up by the Neoplatonists Plotinus and Proclus, whose work is influential for Pseudo-Dionysius. Although his work does not make the explicit textual connections that are necessary to establish his argument "beyond doubt," his work has largely been hailed as a landmark in Neoplatonic studies.

<sup>3</sup> Perl, *Theophany*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> See Bertrand Russell, "Is there a God?" in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Vol. 11: Last Philosophical Testament, 1943-1968*, ed. John G. Slater (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 542-548.

that cannot be thought, for to do so would already be to think such a being.”<sup>5</sup> Being is grasped directly by its intelligible qualities.

The function of language (and thought) in Neoplatonism, then, is to grasp being, so that whenever being is not in view, language fails. Language has the capacity to be used correctly in describing being, but when going beyond being, it is of no use. This is what Dionysius means when he says, “when [contemplation] has passed up and beyond the ascent [of the intelligible], it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable.”<sup>6</sup> Language must be abandoned when going beyond being.

For Dionysius, that which lies beyond the limit of being is God, because he confers being to all beings. God in himself has no intelligible qualities the mind can hold onto because he is the very thing by which intelligible things come to be intelligible. Kathryn Tanner has interpreted this Dionysian description of God as the “very failure to mean.”<sup>7</sup> God means nothing because he is beyond the human capacity to understand. For Dionysius, this “failure to mean” is not simply a feature of language, but a hard limit on the nature of being. “Someone beholding God and understanding what he saw has not actually seen God himself but rather something of his which has being and which is knowable.”<sup>8</sup> Those things that can be known and those things that are cannot be called “God.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Perl, *Theophany*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology* 1033C. Notably, the view that language is limited by being is still in force today. This is what many understand to be the meaning of Wittgenstein’s final sentence in his *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one ought to remain silent.” Notice that for Wittgenstein, the analysis of the limits of language is a result of a philosophical system, not taken as a so-called “first principle” or even a foundation for further argumentation.

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Tanner, “Creatio ex Nihilo as a Mixed Metaphor,” *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (2013): 139.

<sup>8</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, Letter 1, 1065A.

<sup>9</sup> Notably, τῶν ὄντων and τῶν γινωσκομένων are used in the same way in the preceding passage, Dionysius, Epistle 5, 1065A.

This description of God as “beyond being” is presupposed in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The 20th century Greek Orthodox interpreter of Dionysius, Phillip Sherrard, argues this description of God is exactly what the *nihil* in *ex nihilo* is referring to: “*Nihil* denotes the absence...of all that can be called a ‘thing.’ It denotes a realm of divine interiority in which there is ‘no thing.’ It refers to that in God which is free from all form, material or non-material, and which to us presents no identity because it is beyond the capacity of our minds to grasp it.”<sup>10</sup> That is to say, creation *ex nihilo* speaks of the creation of all things without a preexistent matter only by the will of God. God’s will should be understood as that thing which is not intelligible but is made intelligible through creation. In order to assert this, it is important to show how physicalist interpretations that reject this Neoplatonic framework fail conceptually and historically. After exploring this, it can then be argued that the Neoplatonic framework for understanding *nihil* has successfully been used to integrate Genesis and the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

#### PHYSICALIST INTERPRETATIONS OF NOTHING

Christians have sometimes adopted a physicalist interpretation of *nihil*, a deeply incoherent position. Recently, this happens in the context of comparing creation *ex nihilo* and the “Big Bang” theory. As Christian astronomer Robert Jastrow triumphantly put it, “for the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.”<sup>11</sup> It

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<sup>10</sup> Phillip Sherrard, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), 239. He attributes this view to “the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.”

<sup>11</sup> Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1978), 116

took scientists thousands of years to discover the Big Bang, which is supposedly identical to Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. On this view, the *fiat lux* of Genesis 1 is equivalent to the expansion of the early universe, and the *nihil* from which the universe came is whatever was before this—some void, some “singularity,” or some nothing. But more recent studies have shown physics provides no such corroboration of Christian doctrine. After a survey of developments in physics, the Lutheran theologian Mark Worthing concluded there can be no absolute nothing, saying “Any theory explaining how something has come from nothing must assume some preexisting laws or energy or quantum activity in order to have a credible theory. Nothing comes out of nothing.”<sup>12</sup>

A Christian physicalist view fails both scientifically and conceptually.<sup>13</sup> The *nothing* of “creation from nothing” cannot be some physical space into which God injects matter. Firstly, if *nothing* is a physical reality then it is not really *nothing*. It is some *thing* that I can characterize according to its intelligible qualities, be they “laws or energy or quantum activity.” But secondly, even if it is granted that some absolutely negative physical “nothing” is conceivable, the question remains whether this “nothing” exists or does not exist. If nothing does exist, then it violates the concern by which the doctrine of “creation from nothing” originally was forged, that is, a concern against setting up some thing that coexists apart from God in eternity. But if nothing doesn’t exist, then it falls into the same problem. Christians would still be able to identify some *possible* thing that doesn’t exist but *could* exist outside of God eternally. Thus, conceptually, God would not be the only thing beyond being, but would share that distinction

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<sup>12</sup> Mark W. Worthing, *God, Creation, and Contemporary Physics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 110.

<sup>13</sup> This paragraph follows the argumentation of Phillip Sherrard in *Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*, 235-236.

with a figment of the human imagination. And as Phillip Sherrard says, “It is unlikely, to say the least, that God creates the world out of such a figment.”<sup>14</sup>

This view that nothing is some absolute void that can be approximated in the language of physics does not only fail scientifically and conceptually, but has also failed historically, and specifically in the context of the interpretation of Genesis and its relationship to the doctrine of atomism. Atomism, the belief that the world is made of only atoms and void, was revived in the late 17th century with the arrival of mechanical philosophy. A central *locus* of debate was whether this revival of atomism was atheistic or Christian in orientation. There was a group represented by Ralph Cudworth and Isaac Newton that believed Moses to be the father of ancient atomism. The evidence came nearly singularly from a record of the ancient atomist philosopher, Mochus (or Moschus) of Phoenicia, who lived before the fall of Troy and is purported to be the father of the atomic doctrine. He likely influenced Leucippus and Democritus.<sup>15</sup> If this man could be identified as the biblical figure Moses, then it could be shown that atomism had a strong, ancient, and biblical grounding, one from which the materialistic and atheistic approach signified a departure and adulteration.

Of course this enterprise was doomed, and it fell out of vogue as quickly as it appeared.<sup>16</sup>

Atomism is not taught in the Pentateuch (which these theologians unproblematically accepted as

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<sup>14</sup> Phillip Sherrard, *Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*,

<sup>15</sup> See Danton B Sailor, “Moses and Atomism” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25, no. 1 (1964), 3-16. This article and the follow-up article Danton B. Sailor, “Newton’s Debt to Cudworth,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49, no. 3 (1988), 511-518, explain the late 17th-century approach to this problem of Moses as Mochus. See also Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe, wherein all the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted, and its impossibility Demonstrated* (London, 1678).

<sup>16</sup> In Danton Sailor’s memorable ending to “Moses and Atomism,” he flatly says, “the resort to the *philosophia mosaica*... was really derived from humanism more than from science, and thus shared the fate of Renaissance humanism.” The implication here is clear: if Christian theology cannot base its doctrines on science rather than on a kind of humanism or philological research, its fate and future are imperiled.

written by Moses). The Septuagint refers to “οὐκ ... τμητούς” (Exodus 20:25)—an altar of uncut stone— but never ἄτομος, a true uncuttable. There is no atomic theory in the Pentateuch, and that is why mostly extra biblical evidence was brought forth. Christians cannot meaningfully interpret *nihil* as the void of atomism or modern physics. Thus, the Neoplatonic understanding of nothing seems preferable to the physicalist understanding. The problem for the Neoplatonic understanding of “nothing” as “beyond being,” then, is whether it can be related to Genesis 1. But there is doubt that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* actually arises from or relates to the Scriptures at all.

David Fergusson has argued “the key texts themselves are not unequivocal in their support for the doctrine of creation out of nothing.”<sup>17</sup> The biblical texts are multivalent—they are able to be adequately accounted for under a variety of interpretive schemas. I will argue below the Neoplatonic framework succeeds where a physicalist interpretation of the text fails. Gerhard May’s treatment of the topic is particularly important in understanding the relationship between creation *ex nihilo* and Genesis. He has shown that while the doctrine may be consonant with the biblical evidence, “it must be understood and explained as part of the controversy of early Christianity with philosophy.”<sup>18</sup> May argues it is not simply the controversy with Gnosticism, but largely the process by which Christian doctrine differentiated itself from its Platonic allies that sharpened the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> David Fergusson, *Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2014), 15-16. Here he is referencing Genesis 1, Romans 4:17, Hebrews 11:3, and Second Maccabees 7:28.

<sup>18</sup> Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The doctrine of ‘creation out of nothing’ in early christian thought*, trans. A.S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), xi.

<sup>19</sup> Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, especially pages 148, 179-180.



There are important differences between the Platonic tradition and Christian views of creation. Christian theologians have often compared Genesis to Plato's *Timaeus*. Augustine speculated Plato was inspired to write *Timaeus* after reading Genesis.<sup>20</sup> But this comparison runs into similar problems to those of the 17th century theologians who made the case for atomism in the Pentateuch. While *Timaeus* provides many statements about God that seem apophatic in nature, Jaroslav Pelikan has observed these similarities might be overstated.<sup>21</sup> For example, the creator God's nature and purpose are the first things to be expressed about this God, not some action he takes.<sup>22</sup> That is to say, this God can be known apart from what he does. And even so, if any apophatic statements occur, they take up relatively little attention in the dialogue. Instead, the most salient features of this dialogue are Timaeus's long discourses concerning mathematics, the shapes of the Platonic solids, and the kinds of bonds formed by the four elements. Genesis remains silent on those issues; the first chapters of Genesis are not interested in physics as such. There are no speculations about why fire hurts (Timaeus believes fire is made of particularly sharp triangles) or the mathematics that explain the generation of matter. This is why Irenaeus, one of the earliest defenders of creation *ex nihilo* could say "in what way God produced [matter], neither has Scripture anywhere declared; nor does it become us to conjecture."<sup>23</sup> If Genesis is concerned with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* at all, it is concerned with it not as something explicable in terms of mathematics and physical theories, but in terms of language.

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<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *City of God* 11.21.

<sup>21</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem: Timaeus and Genesis in Counterpoint* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997) especially chapters 2 and 6.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 30a. "Let me tell you then why the creator made this world of generation. He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be."

<sup>23</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II 28, 7.

## LUTHER AND THE NEOPLATONIC STRUCTURE OF GENESIS

In Genesis 1, God speaks and things happen. Multiple times and on all 6 days of creation, “God *said*” and “there *was*.” This connection between language and being approximates the Neoplatonic axiom “to be is to be intelligible.” To demonstrate this, I will examine a Neoplatonic thinker who was influenced by Dionysius’ negative theology, Martin Luther and his *Lectures on Genesis*. Luther is an important figure in this respect because he comes just before the rise of atomism and mechanical philosophy and, as Knut Alfsvag argues, is among “the most important contributor[s] to the renewal of [Dionysian negativity] in the Middle Ages.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Alfsvag has shown Luther generally seeks only to add “to the basic Neoplatonic thought structure without breaking its fundamental philosophical presuppositions.”<sup>25</sup>

In his 1535 lectures on Genesis, Luther remarks, “God was incomprehensible in His essential rest before the creation of the world, but now, after the creation, He is within, without, and above all creatures; that is; He is still incomprehensible. Nothing else can be said, because our mind cannot grasp what lies outside time.”<sup>26</sup> God not only was beyond intelligibility before creation, but remains beyond intelligibility, with the result that we cannot speak about him. Because God is beyond being, he can only be known from within being, from, as Luther says, “within his creatures,” even though he remains “without” and “above” them.

Luther interpreting Luther: “God does not manifest Himself except through His works and the Word, because the meaning of these is understood in some measure. Whatever else

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<sup>24</sup> Alfsvag, “Luther as reader of Dionysius the Areopagite,” in *Studia Theologica* 62 (2011), 110.

<sup>25</sup> Knut Alfsvag, “Luther as reader of Dionysius the Areopagite,” 110. Piotr Malysz has made a similar case in, especially making the connection that the ascent/descent structure of Dionysius and Luther show a deep continuity in Piotr Malysz, “Luther and Dionysius: Beyond Mere Negations” in *Modern Theology* 24, no. 4, (October 2008), 679-692.

<sup>26</sup> LW 1,11. See also LW 54,35, a table talk from 1532.

belongs essentially to the Divinity cannot be grasped and understood.”<sup>27</sup> God does not leave us without knowledge of himself. God does not remain beyond being and intelligibility. He “envelops Himself in His works in certain forms [...]. If you should depart from these, you will get into an area where there is no measure, no space, no time, and into the merest nothing, concerning which, according to the philosopher, there can be no knowledge.”<sup>28</sup> Here, Luther adopts the axiom “to be is to be intelligible” when he defines *nihil* as that about which there can be no knowledge. Nothing is literally the thing I cannot determine as a thing. It has no intelligible qualities. It is not a physical void, which I can describe, but it is something beyond intelligibility, a “not-a-thing.”

If God is to make himself known at all, then, he must do it in coverings, which are the works and Word of God.<sup>29</sup> God in himself is no thing; he is beyond being. But when God speaks, he becomes real. Here the connection of being, intelligibility, and language is made explicit. That which is *is* God’s speech—All of *being* is the language of God. This is manifestly the focus of Genesis 1. All beings come to be as a result of God’s speech. Luther describes it thusly: “All [God’s] works are some words of God, created by the uncreated Word.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, “when the sun rises...God is speaking. When plants grow, when human beings are born, God is speaking. Accordingly, the words of God are not empty air but things very great and wonderful, which we

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<sup>27</sup> LW 1,11.

<sup>28</sup> LW 1,11.

<sup>29</sup> Notably, this is the same structure and terminology that Dionysius employs in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*. See Alexander Golitzin’s commentary on the topic in *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita*, ed. Bogdan G. Bucur (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 200-208.

<sup>30</sup> LW 1:47.

see with our eyes and feel with our hands.”<sup>31</sup> Creation is not only an intelligible word from God; it is the way God becomes manifest. Creation—in all its varied phenomena—is an appearance, covering, and mask of the unintelligible God, who is apart from this theophany absolutely no thing.

Luther believes Genesis teaches God is the *nihil* out of which all things are made, and he can only be known by the intelligible things he created. This differs from *Timaeus*, where God’s will and nature are able to be described before he creates something. In Genesis, God is first encountered in the very act of creation. It does not begin a treatise on God’s desires; it starts with God’s intelligible works and Word. These are the things by which Genesis expects the reader comes to know God. As the interpreter of Dionysius, Phillip Sherrard, put it, “the world of phenomena is the theophanic world. This world is that world. [...] All nature, from beginning to end, constitutes a single icon of God. Underlying the whole cosmos and its minutest particles, God is active in nature and nature in God.”<sup>32</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In the creation account of Genesis, the entire world is a theophany. That is to say, the world is the place by which God is made intelligible and thus made a being capable of being known. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* expresses God as “beyond being,” but this only as the matrix by which God becomes intelligible from within being. Physicalist interpretations of *nihil* fail to coherently connect creation *ex nihilo* to the Scriptures, while Neoplatonic interpretations

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<sup>31</sup> Luther, “Lecture on Psalm 2” (1532), in WA 40/2:230.20-25; 40/2:23.28; LW 12:32-33. This is Robert Kolb’s translation, found in Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 47. Kolb’s discussion on pages 46-50 offer further explanation of this theme.

<sup>32</sup> Phillip Sherrard, *Christianity*, 241

of *nihil* express the concept of nothing in a way that is consistent with the structure of the book of Genesis.

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