

Where It All Began

An Inductive Study of Genesis

Notes on the Notion of Substance in Genesis One

If we say that God “found” some sort of primordial “stuff” or energy from which He fashioned the finite, material universe, then we must own that God is not Absolute, that there is some sort of *something* that He did not create. There would exist something real outside God which He is not the God *of*. This is true no matter how ‘small’ or ‘primordial’ (unformed, *proto-matter-ish*) that something may be. Upon this model, God is the divine *architect* of the universe, but not the *Source* of it. He imparts *form* and *order* only. He becomes what the ancient Greeks called a *demiurge* – a builder of the universe who is ultimately not the one who made the ‘stuff’ out of which it is made.

If we say that God created the universe “out of nothing” (*ex nihilo*), that can only mean one thing: it would mean that God made it *from out of Himself*. The very ‘stuff’ (energy, protomatter, substance) of which the world is made would be the product of God’s act; *something separated off from God Himself*. Now, while the Medieval theologians and philosophers were rather frightened by this option (they thought of the ‘substance’ of the world as being necessarily material, in the sense of perishable, and they did not want to say that God in any way contained anything perishable (and thus imperfect) in Him), many of their ancient predecessors had believed that the universe was eternal and infinite, in the sense that some very basic ‘something’ had always existed, and would forever continue to exist. Modern science tends to second this

view, finding the material and perishable order of things to be a mere arrangement of a more basic (and enduring) primordial energy.

What’s the problem here? Well, in the first instance, we have a God Who is less than Absolute. He is not the God of all that is. We might ask Who made the primordial ‘stuff’ out of which God created the universe. We would then have not one, but *two* gods. Our Architect God would not be the only real ‘thing’ in existence before the creation of the world we all know and love, but would be *one* of *two* Absolute Realities (Substances). If there are two such Substances, we should ask either (1) Who made the two of them, or at least (2) what Ultimate reality contains them both (is greater than both) such that they are even able to interact (that is, so that our Architect God can impose form on the Absolute ‘stuff’ which He did not make.

Adding greatly to the problem is the fact that when we are talking about the Absolute Being of all of Reality, it is impossible to talk about more than One... It makes no sense to talk about *two Absolute* Substances – if they are two, they are simply not Absolute! In other words, when we talk of Substance (Ultimate Reality), $1+1=1$ – If it’s Absolute, it’s Absolute, what we think is two is really one thing.

In the second instance, there is only one real Substance (‘stuff’) in Reality, and that Substance (‘stuff’) is *God*. All things

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are made by God out of some part of what He is. God gives not just form and order to what He has made, but its very substance itself. Then, what's the problem with that? If we say that this is true, then the only thing that is ultimately real is God Himself. That is the Eastern solution (remember, the simplified doctrines of Hinduism and Buddhism tell us that the created order is either only an illusion or only the temporary state of God/Absolute Reality into which all things will dissolve, losing their individuality.

This problem in philosophy is called the Problem of the One and the Many. How can the universe of Many things come from One thing which is the only thing that is really real? How can there be Many real things and there still be but One Reality (the ground in which all the many things interact to make up the one Reality we inhabit and experience. To simply say that God made it like that is simply to avoid the question.

Our minds lead us to yet another great paradox: The Lord our God is One (Hear, O Israel). Reality itself is One (while it does make sense to speak of many things *within* reality, it does not make sense to speak of several *realities* somehow interacting). On some level, contrariwise, the individuality of the things and people of the universe is really real – the world is not God, and neither are we. Both options false and

both true, God shows Himself once again to be so much greater than our thought. When we think of God as separated from the world ('up there,' so to speak) and the world of many things as real ('down here') created by Him, we are in a sense correct, but in a sense, missing the very important fact of God's Absolute and Singular reality and the Unity of all Being (Reality).

While we cannot come up with a solution (to have a solution to this conundrum would be to choose one option over the other, and we have seen that there is an important sense in which they are both true and both false!). I suggest to you that Genesis Ch. 1 contains the most fruitful orientation we might take in our thinking. We can see in Genesis a look at God which is a sort of Unity (Oneness) which is different from the unities we experience in the world: God is that Ultimate Unity (One Reality) which contains difference, multiplicity *within itself*. God both *transcends* the universe and is *immanent* within it – in our terms, God is both outside the created order and inside it. The difference comprising the universe is really real because it is a part of the Absolute and Unitary God. God is not a simple Unity, but the Unity of the *interaction* of His Manyness and His Oneness.

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