

# How Far Do Classical Discussions Of The Doctrine Of Creation Consist, In Walsh's Terms, Of "News From Nowhere," And To What Extent Are They "Metaphysical Description"?

[a brief essay to be read in class for discussion]

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Religion 254B – The Doctrine of Creation

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2007 note: The style, spelling, punctuation, and footnote forms remain the same as in 1967.

[original text was double-spaced]

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How far do classical discussions of the doctrine of creation consist, in Walsh's terms, of "news from nowhere," and to what extent are they "metaphysical description" ?

*Metaphysics As "News From Nowhere"*. Walsh notes that in the Platonic sense "metaphysics is the science of things unseen."<sup>1</sup> The supersensible is the subject of inquiry, including such topics as the nature of Being, the soul, etc. The metaphysician's statements are final truth-claims.

Some philosophers of the modern and contemporary periods (*e.g.*, Kant and the Positivists) condemn metaphysics, in that metaphysical pronouncements fail to be related to everyday experience, and therefore "the news it professes to purvey is really news from nowhere."<sup>2</sup> The supersensible, by definition beyond the sense perception, cannot be related (more specifically, *verified* empirically, according to the Positivists) to one's here and now temporal-physical experience.

*Metaphysical "Descriptions"*. An alternative to the Platonic understanding of "metaphysics" is Walsh's interpretation of the use of metaphysical statements. The latter are not meaningful in terms of any claim to a degree of truth; instead their function is to describe tentatively within a

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<sup>1</sup>W. H. Walsh, *Metaphysics* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1963), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44.

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given context certain categorical principles.<sup>3</sup> These principles are what one brings to, not extracts from, experience; Walsh seems to be saying that they are the assumptions on which one, consciously or otherwise, builds his world-view and perceives reality.<sup>4</sup> “Categorical principles function as rules, and so cannot strictly be said to be either true or false”<sup>5</sup>

However, since it is the task of the metaphysician “to give a connected account of the world as a whole,”... “it follows that one test which every metaphysical system must meet is that it should be able to cover all the facts of experience.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the philosopher is not left “free-wheeling” and without this basic guideline in his inquiry. However, Walsh admits it is not without difficulty in establishing what indeed is a *fact*! “In fact,” how one sees the world determines, within his own context, the nature of “facts.”<sup>7</sup> This being the case, Walsh suggests that “we may all the same want to characterize them (metaphysical assertions) as illuminating or the reverse, or to describe them as authentic or spurious.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 183. (my parentheses)

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For religious accounts of experience, Walsh notes, one interprets, statements not literally as Final Truth, but as one metaphysical alternative among many.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it would seem that any metaphysical statement is a description of the way one sees an aspect of reality, not in any certain or final sense, but as a way of making things intelligible.

*Classical Doctrines of Creation.* It was noted in the previous paper that Tresmontant understood that the early Church insisted on certain principles with regard to the doctrine of creation, namely, that the only God is the Creator of the Universe; that Creation is a free act of God, not out of any necessity; that Creation is not eternal (though, according to Origen, created eternally), nor is matter of the essence of its fabric — matter is created by God, and that Creation is not an essential extension of the Divine, but instead wholly distinct from the Creator.<sup>10</sup>

An example of such thinking among classical theologians is Augustine’s interpretation. His formulation includes the preceding principles, but includes the act of creation *ex nihilo* not as an event in time, but as a description of

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>10</sup>Claude Tresmontant, *Christian Metaphysics* (N.Y.: Sheed and Ward, 1965), pp. 48 f.

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the fundamental relationship of God to the world, this relationship focusing upon the world’s dependence upon God for its intelligibility.

*Creation As “News From Nowhere”* The writer submits that, within Walsh’s thinking, the doctrine of creation is “news from nowhere” to the extent that God is supersensible (transcendent), and that the doctrine is essentially removed from, or independent of, physically grounded facts. Thus, it would seem that the wholly other Creator-God of classical theology, claiming final truths from the beyond about the origin and process of creation, fits within the Edinburgh scholar’s category “news from nowhere.”

*Creation As Metaphysical Description.* On the other hand, the immanence of God and the descriptive intent of some theological discourse cast a different light on the subject. That God “acts in history,” even through the *Logos*, implies an alternative to the “wholly otherness” and exclusively transcendent interpretation of creation. One might even conclude that the immanence of God implies the possibility of empirical verification or factuality of God’s acts, even creation. Thus, the extent to which creation is the work of an immanent Creator is the extent to which the doctrine of creation may be termed “metaphysical description.”

Perhaps Augustine’s position, not to describe an event but a relationship, serves as an example. Insofar as there is, in “fact,” a relationship between immanent Creator, through the *Logos*, and the world - even a relationship of intelligibility, it would seem that Walsh’s understanding of metaphysics could include such an understanding of creation. He could posit that in this sense, within an immanent theistic context, a doctrine of creation (even *ex nihilo* in the physicist’s sense) could be an illuminating metaphysical statement, offered on tentative grounds.

*Conclusion.* Walsh has assumed that metaphysical statements require empirical grounding, that metaphysics is concerned with a total interpretation of reality, and that reality is sensible in nature. His assumed rules for the metaphysician’s task focus within these limits. The writer submits that within Walsh’s understanding of “metaphysics,” one may conclude that the classical theological doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* involve both “news from nowhere,” and “metaphysical descriptions.” In this sense the doctrine falls into Walsh’s “mixed systems.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Walsh, *op. cit.*, pp. 185 ff.

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## 2007 Addendum

See “Theological Naturalism” at <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/world/theological.htm/>.

See the Cherbonnier subsite at [www.philosophy-religion.org](http://www.philosophy-religion.org), especially his papers “Biblical Metaphysic and Christian Philosophy,” and “Is There A Biblical Metaphysic?”.

See also Sterling Lamprecht, *The Metaphysics of Naturalism*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967.

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### BOOKS

***The Fabric of Paul Tillich's Theology*, Yale Press, 1967.**

***The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, Fortress Press, 1975.**

***Proving Doctrine: Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, Trinity Press International, 1999**

***To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About Theological Education?*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.**

***Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1993.**

***Imagining Redemption*, Westminster John Knox, 2005.**