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ARTICLE

'Paul and "Prepositional Metaphysics": A Brief Response to George H. van Kooten'

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Abstract

George H. van Kooten has recently argued that Paul's use of 'from him/whom' language with reference to God the father in Romans 11.36 and 1 Corinthians 8.6, in light of the semi-technical use of this prepositional formula in the Greek metaphysical traditions, indicates that God/the father is a material cause. And this coheres, so van Kooten further argues, with other indications that Paul's metaphysic is fundamentally Stoic. This article focuses on van Kooten's claim that Paul's use of 'from him/whom' language with reference to God the father indicates that the latter is, for Paul, a material cause. In this regard, van Kooten has mistranslated and misconstrued key data both in the ancient metaphysical traditions and in Paul and also committed the genealogical fallacy: taking individual lexemes, formulas and/or tropes to suggest that the entire metaphysical construct of one of the earlier philosophical schools (in this case, Stoicism) from which they derive should wholly govern their interpretation in a much later and different text.

Keywords: Paul and philosophy; Pauline metaphysics; prepositional metaphysics; George H van Kooten.

> ['Prepositional Metaphysics' is] an unfortunate term, not only because it implies that a certain type of metaphysics is involved (rather than a certain language for referring to causes), but also because it suggests in any case that there is some doctrine, or line of influence, or rigid aetiological scheme to be inferred from the use of this idiom… But it is just an idiom – one with roots in the aetiological language of Plato (see *Tim.* 28a–30c…) and Aristotle (e.g. *Metaph.* 1032a12–25…).[1,2]

In his characteristically stimulating and wide-ranging essay, 'Mind the (Ontological) Gap! The Collateral Loss of the Pauline-Stoic Creation "From God" in the Joint Attack of the Arian-Nicene Creation "From Nothing" on the Platonic Creation "From Disorderly Matter"', George H. van Kooten argues 'that Paul's own cosmology is deeply Stoic…[and that this] becomes clear in his use of so-called "prepositional metaphysics", in which – in line with Stoic theology and physics – God is seen as the one "from whom" "through

[1] Thanks go to the anonymous reviewers for making this a stronger piece than it might have been.

[2] George Boys-Stones, *Platonist Philosophy 80 BC to AD 250: An Introduction and Collection of Sources in Translation* (CSBPHP; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 89.The phrase seems to have been coined by Willy Theiler, *Die Vorbereitung des Neuplatonismus* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1964) 17–34.

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whom" and "into whom" all things develop'.[3] In this essay, I will demonstrate that van Kooten has misconstrued the relevant data and also failed to appreciate the ways in which, whatever metaphysical work these prepositions are doing in Paul's metaphysics, theology, Christology, etc., they are not doing precisely the same work as they seem to be doing in the metaphysical traditions from which they ultimately derive.[4] And this is why we must carefully heed the warning of Boys-Stones with which we began.

In any case, let us start with what van Kooten gets right. The combined ascription of 'from whom/him' and 'to whom/him' to the same (active) cause in 1 Corinthians 8.6 and Romans 11.36 (cf, Col. 1.15–16) resonates with the monism of the Stoic tradition.

1 Corinthians 8.6: ἀλλ' ἡμῖν εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ
ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς **εἰς αὐτόν**,
καὶ εἷς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς
δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς δι' αὐτοῦ.

Romans 11.36: ὅτι **ἐξ αὐτοῦ** καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ **εἰς αὐτὸν** τὰ πάντα.

The closest parallel to this particular Pauline formulation comes from the famous Stoic philosopher-emperor, Marcus Aurelius:

Meditations 4.23: **ἐκ σοῦ** πάντα, ἐν σοὶ πάντα, **εἰς σὲ** πάντα.

The manner of expressing metaphysical causation by way of prepositional shorthand goes back particularly to Plato and Aristotle, the latter of which had postulated four causes (the material [τὸ ἐξ οὗ], the formal [τὸ εἶδος ἢ τὸ παράδειγμα], the efficient [ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς μεταβολῆς ἡ πρώτη ἢ τῆς ἠρεμήσεως] and the final [τὸ οὗ ἕνεκα]),[5] in addition to which Plato had famously postulated a fifth: the paradigmatic ideal (τὸ πρός ὅ) with reference to which something is made. This idiom was also well known in Paul's day, as can be

[3] George H. van Kooten, 'Mind the (Ontological) Gap! The Collateral Loss of the Pauline-Stoic Creation "From God" in the Joint Attack of the Arian-Nicene Creation "From Nothing" on the Platonic Creation "From Disorderly Matter"', *From Protology to Eschatology and Back Again: Views on the Origin and the End of the Cosmos in Platonism and Christian Thought* (ed. Geert Roskam, Gerd Van Riel and Jos Verheyden; STAC; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022) 161–231, at 171. I note my deep appreciation of Prof. van Kooten's work, which continues to set the agenda for so many of us.

[4] On the use of prepositional shorthand to articulate metaphysical causation in the philosophical traditions, ancient Judaism and early Christianity see esp. Chris Kugler, '"Judaism/Hellenism" in Early Christology: Prepositional Metaphysics and Middle Platonic Intermediary Doctrine', *JSNT* 43.2 (2020) 214–25; Orrey McFarland, 'Divine Causation and Prepositional Metaphysics in Philo of Alexandria and the Apostle Paul', *Paul and the Greco-Roman Philosophical Tradition* (ed. J.R. Dodson and A.W. Pitts; LNTS 527; London: Bloomsbury, 2017) 117–33; idem., 'Philo's Prepositional Metaphysics within Early Christian Debates about the Relation of Divine Nature and Agency', *SPhilA* 27 (2015) 87–109; and Gregory Sterling, 'Prepositional Metaphysics in Jewish Wisdom Speculation and Early Christian Liturgical Texts', *SPhilA* 9 (1997) 219–38. Though this will not be the focus of this essay, van Kooten, 'Mind the (Ontological) Gap!', 178, wrongly infers, almost solely on the basis of Paul's use of 'into God/him' (εἰς αὐτόν) language in 1 Corinthians 8.6 and Romans 11.36, that 'at least so far as Paul is concerned, it is incorrect to say that the Christian understanding of time is linear; his understanding of time is cyclical, in the sense that the cosmos returns to its beginning – to God'. Paul indeed thinks in terms of a teleology in which the *eschatos* of a Spirit-filled, resurrected, and glorified humanity patterned after the image of the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and glorified son is the *telos* toward which the *prōtos* of Genesis 1.26 was always pointing. But this is not the same thing as saying that Paul envisages the *eschatos* as a simple cyclical return to the *prōtos*. On this teleological dynamic in Paul's thought, see e.g. Chris Kugler, 'Adam and Christ' and 'Creation and New Creation', *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (2nd edn; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2023) 8–11, 212–14.

[5] See Aristotle, *Phys.* 2.3–9; *Metaph.* 1.3.1; and 5.2.1–3.

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seen by its use in Alcinous' *Handbook of Platonism*, Seneca's *Epistles*, Philo's writings and, of course, in Paul himself (esp. 1 Cor. 8.6; and Rom. 11.36; cf. Col. 1.15–17/cf. John 1.3, 10; and Heb. 1.2).

> If the world is not such as it is by accident, it has not only been generated from something (ἔκ τινος), but also by something (or someone) (ὑπό τινος), and not only this, but also with reference to something (πρός τι). But what could that with reference to which it is generate be other than form (ἰδέα)? So forms (αἱ ἰδέαι) exist.[6]

> Accordingly, there must be, in the case of each thing, that 'from which' it is made (*unde fiat aliquid*), and, next, an agent 'by which' it is made (*deinde a quo fiat*). The former is its material, the latter its cause [the Stoic position].[7]

> Accordingly, there are five causes, as Plato says: that 'from which' (*id ex quo*), that 'by which' (*id a quo*), that 'in which' (*id in quo*), that 'toward which' (*id ad quod*), and that 'for which' (*id propter quod*) [the Platonic position].[8]

> For to bring anything into being needs all these conjointly, the 'by which' (τὸ ὑφ' οὗ), the 'from which' (τὸ ἐξ οὗ), the 'through which' (τὸ δι' οὗ), and the 'for which' (τὸ δι' ὅ).[9]

The point I want to make here is that in none of these cases does the 'from which' formulation denote the active cause but always the passive material cause. Thus, although it is true that in Stoicism the active divine cause is material, the 'from which' formulation does not seem to have been a way of referring to this active cause.

But what of the two closest parallels van Kooten highlights in this connection? Pseudo-Aristotle, *On the Cosmos* 397b14–15: 'All things are from God (ὡς ἐκ θεοῦ πάντα) and are for our sake held together by God (καὶ διὰ θεοῦ ἡμῖν συνέστηκεν).'[10]

> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.23: 'ἐκ σοῦ πάντα, ἐν σοὶ πάντα, εἰς σὲ πάντα'.

Before we jump to the conclusion that the 'from God' formulation of Pseudo-Aristotle, *On the Cosmos* 397b14–15 necessarily indicates that the active divine cause is also *material* (*à la* Stoic materialism) – as one might suspect on the basis of the use of 'from which' language in Alcinous, Seneca, and Philo (above) – we should remember that in these traditions the 'from which' language never denotes the active divine cause, and we should also note Pseudo-Aristotle's strong Middle Platonic emphasis on the transcendence of the first principle (*On the Cosmos* 400b):

> In a word then, as the helmsman in his ship, as the charioteer in his chariot, as the leader in a chorus, as the lawgiver in a city, as the commander in a military camp, so is God in the cosmos, except that their command is wearisome and fraught with many movements and cares, while God rules without pain and toil, free from all bodily weakness: for he is established in the immovable, and moves and directs all things as

[6] Alcinous, *The Handbook of Platonism* (trans. and ed. John Dillon; CLAP; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), *Ep.* 9.3 (p. 16).

[7] Seneca, *Ep.* 65.2, (Gummere, LCL).

[8] Seneca, *Ep.* 65.8 (Gummere, LCL, slightly revised).

[9] Philo, *Cher.* 125 (Colson and Whitaker, LCL).

[10] (E.S. Forster and D.J. Furley, LCL, slightly revised).

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> and where he wishes, among the varieties of form and nature (τῷ δὲ ἄλυπον ἄπονόν τε καὶ πάσης κεχωρισμένος σωματικῆς ἀσθενείας· ἐν ἀκινήτῳ γὰρ ἱδρυμένος πάντα κινεῖ καὶ περιάγει).[11]

That the active divine principle is 'free from all bodily weakness' and 'established in the immovable' strongly suggests that it is also incorporeal and thus immaterial (*à la* Middle Platonism).

Moreover, when we consider the wider context of Marcus Aurelius' statement in *Meditations* 4.23, we see that neither in this text is the 'from you/God' language designed to signal the materiality of the active divine cause. In other words, though Stoics – and Marcus Aurelius no less – took the materiality of the active divine principle for granted, the prepositional formulations of 'from you/whom/which/God' and 'to you/whom/which/God' do not seem designed to make *that* point.

> All that is in tune with thee, O Universe, is in tune with me! Nothing that is in due time for thee is too early or too late for me! All that thy seasons bring, O Nature, is fruit for me! All things come from thee, subsist in thee, go back to thee (ἐκ σοῦ πάντα, ἐν σοὶ πάντα, εἰς σὲ πάντα).[12]

Rather, the force of the final formulation is to emphasise the monistic unity of the Stoic view of the cyclical nature of reality/time. And this, indeed, is how Philo understands it. As a part of his allegorical interpretation of the meaning of the sacrificial division of animals' limbs, Philo writes:

> The division of the animal into its limbs indicates either that all things are one or that they come from and return to one, an alternation which is called by some Fullness and Want, by others a General Conflagration and Reconstruction (ὅτι ἐξ ἑνός τε καὶ εἰς ἕν, ὅπερ οἱ μὲν κόρον καὶ χρησμοσύνην ἐκάλεσαν, οἱ δ' ἐκπύρωσιν καὶ διακόσμησιν), the Conflagration being the state when the supremacy of heat has prevailed over the rest, the Reconstruction when the four elements, by concession to each other, obtain equilibrium.[13]

In other words, Philo is aware of the 'from whom/which' and 'back to whom/which' idiom as a way of referring to the monistic unity of the cyclical nature of Stoic physics (i.e. 'Conflagration'– 'Reconstruction' – 'Conflagration' – 'Reconstruction' *ad infinitum*).

Beyond this, one should also note a crucial and too little appreciated distinction between the famous statement of Marcus Aurelius above and the similar but different formulations of Paul in Romans 11.36 and 1 Corinthians 8.6. Paul speaks of the divine causal agent(s) 'from', '*through*', and 'to' whom, whereas Marcus Aurelius, in good Stoic-pantheistic fashion, speaks of the single divine causal agent 'from', '*in*', and 'to' whom. 'In you/whom/God' is appropriate to Stoic pantheism, whereas the Middle Platonic intermediary language of 'through whom' derives from the metaphysical insistence upon the distinction between the first causal principle and created reality, something that is out of place in Stoic monism. But van Kooten misses the point first by unwittingly mistranslating a metaphysical statement that Diogenes Laertius attributes to Zeno and then by equating this misinterpretation with the Middle Platonic formulation of Philo:

[11] (E.S. Forster and D.J. Furley, LCL).
[12] (C.R. Haines, LCL).
[13] Philo, *Spec.* 1.208 (F.H. Colson, LCL).

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> According to the Stoic view, God or Zeus (Δία) is the cause 'through which' [*sic*] (δι' ὅν) all things have been generated by pervading 'through all things' (διὰ πάντων)…
>
> 'For they call him Zeus (Δία) as the cause (δι' ὃν) through which [*sic*] all things are (Δία μὲν γάρ φασι δι' ὃν τὰ πάντα)' (SVF 2,1021 *apud* Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7,147 = LS 54A; transl. LS, with minor changes). We also find this view expressed in Philo, according to whom 'the Logos' is that 'through which (δι' οὗ) the whole cosmos was created (λόγος […], δι' οὗ σύμπας ὁ κόσμος ἐδημιουργεῖτο)' (Philo, *On the Special Laws* 1,81).[14]

As one can see, Diogenes Laertius reports Zeno as having spoken of the causal agent '*because* of which' (δι' ὅν/final cause) are all things and not, as in Philo's Middle Platonic intermediary formulation, the causal agent '*through* which' (δι' οὗ) are all things.[15]

Let us, then, finally come to Paul. What are we to make of 1 Corinthians 8.6 and Romans 11.36?

> 1 Corinthians 8.6: ἀλλ' ἡμῖν εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ
> ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν,
> καὶ εἷς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς
> δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς δι' αὐτοῦ.
>
> Romans 11.36: ὅτι ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν τὰ πάντα.

We have already determined that there is no good reason to conclude on the basis of Paul's use of 'from whom/him' language for the active divine cause, God the Father, that he intends hereby to express the latter's corporeality/materiality. But nor does this of itself answer the question as to what Paul did or did not think about divine ontology (immaterial/material/underdetermined). It only rules out 'from whom/him' language as an obvious indication of his view. For Paul, ascribing 'from whom/him' and 'to whom/him' language to God the Father was, not unlike the Stoic formulations in Pseudo-Aristotle, *On the Cosmos* 397b14–15 and Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.23, a way of saying that all of reality and history, its origins and teleological ends, are ultimately dependent upon one divine causal agent.

But what are we to make, then, of the use of the Middle Platonic intermediary formulation 'through whom/him'? In 1 Corinthians 8.6, this language refers to Jesus the Messiah, a fact that could be taken to indicate that, as in typical Middle Platonic hierarchical metaphysics, Paul regards Jesus the Messiah (the intermediary causal agent) as slightly ontologically inferior to God the Father (the first principle), Jesus' intermediary activity serving precisely to safeguard God the Father from direct commerce with created reality. But Paul's use of the intermediary formulation in Romans 11.36 to refer indiscriminately to 'God' suggests that this is unlikely to be the reason he has made use of it.

[14] van Kooten, 'Mind the (Ontological) Gap!', 173–4, who admits to making 'minor changes' to R.D. Hicks, LCL, at Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.147, the latter of whom had translated thus: 'They give the name Dia (Δία) because all things are due to (διά) him.' In other words, Hicks recognises that this is διά with the accusative rather than with the genitive, the latter of which formulations could be taken to refer to intermediary agency. See also ibid., 174, where van Kooten takes 'διὰ θεοῦ' (genitive construction) in Pseudo-Aristotle, *On the Cosmos* 397b14–15 as though it were 'διὰ θεὸν' (accusative construction).

[15] In this connection, ibid., 174, notes Sterling, 'Prepositional Metaphysics', 227, who is correct on this point: 'According to Gregory Sterling, however, the preposition "through" should be taken not so much in a Stoic sense, but in a Platonic sense.'

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The best angle of vision on why Paul made theological and Christological use of this metaphysical idiom and in this way, I suggest, comes from appreciating two facts. (1) Cosmogonical activity was the clearest marker of divinity in Second Temple Judaism: only the one God (and/or his wisdom/word) creates the *kosmos*.[16] (2) Some early Christian traditions (John 1.1–18; 1 Cor. 8.6; Col. 1.15–20; and Heb. 1.1–6) wanted to include the pre-existent Jesus in their Jewish-monotheistic cosmogony, but not as an intermediate being (*à la* hierarchical Middle Platonism) whose primary function was to safeguard the transcendence of the first principle (God the Father). Point (2) ran the risk of collapsing the distinction – equally important to these same early Christian traditions – between the Father and the Son. Therefore, the intermediary formulation 'through whom/him' (John 1.3, 10; 1 Cor. 8.6; Col. 1.16–17; and Heb. 1.2) was chosen so as to make a distinction *within* this Jewish-monotheistic cosmogony, but *not* so as to express the slight ontological inferiority of the intermediary principle, and thereby to safeguard the transcendence of the originating principle. After all, again Paul can refer indiscriminately to 'God' as the one 'through whom' are all things (Rom. 11.36; cf. Heb. 1.2 with 2.10).

In conclusion, then, my contention is that van Kooten has misconstrued key pieces of data relating to the use and implications of this metaphysical idiom in the relevant philosophical traditions and in Paul. (1) There is no evidence to suggest that Paul's use of 'from whom/him' language for God the Father necessarily signalled the materiality of the latter. (2) Van Kooten unwittingly mistranslated the 'because of which' (δι' ὅν) formulation that Diogenes Laertius attributed to Zeno the Stoic (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.147), mistaking a formulation about the final cause for a formulation about the intermediary cause, and then he equated this misinterpretation with Philo's properly Middle Platonic formulation in *Spec.* 1.81 ('through which'/δι' οὗ). (3) And, finally, van Kooten appropriated these misunderstandings in a reading of 1 Corinthians 8.6 and Romans 11.36 in particular and of Paul's metaphysics in general.

Finally, I cite a statement of Michael Frede's with a few comments.

> It seems that Sulla's conquest of Athens in 87 BC had a devastating effect on philosophy in Athens… The consequences of this are easy to see. The diffusion of philosophers and the emergence of a variety of centres of philosophical study encouraged a proliferation of philosophical positions, fostered separate and independent developments, and undermined the unity of the position of the school… This goes some way to explain the absence of clear contours in the history of the philosophy done in the period from 125 BC to 250 AD.[17]

The point here is that when teasing out the metaphysical presuppositions and articulations of figures like (e.g.) Alcinous, Pseudo-Aristotle, Seneca, Philo and Paul – not least in Paul's day, well over a century after Sulla's conquest of Athens – we have to beware of the tempting genealogical fallacy. That is, we have to beware of assuming that the metaphysical function of a particular lexeme, formulation, trope, etc. is doing precisely the same work in a text from the first century CE as it was doing in the earlier school formulations of Plato, Aristotle, Zeno and/or Chrysippus. In other words, by paying careful attention to all of the evidence

[16] On this, see esp. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies in the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009 [2008]) 8–11, 26–31; and Chris Kugler, *Paul and the Image of God* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020) 31–60.

[17] Michael Frede, 'Epilogue', *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (ed. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld and Malcolm Schofield; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 790, 792.

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available to us, we have to try to let authors construct the metaphysic they seem to want to construct, rather than to take single lexemes, formulations or tropes as genealogical evidence that an entire metaphysical construct from one of the earlier schools should wholly govern our reading of a later author/text.

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