

# Mission Impossible? A Reply to Hud Hudson

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I plead the fifth on Tom Cruise, but I know this for certain: Hud Hudson is a stud. Everyone should read this book, just to say you've *had* the experience. Hudson, a first-rate philosopher, argues with Plantingan chutzpah that the most literal rendition of Adam's fall and original sin can be made entirely consistent with *everything* we know from mainstream science. The book is artfully conceived, analytically rich, and playfully witty—with memorable lines to boot, e.g., "Desert landscapes are bleak and depressing. The universe is lush. Always be prepared to pay in the currency of ontology. It is a good investment (134)".<sup>1</sup> Well said. Overall, I'm a fan of Hudson's latest monograph.

## Argument Reprise

At the heart of his argument lies the struggle between science and religion, the common sentiment that modern science—or *aspects* of said science—make particular religious doctrines increasingly difficult if not impossible to believe. The scientific pressures are perceived to be so overwhelming that in a head-to-head between science and religion, theologians fall back in retreat, waving their white flags, abandoning traditional creedal beliefs. But not so fast, for that is precisely where Hudson's voice interjects a welcome rejoinder, reminding us that most conflicts are false advertisements and should not be taken at face value. If we have a true conflict on our hands, he suggests, it is between competing *metaphysical* assumptions, *not* between science and theology per se. Suppose you have a widely-attested scientific theory that contradicts a major religious doctrine, what should you do? Revise the doctrine, or reject it entirely? Perhaps neither, replies Hudson. Perhaps the real conflict is metaphysical, and if you adjusted your metaphysical precommitments, the alleged conflict would vanish. Problem solved, mission accomplished.

To test out this thesis, Hudson takes on the conflict between the doctrine of original sin (including the fall)<sup>2</sup> and the claims of science (e.g., geology, paleoanthropology, evolutionary biology, etc.). Where does the "conflict" really lie?

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, page numbers in parentheses refer to Hudson's book.

<sup>2</sup> After critiquing Mike Rea's important defense of original guilt, Hudson concludes that he's unsure what to think about original guilt (chapter 4). He remains agnostic, hence his focus on the fall and original sin (i.e., original *corruption*).

Hudson relocates the conflict by adopting a different philosophy of time, i.e., the hypertime hypothesis. The argument itself is something of a thought exercise; while Hudson believes that metaphysical issues often underlie alleged science-religion conflicts, the hypertime hypothesis is merely *one* way of demonstrating this broader thesis (he never argues for the *truth* of hypertime, only that we don't know that it is false).

In order to understand hypertime, we need recourse to the Growing Universe Theory (what Hudson calls the Growing Block Theory):

The Growing Block Theory offers us a picture of the universe featuring a spacetime volume that increases as time passes. At any given moment exactly one time is special—the time associated with the hyperplane on the surface of the block in the direction of its growth. The outermost surface, so to speak, is the new kid on the block; it did not exist moments before, and, although it will continue to exist, it will not remain the outermost surface moments hence. (80)

But God is omnipotent. So we can imagine he has the power to add, or transfer, or destroy parts of this growing block. At any given moment, God could embed the present hyperplane into an entirely new block *and thereby change the past*. Or, by changing the location of a hyperplane, events that happened in the past could now become present; or, yet again, if God deletes parts of the growing block, the past would end up being different *before* compared to *after* his deletion. These are strange scenarios, to be sure, but the concept of “hypertime” offers an objective standard by which to measure such putative changes within the growing block. Hudson analyzes hypertime in fascinating and painstaking detail, though we cannot summarize here. Suffice it to say, with the metaphysical concept of hypertime in hand, Hudson erases the conflict between mainstream science and the doctrines of the fall and original sin. To quote him at some length:

In the beginning—perhaps not at the first hypertime, but at the first hypertime to contain a block universe—God created a spacetime and its contents whose earliest stages of growth witnessed the forming of a man from the dust of the ground, the planting of a garden into which he was placed, the adorning of that garden with trees and rivers, the imposition of a restriction on his diet, the presentation and naming of the animals, the extraction of a rib from and creation of a companion for him, the fateful discourse of a snake...and a rebellion that took the form of eating forbidden fruit. And, as the block grew, this once naked and innocent pair fashioned clothing, hid themselves and were found, confessed their disobedience, and received the heavy news of its consequences. Finally driven out of the garden, they and their world underwent a spectacular change.

At the hypermoment the pair exited the garden, say at Hypertime-10million, God annihilated every piece of the block save that region on its outermost edge thus occupied by these ancestors of ours and then

embedded that very region and its contents in a new block—a block sporting a several-billion-year history, replete with ice ages, long-dead hominids, dinosaurs, primordial soups, condensing matter, even a big bang.

In fact, their brave new world—the very block universe that is hyperpresent now—is remarkably accurately described in great detail by the many branches of contemporary science. Moreover, this special pair of our ancestors themselves had ancestors from whom they descended in precisely the manner taught by evolutionary biology. (190-91)

This book has plenty of interesting material for analytic philosophers (e.g., see especially chapters 7 and 8), but I will limit my remarks to matters of theological interest. I outline four specific concerns arising from the hypertime hypothesis, including 1) the skeptical problem, 2) the question of tradition, 3) the doctrine of God, and 4) the doctrine of Scripture. In my judgment, the specific application of hypertime to the doctrines of the fall and original sin fails. As a result, Hudson does not succeed in his main goal of showing that science-theology conflicts usually reflect unexamined metaphysical assumptions. I agree with him on the significance of metaphysical assumptions in putative conflicts between science and theology, but he has chosen a flawed test case. While the project ultimately fails, the book nonetheless deserves a wide reading; the argument is distinctive, exciting—audacious!—and there are illuminating insights throughout.

## Theological Concerns

The hypertime hypothesis, Hudson suggests, “is intriguing and powerful largely in virtue of what it adds to reality rather than in contesting what this or that subfield of science has to say about the local spacetime’s characteristics.” It renders the fall and original sin “consistent with almost any current feature or future development in the sciences” (28). But this seems too convenient. The theory of hypertime ends up doing too much work, becoming the panacea for all the theologian’s woes. Hudson is surely correct that the metaphysics of Scripture is underdetermined, but what do we make of hypertime and its application to the doctrine of original sin? For reasons that I explore below, I have some reservations.

Begin with an obvious question: will scientists find his argument convincing? Theologians who feel growing pressure to modify or abandon the doctrines of the fall and original sin—will *they* find his argument convincing? Unlikely, I think, given the *plausibility problem*.<sup>3</sup> Only a small percentage of Christians, past and present, will understand the theory. For most it will be too complex and metaphysically counterintuitive. The majority of believers will likely dismiss the argument for those

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<sup>3</sup> Granted, what matters isn’t whether scientists and theologians will find Hudson’s argument convincing, but rather, whether they *should* find the argument convincing. However, as I go on to argue below, I don’t think they should.

reasons. Hudson disagrees with this line of critique—“I think this attitude is in error” (115). The hypertime hypothesis works by undermining our fundamental intuitions about time. As a *skeptical* argument, it belongs to a larger family of “local skepticisms” in the history of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fair criticisms one might level at such skepticisms, Hudson argues at length that the hypertime hypothesis escapes all of them. Let’s grant him that, but why all the effort in establishing the epistemic possibility of hypertime? What’s the payoff?

Imagine this claim about two propositions, a scientific thesis and a theological confession:

‘It is metaphysically impossible that spacetime remains as it is in the actual world and that both propositions are true.’ But wait! ... [T]hat may depend on the dimensionality of the actual world. If we inhabit a non-hypertime world, the thesis may well be true, whereas, if we inhabit a hypertime world, the thesis may well be false ... (135)

The hypertime hypothesis enables us to be skeptical about our spacetime because for all we know the past may be completely different from what we think it is; that skepticism then enables the two propositions to be consistent after all. *That’s* the payoff. While those are not trivial gains, I still think most Christians who desire to reconcile the two propositions will find this local skepticism a pill too hard to swallow. If we may legitimately choose the hypertime option, that moment should be postponed until no other reconciling moves are available—a last resort (the nuclear option!). Hudson has not demonstrated we’re anywhere near that point.

More serious is the problem of the history of interpretation. No major Christian tradition ever adopted the metaphysical thesis Hudson is commending. Surely that’s a strike against his argument? But perhaps the metaphysics of time implicit in the traditional doctrines of the fall and original sin is underdetermined, in which case hypertime is a hypothesis as good as any other. Again, I’m doubtful, for it seems to me that the tradition’s assumptions about the fall and original sin *rule out* the hypertime version.<sup>5</sup> That’s why those doctrines occasioned a science-theology “conflict” in the first place. Hudson’s thesis implies that for virtually the entirety of church history, all Christians were fundamentally mistaken about those foundational events of the biblical narrative. It’s not impossible that Hudson has uncovered a truth that no church father imagined, but on the face of it, that seems implausible (but see his note on Origen, 192n5). Hudson may still respond: if earlier church fathers confessed the *same* substantive doctrines of the fall and original sin, is it not moot whether they knew the relevant metaphysical backstory? It’s the doctrinal *content*

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<sup>4</sup> Hudson distinguishes between “global” and “local” skepticism. Global skepticism claims that *all* our beliefs are threatened; local skepticism, less radically, is the view that only a specific subgroup of our beliefs are open to doubt. The hypertime hypothesis is a local skepticism about *time*—for detailed analysis, see chapter 6.

<sup>5</sup> Moreover, theologians have traditionally welcomed philosophy in a *ministerial* or “handmaiden” role. As a philosophically-driven hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture, should one worry that the hypertime hypothesis takes on a more *magisterial* and thereby problematic status—even if in the guise of a friend?

that matters, not the *metaphysical* scaffolding. As true as that may be, any escape route remains sealed off. The hypertime hypothesis implies that the church fathers confessed a *different* doctrine of the fall. For them, that event happened *historically*; given hypertime, it happened *hyperhistorically*—big difference.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from tradition, the hypertime hypothesis raises questions about God's character and the nature of biblical religion. Does the God of Hypertime resonate with the God we find revealed in creation, in Scripture, and preeminently in Jesus Christ? That's hard to say. If the hypertime thesis holds, then God seems to be deceptive. God's promises throughout Scripture assume the givenness of the past and God's action in the future (e.g., Ezek 36:26-27, Rom 8:1-2, and *passim*). Christianity is a historical religion marked by ongoing divine action within our space-time matrix; God's relationship to time is admittedly complex, but the idea that God changes the past is foreign to the biblical tradition. Moreover, that the past can change undercuts the urgency of the gospel—e.g., "But now [Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Heb 9:26-27); "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (cf. Josh 24:14-15).<sup>7</sup> On this side of the Eschaton, this time is all we have been given; arguably, the pathos of salvation implies that the past cannot change. Hudson's hypertime hypothesis is thus placed on the horns of a dilemma: either, God did not tinker with any segment of the spacetime block that spans redemptive history, in which case the thesis is left purely hypothetical and so rather trivial; or, God did (or will) make significant changes to the spacetime block at one or more key moments in redemptive history, leaving us worried that God is a deceiver.<sup>8</sup>

This particular line of inquiry brings to mind the nineteenth-century book, *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot* (London: John VanHoorst, 1857). The author was Philip Henry Gosse, an acclaimed naturalist and Fellow of the Royal Society. He was a keen proponent of nineteenth-century geology but was also fully committed to a literal, six-day interpretation of Genesis. He resolved the conflict by speculating that God created the world with the *appearance* of age. God created Adam miraculously without any human parents; on Day 1 he would have appeared as an adult—with a navel (Greek, *omphalos*). Gosse applied the same logic to the rest of the creaturely order. Some parts of God's creation imply processes that are a genuine index of organic, historical development within earth history—what he called "diachronic" processes. Other parts of creation, however, reveal "*unreal*

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<sup>6</sup> Recall that, according to Hudson's hypertime hypothesis, Adam's fall never happened given that God destroyed the relevant spacetime block. The scriptural events in the Garden of Eden were part of our history *before*—but not after—God changed the past (!). Since God obliterated the original spacetime block and replaced it with a several-billion-year evolutionary history, Adam's fall can only be said to have happened "hyperhistorically" not historically (the metric of hypertime allows Hudson to speak meaningfully of such events that once-existed-but-no-longer in the spacetime block). But, of course, the church fathers believed nothing of the sort; they took Adam's fall to be straightforwardly historical, a past event in human history.

<sup>7</sup> Scripture references here and elsewhere are from the New International Version © 1984.

<sup>8</sup> These matters are bound up with how one understands the nature of Scripture, an issue I address below.

developments whose *apparent* results are seen in the organism *at the moment of its creation*.”<sup>9</sup> Such processes are “prochronic” and only have the appearance of age. Significantly, science cannot in principle distinguish between diachronic and prochronic processes. Gosse’s synthesis, we might say, rendered creation “consistent with almost any current feature or future development in the sciences” (quoting Hudson, again). To his chagrin, however, Gosse’s labor of love was universally condemned in the scientific literature of the day. To cite one of many examples:

We have no hesitation in pronouncing this book to be the most important and best written that has yet appeared on the very interesting question with which it deals. We believe the logic of the book to be unanswerable, its postulates true, its laws fairly deduced, and the whole, considered as a play of metaphysical subtlety, absolutely complete; ... But the important question remains to be asked, whether, after all this display of logical subtlety, the world at large will believe one word of Mr. Gosse’s theory. We are confident, and so we think is Mr. Gosse, that they will not. ... From Berkeley’s day to the present hour, his theory of the non-existence of an external world has not gained a single convert; and we believe that Mr. Gosse’s theory of *Prochronism* ... will prove equally barren and unfruitful. They are idle speculations, fit only to please a philosopher in his hours of relaxation, but hardly worthy of the serious attention of any earnest man, whether scientific or not. ... We do not think that the cause of religion is served by these attempts to remove difficulties by metaphysical subtleties.<sup>10</sup>

Hudson’s thesis is obviously a different animal, more exotic and sophisticated, but it shares at least two features with the Omphalos theory. Both theories appear to be unfalsifiable; and they both embrace mainstream science while retaining as much of the biblical narrative as possible (metaphysically having your cake and eating it too). And perhaps one more shared feature: Gosse was repeatedly criticized for portraying God as a deceiver. The same might be said of the God of Hypertime, as I have tried to argue.

But *is* the hypertime hypothesis unfalsifiable? While it is generally true that Scripture is underdetermined metaphysically, in this case the biblical narrative raises difficulties for the thesis. Consider that Jesus and the Apostle Paul, on numerous occasions, refer back to Edenic events prior to the exile of Adam and Eve *as happening in history* (not hyperhistory). In Matt 19:11 (and Mark 10:1-9), for example, Jesus refers back to the original creation ordinance (Gen 1:27 and 2:24)—“But it was not this way from the beginning” (Matt 19:8). On two separate occasions, Paul invokes the first marriage in Gen 2:24 when giving marital advice (Eph 5:31) and when emphasizing the severity of sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:16). There are similar

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Henry Gosse, *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot* (London: John VanHoorst, 1857), 124-25, my emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> *The Natural History Review* 5 (1858): 55-60, cited in David J. Krause, “Apparent Age and Its Reception in the 19th Century,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 32 (1980): 149.

passages elsewhere (e.g., see 2 Cor 11:3 and 1 Tim 2:13-14). According to Hudson's thesis, however, those Edenic events *never* happened—they *hyper*happened. All this raises questions about the historical (and metaphysical) integrity of Scripture.<sup>11</sup> Jesus and Paul, *ex hypothesi*, knew nothing about hypertime; but then, why did they regularly, and rather unproblematically, display knowledge of primordial events in Eden that happened *prior to* Adam and Eve's exile? As one wise sage quipped, "you just cannot get hyperthen from here" (191). The hypertime hypothesis seems to unravel in light of the biblical witness to the sweep of redemptive history. I'm eager to see how Hudson will resolve this apparent discrepancy.

## Concluding Thoughts

Hudson's considered position on the fall and original sin is similar to that of Peter van Inwagen (see 42-54). He retains elements of the traditional doctrine but, in response to the scientific consensus, sheds the rest. He denies a single couple (monogenesis); he characterizes the origin of sin—its prehistory—as partly biological ("The causal history and transition mechanism for this lamentable condition is given partly by our genetic inheritance from untold ages of non-person ancestors fitfully living out brutish and painful lives in a world red in tooth and claw" [50]); and he concedes that these views are designed "to steer clear of theses that have been disproven by what we have come to learn of the nature of the world and its history in our modern age" (53). And, frankly, it shows; while the story retains conceptual overlap with the tradition, its overall shape feels different, accommodated as it is to the modern scientific narrative.

But recall that the argument of his book is that we need not accommodate doctrine to scientific interpretations with which it is in conflict. Given that Hudson's own view does just that, one might ask: Do we have a performative contradiction here? No, we don't. Hudson's main goal was to argue that metaphysics is usually the proper battleground in the dialogue between science and theology (on that score, his book is an ally to Al Plantinga's *Where the Conflict Really Lies*)—arguing a case he does not himself hold to is perfectly legitimate.<sup>12</sup> The real problem for Hudson is that he chose to test run this thesis by defending a fascinating-but-flawed metaphysical approach to time conjoined to the fall and original sin. In light of the four concerns I have raised above—especially my queries about the tradition, God, and Scripture—I think Hudson's hypertime iteration of these doctrines fails. If I'm right, his broader

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<sup>11</sup> I have related concerns about the *eschatological* integrity of the biblical story. The last two chapters of the canon assume specific realities and/or events from the first three chapters of Genesis—e.g., the tree of life (Rev 22:2, 14, 19); the curse broken forever (Rev 22:3); death no more (Rev 21:4); etc. Hudson's idea that God could have embedded the Adam-&-Eve-post-Edenic-exile hyperplane (Gen 3:24) into a new spacetime block seems to destabilize redemptive history.

<sup>12</sup> However, I suspect the hypertime thesis would have had more *rhetorical* force if Hudson actually believed it.

thesis, a thesis that I find quite plausible, does not get off the ground (at least, not in this book<sup>13</sup>).

If I'm wrong, then all bets are off, in which case it is possible the Lord will annihilate all the smallish, proper subregions of the inner-hyperplanes in which I am reading his book and writing this doomed review<sup>14</sup>—condemning this essay to the dustbins of hypertime, with Hudson none the wiser. Ignorance is bliss.

## Bibliography

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<sup>13</sup> Hudson has defended his broader thesis with reference to other religious doctrines; e.g., see his "Philosophical Contributions to the Dialogue between Science and Religion," *Euresis Journal* 1.1 (2011): 59-75.

<sup>14</sup> I cribbed the wording from Hudson: "Recall that a morphing block can masquerade as a growing block and, then, quietly annihilate smallish, proper subregions of inner-hyperplanes ..." (85).