

A Review of Paul Helm's *Eternal God*

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SUMMARY

Paul Helm's *Eternal God* is an important defense of the construal of divine eternity as timeless. I show that Helm's construal presupposes a tenseless (or B-Theory) of time without sufficient justification.

A REVIEW OF PAUL HELM'S ETERNAL GOD

Writing in the spirit of Jonathan Edwards, Helm provides a philosophical defense of the coherence and plausibility of the view that God is a timeless, omniscient being whose existence is logically inconsistent with libertarian freedom in any of His creatures. As the title of the book suggests, the fulcrum of Helm's case is his defense of divine timelessness.

Biblical scholars may shake their heads at the prospect of anyone's construing the biblical notion of divine eternity in terms of timelessness, rather than omnitemporality. But in chapter 1, "The Issue of Divine Eternity," Helm argues very persuasively that the biblical writers neither accepted nor rejected the idea of divine timelessness, since they lacked a "reflective context" in which this question needed to be addressed at all. The biblical writers consistently *speak* of God as in time, but, Helm quite correctly points out, they with equal consistency speak of God as in space, too, and yet the vast majority of theologians and philosophers do not construe divine omnipresence as God's being spatially extended, but consider Him as transcending space. Helm contends that we ought analogously to construe divine eternity as timelessness because this doctrine, by guaranteeing divine immutability, offers the necessary metaphysical underpinning for God's functioning as the biblical God. To carry his case, then, Helm must show not merely that divine timelessness is logically coherent, but that there are good reasons to embrace the doctrine.

Unfortunately, much of Helm's discussion of the coherence of divine timelessness is undermined by his failure to do the necessary, preliminary spadework concerning certain key issues in the philosophy of space and time; for example, an adjudication of the objectivity of temporal becoming and the ontological status of the future. His discussion of "Omniscience and the Future" in chapter 7 suggests that Helm wants to hold to a so-called A-theory of time, according to which the future is unreal and objective becoming exists. But his arguments for the coherence of divine timelessness seem to presuppose a B-theory of time, according to which all events--past, present, and future--are equally real and what exists "now" is purely a relative matter of subjective consciousness.

For example, his handling of tensed sentences and temporal indexicals in chapter 3 "Indexicals and Spacelessness" and chapter 5 "Eternity, Immutability and Omniscience" is B-theoretic in nature. He

endorses D. H. Mellor's proposal for specifying tenseless truth conditions of tensed sentences and treats indexicals like "now" not as tensed expressions, but as the analogues of spatial indexicals like "here." He also regards the temporal distinction between past and future as analogous to the spatial distinction between before and behind.

In chapter 4 "Eternity and Personality," after effectively refuting objections that a timeless being cannot be personal based on considerations of memory, purpose, and knowledge, Helm proposes to solve the objection that a timeless being could not causally create a universe which unfolds serially in time by asserting that the universe as a whole does not exist in time and that God produces the whole universe, the entire temporal matrix, by a single, timeless act of causality, rather than producing each event by a separate exercise of causality (cf. p. 27). This solution is coherent, I think, but only if one assumes a B-theory of time, which Helm never discusses nor justifies.

In any case, why regard God as timeless? Helm argues cogently, it seems to me, that only if God is timeless can He be immutable in a very strong sense. But I do not see that Helm provides any warrant for adopting so strong a doctrine of immutability in preference to less stringent formulations of that doctrine. Helm also asserts that only a timeless God can know the world's future (p. 94), but the reader will search in vain for any argument why a temporal God cannot know the future, especially if He has, as Helm believes, decreed everything that shall happen. In short, Helm's case for embracing divine timelessness is disappointingly weak.

Chapters 6-8 elaborate the theme of God's knowledge of future contingents. Unfortunately, his discussion seems quite confused and interacts with the current, lively debate over this problem only superficially. Helm argues effectively, I think, that divine timelessness does not solve the problem of theological fatalism because for any time t it can be truly asserted before t that God knows timelessly what happens at t , which is all the fatalist needs. Oddly enough, however, he does not think this argument can be reduced to logical fatalism because if propositions are timelessly true, they are not temporally necessary. But the same gambit may be played here as with God's timeless knowledge: prior to t it may be truly asserted that it is timelessly true that some event happens at t . Nor, *pace* Helm, does logical fatalism hold that all propositions are logically necessary (*i.e.*, there is only one possible world), but that they are temporally necessary. Helm makes a half-hearted pass at discussing temporal necessity and hard/soft facts, but does not advance the discussion. Most amazingly, however, Helm appears to concede in the end that divine foreknowledge "perhaps . . . can be reconciled with human indeterministic freedom and logical . . . fatalism likewise disproved" (p. 142), which seems to give away his whole case!

What Helm winds up arguing is that foreknowledge *which is based on God's foreordination of the future* is incompatible with indeterministic human freedom. But only Thomists (and perhaps some

Augustinians) should care to dispute that claim! The point is that Helm has offered no justification at all for adopting such a model of foreknowledge (unless he is confusing the future's being determinate with its being determined). Thus, it is not the existence of a timeless, omniscient God which is inconsistent with libertarian freedom, but the model of foreordination adopted by Helm. Chapter 9 "Timelessness and Human Responsibility" is a thought-provoking attempt to show that if atheistic compatibilism is consistent with human responsibility, then so is theistic compatibilism, and thus God ought not to be blamed for decreeing a world involving human sin. (Helm recognizes that that is a big "if"!)

Helm's discussion of "Divine Freedom" in chapter 10 is hampered by his inadequate grasp of the counterfactuals involved in God's freedom to actualize other worlds; but chapter 11 "Referring to the Eternal God" is a helpful discussion of the fashionable atheistic objection that God cannot be identified.

The value of Helm's book is limited by his failure to discuss several key issues (*e.g.*, middle knowledge or proposals for handling personal and temporal indexicals like D. Lewis's distinction between knowledge *de se* and *de dicto*). On a more minor key, the book is marred by a surprising number of printer's errors and Helm's habit of writing in sentence fragments.