

# Confessions - Book Xii - Chapter Xxix

by St. Augustine

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## Transcript

40. But he who understands "In the beginning he made" as if it meant, "At first he made," can truly interpret the phrase "heaven and earth" as referring only to the "matter" of heaven and earth, namely, of the prior universal, which is the intelligible and corporeal creation. For if he would try to interpret the phrase as applying to the universe already formed, it then might rightly be asked of him, "If God first made this, what then did he do afterward?" And, after the universe, he will find nothing. But then he must, however unwillingly, face the question, How is this the first if there is nothing afterward? But when he said that God made matter first formless and then formed, he is not being absurd if he is able to discern what precedes by eternity, and what proceeds in time; what comes from choice, and what comes from origin. In eternity, God is before all things; in the temporal process, the flower is before the fruit; in the act of choice, the fruit is before the flower; in the case of origin, sound is before the tune. Of these four relations, the first and last that I have referred to are understood with much difficulty. The second and third are very easily understood. For it is an uncommon and lofty vision, O Lord, to behold thy eternity immutably making mutable things, and thereby standing always before them. Whose mind is acute enough to be able, without great labor, to discover how the sound comes before the tune? For a tune is a formed sound; and an unformed thing may exist, but a thing that does not exist cannot be formed. In the same way, matter is prior to what is made from it. It is not prior because it makes its product, for it is itself made; and its priority is not that of a time interval. For in time we do not first utter formless sounds without singing and then adapt or fashion them into the form of a song, as wood or silver from which a chest or vessel is made. Such materials precede in time the forms of the things which are made from them. But in singing this is not so. For when a song is sung, its sound is heard at the same time. There is not first a formless sound, which afterward is formed into a song; but just as soon as it has sounded it passes away, and you cannot find anything of it which you could gather up and shape. Therefore, the song is absorbed in its own sound and the "sound" of the song is its "matter." But the sound is formed in order that it may be a tune. This is why, as I was saying, the matter of the sound is prior to the form of the tune. It is not "before" in the sense that it has any power of making a sound or tune. Nor is the sound itself the composer of the tune; rather, the sound is sent forth from the body and is ordered by the soul of the singer, so that from it he may form a tune. Nor is the sound first in time, for it is given forth together with the tune. Nor is it first in choice, because a sound is no better than a tune, since a tune is not merely a sound but a beautiful sound. But it is first in origin, because the tune is not formed in order that it may become a sound, but the sound is formed in order that it may become a tune.

From this example, let him who is able to understand see that the matter of things was first made and was called "heaven and earth" because out of it the heaven and earth were made. This primal formlessness

was not made first in time, because the form of things gives rise to time; but now, in time, it is intuited together with its form. And yet nothing can be related of this unformed matter unless it is regarded as if it were the first in the time series though the last in value--because things formed are certainly superior to things unformed--and it is preceded by the eternity of the Creator, so that from nothing there might be made that from which something might be made.

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