**A Theory of Creation *Ex Deo***

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**Abstract**: The idea that God creates out of himself seems quite attractive. Many find great appeal in holding that a temporally finite universe must have a cause (say, God), but I think there’s also great appeal in holding that there’s pre-existent stuff out of which that universe is created—and what could that stuff be but part of God? Though attractive, the idea of creation ex deo hasn’t been taken seriously by theistic philosophers. Perhaps this is because it seems too vague—‘could anything enlightening be said about what those parts are?’—or objectionable—‘wouldn’t creating out of those parts lessen or destroy God?’ Drawing from Stephen Kosslyn and Michael Tye’s work on the ontology of mental images, I respond to the above questions by developing a theory on which God creates the universe out of his mental imagery.

**§1. Introduction**

Let’s call the following principle the ‘Efficient Cause Principle’ (ECP): necessarily, anything that begins to exist has an efficient cause of its existence. When we ask ‘who made the statue of David?’ we are asking for the statue’s efficient cause—which is, in this case, Michelangelo. The ECP is an appealing principle. Its plausibility motivates us to think that there’s also an efficient cause of the entire universe[[1]](#footnote-1)—supposing that the universe came into existence at some point in time. (This is essentially William Lane Craig’s (1991) influential Kalam Cosmological argument.) But in addition to an object’s efficient cause, we want to know what *pre-existent stuff* it’s made out of. From what did Michelangelo create the statue? This isn’t simply to ask what the statue is made out of *now*, but, more importantly, what matter Michelangelo acted on *before* the statue existed, out of which the statue was eventually made. Likewise, it’s appealing to hold that there not only must be an efficient cause of the universe, but also pre-existent stuff out of which the creator (say, God) created it. This gives us a ‘Pre-existent Stuff Principle’ (PSP) that is also quite attractive: necessarily, for anything that begins to exist, there is pre-existent stuff out of which it is made.

But the proclamation that God creates the universe ex *nihilo* is at odds with the PSP principle; and this presents a problem for the creation *ex nihilo view*. The first problem is simply that the PSP has (at least some) intuitive force, hence creation *ex nihilo* doesn’t sit comfortably with such an intuition. And a second (related) problem is that it seems *ad hoc* to insist on the truth of the ECP (as the Kalam argument does) while denying the PSP. As J.L. Mackie (1982: 94) explains: “there is *a priori* no good reason why a sheer origination of things, not determined by anything, should be unacceptable, whereas the existence of a god with the power to create something out of nothing is acceptable.” In other words, if something can’t come from nothing, then God shouldn’t be able to *create* something out of nothing.[[2]](#footnote-2) I believe these two reasons should give the theist reason to hope for a viable alternative to creation *ex nihilo*.

One alternative is to hold that God created the universe out of some stuff that was distinct from God. But this is a move unavailable to those Christians that agree with the Nicene Creed that God is the “creator of all things visible and invisible”. A remaining alternative is then to hold that God created out of *himself*—out of some stuff that makes up his being (is this compatible with the Nicene Creed? See section 3 for a defense of the affirmative). The point of this paper is to develop such a theory of creation *ex deo*. Part of the task of such a theory is to answer questions such as ‘out of what parts of himself did God create?’ and ‘if God creates out of himself, is God subsequently injured or are his functions inhibited due to a loss of those parts?’ Drawing from the work of Stephen Kosslyn and Michael Tye on the ontology of mental images, I respond by developing a theory on which God creates out of his mental imagery. Throughout the paper, I will assume the ECP, that the universe has a beginning and that God—some personal, omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being—is its efficient cause. In section 2, I spell out the PSP in more detail. In section 3, I look at problems for saying that God created out of pre-existent stuff— whether the stuff is part of himself or not. And in the subsequent sections, I present and develop a theory of creation *ex deo*.

**§2. The Pre-existent Stuff Principle**

The Pre-existent Stuff Principle tells us that, necessarily, for anything that comes into existence, it comes into existence out of some pre-existing stuff. To clarify the principle, start with the notion of ‘pre-existence’. Intuitively, the principle pushes us to think that there’s stuff that *precedes* the Big Bang in some sense. Yet even time itself started with the Big Bang; so we can’t straightforwardly say ‘there was a time before time began’. Instead, I will follow[[3]](#footnote-3) Alan Padgett (1992: 125-30) and assume that there is the familiar sort of time (‘Measured Time’) that we are governed by for which it makes sense to apply measure words like ‘second’, ‘hour’ and ‘year’, and yet a different sort of time that God experiences that transcends Measured Time. By making this distinction, we can agree that time (i.e. Measured Time) came into existence with the Big Bang, but nonetheless hold that there is a time (i.e. Non-Measured Time) before the Big Bang. I do not intend to delve any deeper into this issue, as it would detract from the point of the paper. But it’s important to notice that the same issue arises with the claim that God is the *efficient cause* of the universe—for we can’t literally say that God is a temporally pre-existing cause (at least when ‘temporally’ is understood in the Measured Time sense). So we might get around this issue by employing Padgett’s terminology: God pre-exists in the Non-Measured Time sense of ‘pre-exists’. If so, then the PSP would just add that there is some pre-existing stuff alongside the pre-existing efficient cause.

Second, the pre-existent *stuff* needn’t be spatial or physical. If the universe has a beginning, then the PSP would require that the pre-existent stuff is non-spatial and non-physical, since all of space and all physical objects came into existence with the universe. Again, this parallels the ECP: the ECP requires that the efficient cause of the universe be non-spatial and non-physical, since nothing spatial or physical existed prior to the beginning of the universe.

Finally, the notion of ‘being made out of’ pre-existent stuff is fairly clear. The house that was built at *t* is made out of mortar and bricks that existed before *t*. At the moment when the zygote comes into existence, it is made out of particles that were previously found in its parent sperm and egg. A necessary condition might be stated like this: *x* is made out of pre-existent *y*s at *t* only if (i) every part of *x* overlaps one of the *y*s at *t*, (ii) each one of the *y*s is a part of *x* at *t*, and (iii) each of the *y*s existed at the moment prior to *t*. The right-hand side might need more if we want it to be a sufficient condition for the left-hand side.[[4]](#footnote-4) But I take the notion to be intuitive enough to not require further analysis. (Notice that this condition requires tweaking depending on one’s view of persistence over time.[[5]](#footnote-5) )

The PSP is intuitively attractive. Of course it’s not irresistible. Richard Swinburne denies it and explains:

human beings do not have the power to bring matter into existence (given that we construe ‘matter’ in a wide sense which includes energy). It is, however, fairly easy to picture what it would be like for them to have such a power. If I could just by so choosing produce a sixth finger or a new fountain-pen (not made out of pre-existing matter) I would have the power to bring matter into existence. (1993: 142-3)

This, however, isn’t a very satisfying reason to reject the PSP. We don’t generally take the ability to picture something as implying its possibility.[[6]](#footnote-6) And if we did, then we would also have a simple reply to ECP: we can fairly easily picture what it is for something to come into existence without an efficient cause. Theists, especially those attracted to the Kalam argument, won’t find such reasoning attractive.

**§3. What Pre-existent Stuff?**

If God didn’t create *ex nihilo*, from what pre-existent stuff did he create?[[7]](#footnote-7) Two remaining options are to say either that God created it from some immaterial[[8]](#footnote-8) stuff that just happened to be lying around, or to say that God created it out of himself. But I will not pursue the former response in this paper because it is unappealing to many Christians due to their commitment to the Nicene Creed, which declares “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.” Thus by developing a theory of creation ex deo, we potentially have a theory that is available to believers in the Nicene Creed.

I appeal specifically to the Nicene Creed because it is a central profession of the Christian religion, and so is held by a large number of Christians. I do not have a general standard for deciding which historical claims Christians have made that should be preserved and which need not be. But, generally, the more central claims that can be preserved, the better; this is at the very least for the pragmatic reason that a larger amount of Christians would be unwilling to give up such claims and so wouldn’t adopt such a view. And I assume the Nicene Creed is a paradigmatic example of a central claim of Christianity. On this score, creation ex deo is better than creation out of uncreated stuff that is disjoint from God because (as I will argue) only the former is consistent with the Nicene Creed.[[9]](#footnote-9)

But is the Nicene Creed really incompatible with God creating out of such disjoint pre-existent stuff? Some take the creed to be compatible with there being Platonic abstract objects—like propositions or numbers—that are uncreated by God. Peter van Inwagen says that the “all things” in the creed doesn’t quantify unrestrictedly over everything: “The tacit restriction on the quantifier ‘all things’, I say, is this: its domain is restricted to objects that can enter into causal relations” (2009: 19). Since, according to van Inwagen, abstract objects don’t enter into causal relations, the creed doesn’t imply that there are no uncreated abstract objects. Similarly, Swinburne says that the creed should be understood to imply only that “there exists an omnipresent spirit who is the creator of all logically contingent things apart from himself” (1993: 130). Since prime numbers and propositions are logically necessary, the creed once again doesn’t imply that God is their creator. If abstract objects are immune from the creed, why not say the same for uncreated stuff that is disjoint from God?

My reason is that extending such immunity is unjustified. Swinburne’s reason for the restriction is that “such things which exist as a matter of logical necessity do not, we feel, exist in the hard real way in which tables, chairs, and people do. To say that they exist is not to give us any real information about how things are” (1993: 130). Swinburne could also include nonphysical beings such as God, angels and heaven on that list to make the same point; abstract objects don’t exist in the hard way that God, angels and heaven do, were such things to exist. Likewise, van Inwagen’s restriction seems justified because abstract objects don’t play that weighty role of entering into causal relations. The existence of stuff that is disjoint from God, on the other hand, is a completely different story. Such stuff *would* enter into causal relations— since God would interact with it to create the universe—and it *would* be just as real as the angels and heaven, were there such things.

For this reason it seems that if God created out of pre-existent stuff, and the Nicene Creed is right, the stuff would be part of himself. But does moving it into God’s own self really get us out of the creed problem? I think so. Even though the creed says that God is the creator “of all things visible *and invisible*” we should at least grant that God himself gets immunity from the claim—surely we’re not committed to claiming that God *created himself*. And if God has proper parts, I should think those parts would likewise be immune. So I don’t think the creed should be understood as quantifying over God or his parts.

There are *other* issues, however, concerning the claim that God created out of proper parts of himself. Some argue that God couldn’t have proper parts in the first place: things with proper parts are dissoluble, but God is not dissoluble (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.18.3), or things with proper parts depend on their proper parts, but God doesn’t depend on anything (e.g. Mann 1983: 268; Dolezal 2011: 71-2). However, these arguments seem to prove too much. If they are sound, then we have just as much reason to think that there is no distinction between God and his *properties*. For if the interlocutor should suppose that a being that has proper parts could either lose those parts or would depend on those parts, then she should also suppose that we have just as much reason to think that a being that instantiates properties—without being identical to those properties—could either lose those properties or would depend on those properties. And, furthermore, the interlocutor should likewise think that God couldn’t lose properties (since that would make God dissoluble) nor would God depend on properties. Thus, the interlocutor should think that God is *identical* to his properties. In fact, this is the further conclusion the above authors intend to draw (see Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles*: I.21-23; Mann 1983: 267-8; Dolezal 2011: 71-2). But many find that the claim that God is identical to his properties runs into deep conceptual problems. It seems to imply absurd claims such as: (i) God is a property and so not a person, (ii) God has only one property, (iii) God has only essential properties and (iv) God’s specific creative act was necessary and unfree (see, for example, Plantinga 1980: 35- 69; Hughes 1989: 21+37; Gale 1991: 23-9; Moreland and Craig 2003: 524-5; for discussion of (iv), see especially Kretzmann 1991; and Dolezal 2011: ch. 7). Those who are sympathetic with these objections will therefore have good reason to reject the claim that there is no distinction between God and his properties. And since the arguments against God having proper parts imply that there’s no distinction between God and his properties, they will also have good reason to reject those arguments themselves. (What premise should be denied? One could deny that having parts implies the possibility of losing those parts; one might also deny that God doesn’t depend upon anything.) Certainly there is far more to say in defense of the doctrine of divine simplicity and the arguments against distinctions within God. (See especially Stump and Kretzmann (1985), Vallicella (1992), O’Connor (1999) and Feser (2017, 191-6).) But these are further issues that I shall have to set aside here.[[10]](#footnote-10)

There’s another objection—I’ll call it the ‘Injury Problem’—that I think poses a larger problem for the claim that God creates out of his proper parts. The objection is this: if the xs are proper parts of God and God creates the universe out of the xs, then God loses whatever functions or features the xs conferred on God. And this would make God worse off or lessened. For instance, if Michelangelo created the statue of David not out of a block of marble, but out of the flesh and bone in his right foot, Michelangelo would no longer be able to walk as he once did. It would seem that something just as injurious to God would take place if he were to create out of himself. Perhaps we could reply that God creates out of parts that don’t really contribute to God’s properties or functions.[[11]](#footnote-11) But this response seems unappealing and ad hoc, for why did God have those parts in the first place and in what sense are they really parts of him if they don’t really serve any function? A different response is to say that God could heal himself—replace those parts from which he created the universe with new parts. But the problem (and the injury) would just be pushed back to where those parts were taken from.

Instead, I think the best way to reply is to say that even though God creates out of parts that are involved in God’s cognitive functioning, when those parts are materialized into the universe, they *continue* to be involved in that cognitive functioning. Of course, whether this response works depends on identifying what parts of God the universe is made out of. That’s the task I turn to next.

**§4. Made Out of the Image of God**

If God creates the universe out of some of his proper parts, which parts are they? I suggest that they are parts of his mental imagery. Suppose I ask you to imagine the statue of David. When you do so, it will seem as though a picture of the statue appears in your mind. This sort of experience seems to indicate that we have images projected onto a sort of canvas in our minds. (We will see Kosslyn and Tye’s accounts of what this ‘canvas’ is in the next section.) I want to say that God has something much like this in his mind as well—and, furthermore, that God creates out of it. When Michelangelo creates the statue, he has to create it out of something outside of his mind—for instance, a block of marble. But I say that God can create objects directly out of his mental imagery canvas without having to use any external materials. In this way, God not only creates the universe in *accordance* with how he represents it (as a mere blueprint), but he also creates the universe *out of* that mental representation. A rough analogy might help: if you have a sheet of paper instructing you how to make a paper airplane, you could take another piece of paper and fold it in accordance with the instructions. However, an alternative way of making the airplane is to take the instructions and make the airplane *out of that very piece of paper*, not using some other piece; in that way, you would make the airplane not only in accordance with but also *out of* the instructions.

Let me be a bit more specific here about what it is for God to create “out of” his mental imagery.[[12]](#footnote-12) We can suppose that God’s mental images are complete. Before creating the universe, God imagined it in full detail down to the smallest particles. Though humans might imagine objects only in two dimensions, there is no similar psychological restriction on God. God imagined the universe along all spatial dimensions. God’s imaging also wasn’t restricted to the universe’s visual appearance; it also included the universe’s sounds and smells, etc. (likewise for conscious beings, God imagines their thoughts and feelings). Now it’s important to notice, as J.J.C. Smart (1959: 151) has pointed out, that when we imagine something with a particular color, nothing inside of our mind is that color. Though Michelangelo imagined a grey, humanshaped statue made of marble, nothing in his mind was grey; nor was anything in his mind a human-shaped statue made of marble. We should therefore only say that Michelangelo’s image *represented* a statue with such-and-such properties without itself instantiating such properties.[[13]](#footnote-13) The same distinction holds for God’s mental image of the universe prior to creation: God’s mental image represented a universe full of stars and planets made out of mass-energy, but God’s mental imagery itself was not full of stars and planets made out of mass-energy. But on the current proposal, to say that God creates “out of” his mental imagery is to say that the distinction collapses—the image instantiates those properties that it had previously merely represented.

That’s the basic proposal—let’s call it ‘The Image’ view. By holding that God’s mental images *themselves* take on the properties they represent, The Image view gives us a way of preserving the idea that God created out of pre-existent stuff. But how does the view deal with the Injury Problem, which says that if God creates the universe out of proper parts of himself, then God loses the functions or properties associated with those parts? The response that The Image view now affords us is to deny that the parts from which God creates lose their role in God’s cognitive life. When God creates physical objects out of his mental images, the objects *continue to be God’s mental images*. When God creates the universe out of his mental image of the universe, the universe continues to be God’s mental image of the universe. God thereby remains uninjured by the process.

Could it really be that we are God’s mental images? It will help to notice that the idea bears resemblance to externalism about the mind. For instance, Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) have proposed that objects and processes outside of a human’s skull can be (and often are) part of one’s mind. As an intuition pump, they consider a fictitious case where one’s brain is hooked up to a game of Tetris. The hookup allows one to manipulate and rotate the falling blocks directly with one’s mind. As one plays the game, one could try to figure out how to position the blocks by mentally manipulating mental images within one’s head. But with the direct hookup, one could instead mentally manipulate the actual blocks in the game to do the same work. In so doing, as Clark and Chalmers claim, the blocks in the game will be just as much of a part of your mind as any purely mental image of the blocks you could have used. So there is independent plausibility to the idea that physical objects can serve as mental images.[[14]](#footnote-14),[[15]](#footnote-15)

Fred Adams and Ken Aizawa, however, find this externalism objectionable. They argue that mental cognition is essentially representational, yet the Tetris blocks aren’t representational in the right way—“they do not represent blocks to be fit together; they *are* the blocks to be fit together.” (2001: 54) Hence the blocks couldn’t be part of one’s mind. One could likewise object to The Image view in the same fashion: humans don’t represent humans; they *are* humans.

In response, I’m willing to grant that mental images are representational. But I don’t see this as reason to not count physical objects as mental images—why not say that physical objects represent themselves? There is, however, something intuitive to saying that ‘humans don’t represent humans; they *are* humans’. But this is only because the claim that ‘humans represent humans' isn’t usually *appropriate*, even if true. An analogy: a man introduces his wife saying ‘this is my friend’. Though the man hasn’t said anything false—the man and wife do very much enjoy being together—the wife seems reasonable to respond ‘I’m not his friend; I’m his wife!’ The woman’s objection isn’t to the truth of the label, but to its appropriateness in the context. Another analogy: I ask Jill if Jones is sad. Jill responds ‘he’s not sad; he’s depressed.’ Again, Jill isn’t denying that Jones is sad, she simply doesn’t think the label is appropriate in the context. I think the same can be said in terms of representations. Suppose we’re at a museum admiring the various statues on display. Pointing to a figure in the distance I ask ‘does that represent a human?’ You happen to recognize that the distant figure isn’t even a statue, but just another of the visitors to the museum. You reply, ‘that doesn’t represent a human; that *is* a human!’ This seems like the right thing to say. But I suggest that, like the other cases, it isn’t because we’re denying that objects self-represent. Instead, we’re just objecting to the appropriateness of the remark in the context.

**§5. The Ontology of God’s Mental Imagery**

How should we conceive of the nature of the ‘mental images’ that are in the mind of God? Surely God cannot create out of mental images *directly*, after all mental images are complex properties (or perhaps events) of minds, rather than substances themselves. So what is the underlying substance of the mental images out of which God creates? And, furthermore, I have been assuming a sort of picture-theory of mental imagery on which mental images are projected onto a canvas in our minds. But surely minds (whether human or divine) don’t *literally* have some canvas floating around within them. (Ryle (1959) also presents substantial philosophical challenges to the picture-theory. He argues that if we need a “mind’s eye” that views the canvas, that eye itself needs an inner canvas to represent that canvas, thus leading to a vicious infinite regress. Also, the picture-theory seems unable to account for vagueness in our mental imagery. However, it is outside of the scope of this paper to address these issues.[[16]](#footnote-16)) So many have found the picture-theory puzzling, instead seeking alternatives such as Pylyshyn’s (1973) linguistic-theory, on which mental imagery is much more like a linguistic description than a picture. But in this paper, I will instead draw from the quasi-picture theory—which maintains that mental imagery *is indeed* picture-like in some important sense—of Michael Tye (1988, 1991) and the cognitive scientist Stephen Kosslyn (1983).

Tye (1988: 508) summarizes Kosslyn’s view as this: “mental images exist in a medium that functions as a space; they are themselves functional pictures in this medium.” Kosslyn doesn’t want to say that the medium in which mental imagery exists is *literally* spatial, nor that the mental images are *literally* pictures. He claims only that they ‘function’ that way. In order to understand this idea, begin by considering the 3x3 matrix in Fig. 1.

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Fig. 1 A 3x3 matrix filled in with a plus-sign pattern.

Suppose 9 different people are shown the diagram and are each assigned a particular square to memorize. The information in the image is now stored in the group of people in the following way: suppose you later ask the people if square (1,1) is filled, in which case the person assigned to the square responds with either “filled” (if filled) or silence (if not). If you continue to do this for square (1,2), (1,3), (2,1), etc., you can reconstruct the pictured image. Kosslyn (1983, 23) claims that in this way the people—or their responses—form a functional picture. It’s *functional* because it doesn’t matter where these people are standing. The person assigned to (1,1) needn’t be standing next to the person assigned to (1,2), or above the person assigned to (2,1), in order for the information to be accurate. The person assigned to (1,1) could be standing very far away from the person assigned to (1,2), yet they still represent adjacent points in the matrix.[[17]](#footnote-17)

To further explain the underlying ontology, Tye says that the medium (that functions as a space) “consists of a large number of cells, each of which may be either filled or empty. Filled cells contain vectors of symbols; empty cells contain no symbols.” (1991: 91) The cells make up the functional space and the symbols of each cell are the representational properties that the cell instantiates—such as <being a representation of red>. Tye further clarifies that though he doesn’t take the medium to be identical to brain processes, it is nevertheless *constituted* by them. This is similar to how the statue of David is constituted by a hunk of marble without being identical to it (there are changes that David, but not the hunk, could survive) (ibid., 140).

We are now in position to use these tools to explicate The Image view. In answer to the initial question ‘what is the underlying substance of mental images out of which God creates the universe?’, the answer is ‘God’s mental imagery cells’. But, of course, not everything that Tye holds about the human mind can straightforwardly applied to God’s mind—afterall, God doesn’t have a physical brain. Hence, where Tye takes the mental medium (the aggregate of cells) for humans to be constituted by, but not identical to, brain processes, I take God’s mental medium to be neither identical to nor constituted by brain processes or any other process. I take God’s cells to be (at least prior to creation) non-physical, non-material and non-temporal (in the Measured Time sense of ‘temporal’) parts of God’s mind that instantiate representational properties and relations and aren’t constituted by anything further. That is the substance from which God can create the world. He then creates the world by ‘materializing’ cells: roughly put, he chooses some cells and endows those cells with the properties that they represent.

Let me now fill out the details of that rough sketch. Where Kosslyn and Tye take human mental imagery to be projected on a medium that functions as a two-dimensional space, I take God’s mental imagery to be projected onto a medium that functions as a modal space. That is, the space represents all possible worlds—including all the temporal and spatial relations between objects.[[18]](#footnote-18) (This needn’t imply that God is responsible for which worlds are possible.[[19]](#footnote-19)) We can think of it on analogy to David Lewis’ (1986) modal realism. Lewis claims that modal space is made up of a plenum of possible worlds, which he takes to be concrete maximally unified objects that are spatio-temporally unrelated to each other. Each of these worlds are a way the world could have been. So I say that God’s mental imagery corresponds to Lewis’ modal space—but God’s medium isn’t literally a modal space with concrete possible worlds, rather it functions as a modal space with parts that *function* as concrete possible worlds. We can put the point from a bottom-up perspective. For each spacetime point, there is a cell that represents it. Each such cell has representational properties that say what properties the cell is represented as instantiating—such as <being represented as having negative charge> or <being represented as having mass *m*>. Each cell will also have representational *relational* properties with other cells. Between any two cells that represent spacetime points, they will represent their spacetime points as either existing in the same world or not; and they will represent what temporal and spatial relations they have between them, if any. (For simplicity, I’m assuming that specifying the properties of individual spacetime points and the relations between them are enough to form and fully specify the functional modal space. But this assumption is dispensable.[[20]](#footnote-20)) Thus, when God ‘materializes’ the universe he chooses a functional possible world, and endows all and only the cells of that world with the properties that they represent. In this way, God creates the universe and all of its parts out of himself. And he avoids self-inflicted injury since the physical objects continue to function as part of God’s mental imagery.

To give further detail to how I’m envisioning the view, especially in terms of the persistence of objects, we can explain the view in perdurantist terms (though it could also be formulated in endurantist terms[[21]](#footnote-21)). Endurantism, which is often taken as the commonsense view, says that objects are “wholly present” at each moment at which they exist, whereas perdurantism holds that objects are spread out through time by having *temporal* parts. Thus, on perdurantism, much as I have spatial parts such as hands, a head, a torso, etc. none of which are identical to each other (and I am the whole that is composed of those parts), so I have temporal parts such as my 1-year-old self, my 2-year-old self, etc. none of which are identical to each other (and I am the whole that is composed of those temporal parts). We can combine perdurantism with The Image view by holding that one’s temporal parts are composed of spacetime points. Likewise, prior to creation, God’s mental imagery cells each represent one of the spacetime points that make up my 1-yearold self; those cells thereby jointly represent my 1-year-old temporal part.

As a point of clarification, notice that spacetime points, by their very nature, exist (that is, are materialized) for only a moment.[[22]](#footnote-22) Thus, at each moment, a new set of spacetime points exists which didn’t exist at previous moments—though they still existed in a non-material form in the mind of God. And since, on the current characterization of The Image view, the statue of David (to take a simple example) is composed of spacetime points, there’s a sense in which that statue is constantly being made out of things that just came into existence. But how is this compatible with the fact that the statue is made out of a block of marble that existed before the statue of David existed? The answer is this: David is *made out of* the block of marble because, after Michelangelo has formed the block into a statue, the space time points (and temporal parts) that make up the block also make up the statue—i.e. the statue and the block have the same temporal parts at that point in time; and still the block of marble *existed before* David did—at which time the statue (i.e. a temporal part of the statue) was made up of different spacetime points (for further discussion, see Heller (1984)).

**§6. Objections and Alterations**

I will now consider some objections aimed at The Image view; we will also see how the view can be modified to accommodate various views of free will, time and persistence. The first objection I will consider claims that the view is panentheistic in a way that Classical Theists will find problematic. Panentheism can be characterized as the view that the world exists *in* God or is a *proper part* of him—this is unlike pantheism in which the world *just is* God. But why should Classical Theists find panentheism, when characterized in this way, so troubling? (Afterall, Christian scripture seems to support it.[[23]](#footnote-23)) The reason is that champions of panentheism, such as Charles Hartshorne (1941: ch. 5), include much more in the idea of ‘panentheism’ than the above characterization. For not only does Hartshorne think the physical world is a part of God, but that it’s *necessarily* a part of God; that is, God couldn’t exist without there being a physical world in existence—God had no choice but to create. And it is on this very point that Classical Theists (such as William Alston (1989)[[24]](#footnote-24)) have criticized Hartshorne. If we understand panentheism as entailing this stronger claim, then The Image view does not entail panentheism. The Image view is compatible with God not materializing cells into a physical world at all. Creation would still be a free act of God.

There might be separate worries with respect to *human* free will though. I’ve said that when God creates, he chooses a functional possible world and materializes all and only the cells of that world. This view might seem predeterministic and unfriendly to human free will. If so, we can adopt a branching view (for details, see Ploug and Øhrstrøm (2012)) by replacing isolated functional possible worlds with worlds that are interconnected through functional branching timelines. The basic idea is to have various timelines, many or most of which branch in different directions. These branches represent open possibilities. Thus, in creating, God needn’t determine which functional timeline to materialize all by himself. Instead he allows human free will to play a role in determining which branches along the timeline are materialized.

Relatedly, the view can be adapted to either eternalism or presentism. Eternalism holds that not only do present objects—such as you and I—exist, but so do past and future ones—such as past dinosaurs and future colonies on Mars. Presentism, on the other hand, holds that only present objects exist. One might worry that my proposal that God’s mental imagery is projected on a medium that functions as a modal space (including each possible world’s entire history) is incompatible with presentism—since such timelines include times and objects that don’t exist in the present. But there is no conflict here since the timelines are only *functional* timelines, and so don’t imply that the past and future objects that are represented as existing actually exist. A similar move can also be made with respect to perdurantism (see the end of section 5 for more on perdurantism). For Presentism is normally thought to be incompatible with perdurantism since the latter implies that there are objects with non-present temporal parts and presentism implies that there are no non-present objects. Nevertheless, The Image view allows presentists to hold something similar to perdurantism: though objects don’t have non-present temporal parts, they have parts that *function* as non-present temporal parts. For instance, those cells of God’s mental imagery that represent my 1-year-old self and 2-year-old self are part of me; and this is consistent with presentism since those cells aren’t past objects; rather, they presently exist, and only *represent* past objects.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Another issue about persistence concerns whether The Image view requires that ordinary objects exist even before God creates the universe. For instance, if we adopt an eternalist perdurantist view, then the statue of David is just a sum of God’s mental cells; but since that sum exists before God creates the universe, then the statue of David would *also* exist before God creates (though the statue of David wouldn’t be physical, spatio-temporally located or even a statue). This line of thinking, however, can be resisted. Even if the statue of David is the sum of some xs, we needn’t say that that sum of the xs (or any other sum of the xs) exists before God creates. Instead we could say that God only *represents* those xs as composing a sum, and only at creation do they manage to compose anything. This is parallel to seeing some bricks lying around on the ground, envisioning them as a house, and then stacking them together to make a house. Just as the house only comes into existence after the bricks have been appropriately arranged, so the statue of David comes into existence only once the cells have been appropriately arranged (and materialized).

A separate issue concerns the ontology associated with the various mental states that come into and out of existence in God’s mind. When God decides to create the universe, would The Image view imply that a volition comes into existence? And when God actually creates the universe, would The Image view imply that God’s belief that there is a universe comes into existence? If so, wouldn’t these volitions and beliefs come into existence out of nothing, in violation of the PSP?

I don’t think there would be such a violation. God’s volitions and beliefs are either properties of or substances within God’s mind. If they are properties, then the problem doesn’t arise. The mere fact that an object gains new properties doesn’t entail that the object has new parts—I can be standing at one moment, then sitting at the next, without losing or gaining parts. But the idea that they are substances can also be accommodated: have them be made out of God’s mental imagery medium. God’s belief that there is a universe comes into existence out of a cell that has the property <being a representation of God’s belief that there is a universe>. And I think this is a natural move to make. When God imagines creating the universe, we can suppose he imagines *everything* that comes along with that—including the fact that he would gain the belief that there’s a universe. And if beliefs are substances, then God would envision the fact that he would have an object in his mind that is identical with that belief. Thus we can say that when God creates the universe by materializing some cells in his mind, he also materializes the cell that represents God’s belief that there’s a universe. (And the same approach can be taken, *mutatis mutandis*, with respect to God’s volitions.)

**§7. Conclusion**

The Image theory offers us a detailed and coherent account of creation ex deo. To the question ‘out of what parts of himself did God create?’, The Image theory answers ‘from the “cells” that make up God’s mental imagery’. And the nature and existence of such cells is motivated by the Kosslyn-Tye account of human mental imagery. To the question ‘wouldn’t creating out of God’s self reduce God’s abilities or functions in some way?’, The Image responds ‘the cells that God creates out of *continue* to play the same cognitive role in God’s mental life as they did prior to creation.’ We thus have a viable alternative to creation ex nihilo. The believer in God needn’t commit herself to the seemingly baffling claim that the universe was created without preexistent stuff from which it was made. God could just as well have created it out of himself.

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1. By "universe" I intend to include all of physical reality at least. Thus, if there's a multiverse, that would also be included. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One could reply that the 'something can't come from nothing' principle only implies that where there is nothing at all, nothing can arise. In which case, it doesn't imply that God can't create anything (since there would be something). But I worry that restricting the principle in that way doesn't really capture the intuitive judgment behind the 'something can't come from nothing' principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Craig (2001) for an alternative proposal. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Suppose (counter-possibly) that Michelangelo makes the statue of David ex nihilo—Michelangelo waved his hands and out of thin air popped the statue. The PSP is meant to rule out the possibility. But if conditions (i)-(iii) were sufficient for the left-hand side of the principle, there’s at least one metaphysical view that implies that Michelangelo *did in fact* create the statue out of pre-existent stuff. For instance, one might hold that there are objects that “shift” from one object to another. For example, this might imply that at one moment there is an object that coincides me (that is it is overlaps everything that I overlap and nothing more at that time), and at the next moment it “shifts” over by coincides my chair instead of me. If there are such shifty objects, we could say the following about the Michelangelo creating the statue of David ex nihilo example: there is an object such that it coincided Michelangelo before he created the statue and then shifted onto the statue by coinciding it when the statue came into existence. Such a shifty object would satisfy conditions (i)-(iii), but intuitively is not a case where Michelangelo created out of pre-existent stuff. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For instance, on perdurantism, objects persist over time by having temporal parts. (See the end of section 5 for more on perdurantism.) Thus, if a house is made out of pre-existent bricks at t1, then those bricks will have temporal parts that exist at t0. But since those bricks have t0 temporal parts, the bricks themselves aren’t part of the house—not every part of each of the bricks overlaps the house. So condition (ii) wouldn’t be fulfilled. (The perdurantist will also find the condition puzzling because of the ‘at t’ qualifiers; on perdurantism parthood is a two-place relation between an object and its part, not a three-place relation.) The perdurantist should prefer the condition: x is made out of pre-existent ys only if (a) every part of x overlaps one of the ys, (b) each one of the ys *overlaps* x, and (c) each of the ys has a temporal part that is temporally located at a time prior to x’s temporal location. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For instance, even if we suppose God is a necessary being, we can picture a world in which he does exist and picture one where he does not exist. But that’s not good reason to think that it’s both possible that God exists and possible that God does not exist; this is because God’s being a necessary being implies that it’s either necessary that he exists or necessary that he doesn’t. So we can’t hold that everything that we can picture or conceive of is possible. Nonetheless, conceivability may still be a good guide to possibility (see for instance Yablo (1993) and Menzies (1998)). So one might treat the ability to picture God creating something out of nothing as an indication of God’s ability to do so. (But, as I explain next above, this creates quite the tension for the Kalam defender who doesn’t want to likewise say that the ability to picture something coming into existence out of nothing is an indication of that possibility.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One suggestion that I am setting aside is that the universe is a sort of *emanation* from God’s being. Plotinus (see Gerson 2014) claims that the universe emanates from ‘the One’, which is an absolutely simple first principle of all. Plotinus thought the emanation was not a case of creation ex nihilo. Nor did he think that the universe came from parts of The One, since The One is without parts. I will set this suggestion aside, however, since I find the notion of a multiplicity emanating from something simple obscure. Instead, I will assume that the universe came from a multiplicity of pre-existent stuff. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. At least, if the universe (or multiverse) does in fact have a beginning, then the pre-existent stuff would have to be immaterial. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Divine simplicity might also be a rather central Christian claim, in which case the kind of creation ex deo will do worse than other views on that point—at least in the sense that it won’t appeal to those who are unwilling to give up on divine simplicity. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Forinstance, Tom Morris(1988: 164-9) givesreason to think that the argument for “property simplicity”— that there’s no distinction between God and his properties—should be rejected, whereas the argument for “spatial simplicity”—that God has no spatial parts—should be accepted. If this is true, then that seems to contradict my claim that the argument that God is partless also implies that he doesn’t have *properties* distinct from himself. Morris’ argument for God’s “spatial simplicity” is essentially this: if an object x’s spatial parts were destroyed, x would be destroyed as well; but it doesn’t follow that if x were destroyed, then so would its parts. (For instance, my table can be destroyed by hacking it to bits, but after the hacking, the bits of wood that composed the table would still exist.) Hence if an object has spatial parts, the object would indeed depend on those parts. But Morris eventually rejects his own argument for divine spatial simplicity (ibid.: 172). Furthermore, on the view of creation ex deo that I develop, we can see why the argument for spatial simplicity does not work because even if all the spatial parts of God were destroyed (i.e. the entire universe were destroyed) God would still exist unharmed. This is just because if the universe were destroyed, that just implies that those mental imagery cells that represented our universe are no longer materialized—they would be unmaterialized. And so the mental imagery cells would still exist and God would still be able to represent a universe with those cells. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Of course they would still confer on God properties like <having more parts than God would have had without them>, but this surely isn’t the relevant sort of property. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I give a more detailed account of the proposal at the end of section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Though this isn't the lesson Smart draws from it. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Though we might wonder: in the Tetris example, the gamer manipulates the blocks to figure out how to best position them. But God doesn’t manipulate us in the same way to figure out his plans (for instance, he doesn’t first physically move us around in different situations to see how we would act in those situations in the way we move tetris pieces around). Does this difference disallow us from saying that we are God’s mental images? I don’t think so. On the developed view that I present below, God needn’t manipulate us to figure out the possibilities since he has all the possibilities laid out in his mind already. We need to manipulate the images in our mind—place it in spot 1 on the Tetris wall, then the spot 2, then spot 3, etc. to see where the best fit is. But this is because it’s too difficult for us to mentally place the block in all of the spots all at once in our minds. God however doesn’t have the same limitation since he represents all of modal space all at once (this idea will be fleshed out more in the sections to come, especially section 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Putnam (1975) has also given semantic reasons for externalism about the mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Though see Tye (1991), especially section 2.1 for responses. Colin McGinn (2004) is one of the more recent philosophical contributions to the small literature on mental imagery, but the objections he presents to the picture theory are essentially the same as those that Tye considers. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Tye (1988: 503) for a detailed analysis of what it takes to be a functional (or ‘quasi-') picture. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It might be objected that these things don’t really function as *possible* worlds since they don’t contain, say, God in them. I’m not sure that this is a good reason to deny them the status of a functional possible world. In any case, one who objects to the ‘modal’ and ‘possible worlds’ labels could instead say that the objects function as ‘possible creations’ in ‘creation space’. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. It’s consistent with the view to hold that it’s out of God’s control whether a world is possible. If so, then whether God can materialize one of the functional worlds that he imagines will depend on what is independently possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For instance, we could instead have a version that parallels Schaffer’s (2010) monism. Fundamentally, the universe consists of a single all-encompassing cell (and perhaps it instantiates a representational distributional property, a la Parsons (2004)). And this fundamental cell grounds the existence and representational properties of the non-fundamental parts of the cell. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. To have an endurantist view, we could hold that, for each moment at which I exist, I am wholly composed of those spacetime points that I overlap at that time. Likewise, for each atom that is a part of me: for each time at which it exists, it is composed of the spacetime point(s) that it overlaps at that time. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Judith Jarvis Thompson (1983, 213) famously criticizes perdurantism for implying that there are things—i.e. temporal parts—that come into existence ex nihilo. But The Image view has a reply: the temporal parts don’t come into existence ex nihilo but are rather are made out of God’s mental imagery cells. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For instance, Acts 17:28 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Alston is also concerned to preserve what he calls ‘creation ex nihilo’ in that paper. But he clarifies that: “Whether "creation ex nihilo" is the best term for such a doctrine is not the basic issue. What is crucial is that we can combine the thesesthat(a) God’s not having done what isrequired in orderthat there be anything other than Himself is (was) a real possibility, and (b) the universe is temporally infinite.” And The Image view is compatible with (a) (even in conjunction with (b)). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. On Longenecker’s (2017) account, material objects have presently existing non-concrete parts that correspond to the Perdurantist’s past and future temporal parts. The Image view can supplement this view by identifying the non-concrete parts with cells in God’s mental imagery medium which instantiate representational properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)