

# Divine Eternity

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## SUMMARY

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## DIVINE ETERNITY

"God," declares the prophet Isaiah, "is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity" (Is. 57.15). But being a prophet and not a philosophical theologian, Isaiah did not pause to reflect upon the *nature* of divine eternity. Minimally, to be eternal means to exist without beginning and end. To say that God is eternal means minimally that He never came into being and will never go out of being. To exist eternally is to exist permanently. [1]

There are, however, at least two ways in which something could exist eternally. One way would be to exist omnitemporally throughout infinite time. In this case God would have an immemorial and everlasting temporal duration. The other way in which a being could exist eternally would be by existing timelessly. In this case God would completely transcend time, having neither temporal location nor temporal extension. He would simply exist in an undifferentiated, timeless state.

If we take Scripture as our guide in matters of theology, the initial question we must ask is: does biblical teaching on divine eternity favor either one of these views? The question turns out to be surprisingly difficult to answer. On the one hand, it is indisputable that the biblical writers typically portray God as engaged in temporal activities, including foreknowing the future and remembering the past, and when they speak directly of God's eternal existence they do so in terms of beginningless and endless temporal duration. The data are not wholly one-sided, however. There is some evidence, at least, that when God is considered in relation to creation He must be thought of as the transcendent Creator of time and the ages and therefore as existing beyond time (Gen. 1.1; Prov. 8.22-23; I Cor. 2.7; II Tim. 1.9; Tit. 1.2-3; Jude 25). So the biblical data are underdeterminative, and one seems forced to conclude with James Barr that "if such a thing as a Christian doctrine of time has to be developed, the work of discussing it and developing it must belong not to biblical but to philosophical theology." [2]

At issue here is God's relationship to time: Does God exist temporally or atemporally? God exists temporally if and only if He exists in time, that is to say, if and only if His duration has phases which are related to each other as earlier and later. In that case, God, as a personal being, has experientially a past, a present, and a future. No matter what moment in time we pick, given God's permanence, the assertion, "God exists now," were we to make it, would be literally true.

By contrast, God exists atemporally if and only if He is not temporal. This definition makes it evident that temporality and timelessness are contradictories: an entity must exist one way or the other and cannot exist both ways at once. If, then, God exists atemporally, He has no past, present, and future. At any moment in time it would be true to assert, "God exists," in the tenseless sense of "exists," as when one says, "The natural numbers exist," but not true to assert, "God exists now."

Philosophical theologians have been sharply divided with respect to God's relationship to time. What are the principal arguments which they have offered for divine timelessness and temporality?

### **Arguments for Divine Timelessness**

**Argument from Simplicity or Immutability.** Consider first the view that God exists timelessly.

Traditionally Christian theologians like Thomas Aquinas argued for God's timelessness on the basis of His absolute simplicity and immutability (*Summa theologiae* 1a. 10. 3). The argument can be simply formulated As a first premiss, we assume either

1. God is simple

or

1'. God is immutable.

Then we add

2. If God is simple or immutable, then He is not temporal,

from which it follows that

3. Therefore, God is not temporal.

Since temporality and timelessness are contradictories, it follows that

4. Therefore, God is timeless.

Is this a cogent argument? Consider (2). The doctrine of divine simplicity implies not merely that God does not have parts, but that He does not possess even distinct attributes. In some mysterious way His omnipotence is His goodness, for example. He stands in no relations whatsoever. His nature or

essence is not even distinct from His existence. He is, Aquinas tells us, the pure act of existing (*Summa theologiae* 1a. 3. 4). Now if God is simple in the way described, it obviously follows that He cannot be temporal. For a temporal being is related to the various times at which it exists: it exists at  $t_1$  and at  $t_2$ , for example. But a simple being stands in no real relations. Moreover, a temporal being has phases of its life which are not identical but rather are related to one another as earlier and later. But an absolutely simple being could not stand in such relations and so must have its life, as Boethius put it, "all at once" (*totum simul*) (*Philosophiae consolationis* 5. pr. 6. 9-11).

Similarly, if God is immutable, then even if He is not simple, He cannot be temporal. Like simplicity, the immutability affirmed by the medieval theologians is a concept: God cannot change in *any* respect. God not only cannot undergo intrinsic change, but He also cannot change extrinsically by being related to changing things. [3]. But obviously a temporal being undergoes at least extrinsic change in that it exists at different moments of time and, given the reality of the temporal world, co-exists with different temporal beings as they undergo intrinsic change. Even if we relax the definition of "immutable" to mean "incapable of intrinsic change" or the even weaker concept "intrinsically changeless," an immutable God cannot be temporal. For if God is temporal, God will be constantly changing in His knowledge, knowing first that "It is now  $t_1$ " and later that "It is now  $t_2$ ." God's foreknowledge and memory must also be steadily changing, as anticipated events transpire and become past. God will constantly be performing new actions, at  $t_1$  causing events at  $t_1$  and at  $t_2$  causing events at  $t_2$ . Thus, a temporal God cannot be changeless. It follows, then, that if God is immutable, He is timeless.

Thus, God's timelessness can be deduced from either His simplicity or immutability. Is this a good reason for thinking that God is timeless? That depends on whether we have any good reason to affirm (1) or (1'). Here we run into severe difficulties. For doctrines of divine simplicity and immutability which are sufficiently strong to support divine timelessness are even more controverted than the doctrine of divine timelessness itself. These strong doctrines find no explicit support in Scripture, which at most speaks of God's immutability in terms of His faithfulness and unchanging character (Mal. 3.6; Jas. 1.17), and philosophically there seem to be no good reasons to embrace these doctrines but weighty objections against them. [4] These cannot be discussed here; the point is that (1) and (1') are even more difficult to prove than (4), so that they do not constitute good grounds for believing (4). Thus, while we may freely admit that a simple or immutable God must be timeless, we have even less reason to think God simple or immutable than to think Him timeless and so can hardly hold that He is timeless on the basis of those doctrines.

**Argument from Divine Knowledge of Future Contingents.** In contrast to divine simplicity and immutability, divine omniscience is clearly a great-making property and enjoys considerable Scriptural warrant. An argument for divine timelessness predicated upon God's omniscience would therefore

have a more secure theological foundation. Many thinkers have argued that God's knowledge of future contingent events, for example, future human free actions, implies divine timelessness. The reasoning seems to go as follows:

5. A temporal being cannot know future contingent events.

6. God knows future contingent events.

7. Therefore, God is not a temporal being.

Again, if God is not a temporal being, then (4) follows as before.

Despite the denial of (6) on the part of a wide range of contemporary thinkers from process theologians to so-called "open" theists, a biblical doctrine of divine omniscience makes (6) incumbent upon an orthodox theologian. [5] The argument hinges, therefore, on the truth of (5). On behalf of (5) it is usually claimed that contingent events, not being deducible from present causes, can be known only insofar as they are real or existent. Given (6), it follows that future contingent events are real or existent for God. Defenders of divine timelessness such as Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas thus typically maintained that all events in time are real to God and therefore can be known by Him via His *scientia visionis* (knowledge of vision).

How can we make sense of this claim? The most plausible move for the defender of divine timelessness to make will be to hold that the four-dimensional space-time manifold exists tenselessly and that God transcends that manifold. A good many physicists and philosophers of time and space embrace such a tenseless view of time (spacetime realism). Such a view makes sense of the traditional claim that all events in time are present to God and therefore known to Him via His *scientia visionis*.

The drawback is that there is a high price to be paid philosophically and theologically for such a tenseless theory of time. [6] Therefore, the claim that contingent events can be known only insofar as they are real or existent comes at a considerable cost for the biblical theist. One is therefore inclined to be sceptical of the argument on behalf of (5).

Moreover, (5) can be directly challenged as well. In assessing the question of how God knows truths about temporal events, we may distinguish two models of divine cognition: the *perceptualist* model and the *conceptualist* model. The perceptualist model construes divine knowledge on the analogy of sense perception: God looks and sees what is there. Such a model patently underlies the classic doctrine of *scientia visionis* and is implicitly assumed when people speak of God's "foreseeing" the future. The perceptualist model of divine cognition does encounter difficulty concerning God's knowledge of future

contingents, for, if future events do not exist, there is nothing there to perceive. [7]

By contrast on a conceptualist model of divine knowledge, God does not acquire His knowledge of the world by anything like perception. His knowledge of the future is not based on His "looking" ahead and "seeing" what lies in the future (a terribly anthropomorphic notion in any case). Rather God's knowledge is more like a mind's knowledge of innate ideas. It is therefore inappropriate to speak of God's *acquiring* knowledge at all. Rather as an omniscient being, God has essentially the property of knowing all truths; there are truths about future events; *ergo*, God knows all truths concerning future events. So long as we are not seduced into thinking of divine foreknowledge on the model of perception, it is no longer evident why knowledge of future contingents should be impossible.

We can go further, however. For the doctrine of middle knowledge (*scientia media*) is a version of the conceptualist model which allows us to say considerably more about the basis of God's foreknowledge of future contingents. Divine foreknowledge is based on (i) God's middle knowledge of what every creature would freely do under any circumstances and (ii) His knowledge of the divine decree to create certain sets of circumstances and to place certain creatures in them. Given middle knowledge and the divine decree, foreknowledge follows automatically as a result without any perception of the created world. This complex and interesting doctrine must be pursued in an independent discussion.

In sum, while the argument from God's knowledge of future contingents has some force in motivating a doctrine of divine timelessness, that force is mitigated by the availability of viable alternatives and the high price exacted by a tenseless theory of time.

***Argument from Special Relativity.*** A third argument for divine timelessness arises from the concept of time in Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity (STR). According to Einstein's theory, there is no unique, universal time and so no unique, worldwide "now." Each inertial frame has its own time and its own present moment, and there is no overarching, absolute time in which all these diverse times are integrated into one. So if God is in time, then the obvious question raised by STR is: *Whose time is He in?*

The defender of divine timelessness maintains that there is no acceptable answer to this question. We cannot plausibly pick out some inertial frame and identify its time as God's time because God is not a physical object in uniform motion, and so the choice of any such frame would be wholly arbitrary. Moreover, it is difficult to see how God, confined to the time of one inertial frame, could be causally sustaining events which are real relative to other inertial frames but are future or past relative to God's frame. Similarly, God's knowledge of what is happening now would be restricted to the temporal perspective of His frame, leaving Him ignorant of what is actually going on in other frames. In any case, if God were to be associated with a particular inertial frame, then surely, as God's time, the time

of that frame would be privileged. It would be the equivalent of the privileged frame of the aether in classical physics. So long as we maintain, with Einstein, that no frame is privileged, then we cannot identify the time of any inertial frame as God's time.

Neither can we say that God exists in the "now" associated with the time of every inertial frame, for this would obliterate the unity of God's consciousness. In order to preserve God's personal consciousness, it must not be fragmented and scattered among the inertial frames in the universe. But if God's time cannot be identified with the time of a single frame or of a plurality of frames, then God must not be in time at all, that is to say, He exists timelessly.

We can summarize this reasoning as follows:

8. STR is correct in its description of time.

9. If STR is correct in its description of time, then if God is temporal, He exists in either the time associated with a single inertial frame or the times associated with a plurality of inertial frames.

10. Therefore, if God is temporal, He exists in either the time associated with a single inertial frame or the times associated with a plurality of inertial frames.

11. God does not exist in either the time associated with a single inertial frame or the times associated with a plurality of inertial frames.

12. Therefore, God is not temporal.

What can be said in response to this argument? Although it may come as something of a shock to many, the most dubious premiss of the argument is (8). For STR's concept of time rests upon decrepit epistemological foundations. Einstein's re-definition of simultaneity in terms of clock synchronization by light signals simply assumes that the time which light takes to travel between two relatively stationary observers A and B is the same from A to B as from B to A in a round-trip journey. That assumption presupposes that A and B, while at relative rest, are not both in absolute motion, or in other words that neither absolute space nor a privileged inertial frame exists. What justification did Einstein have for so radical a presupposition? The answer, in a word, is verificationism. It is empirically impossible to distinguish uniform motion from rest relative to such a frame, and Einstein believed that if absolute space and absolute motion or rest are undetectable empirically, they therefore do not exist (and may even be said to be meaningless). Historians of science have shown that at the philosophical roots of Einstein's theory lies a verificationist epistemology, mediated to the young physicist chiefly through the influence of Ernst Mach, which comes to expression in Einstein's analysis of the concepts of time and space. [8]

The untenability of verificationism is so universally acknowledged that it will not be necessary to rehearse the objections against it here. [9] Verificationism provides no justification for thinking that Newton erred, for example, in holding that absolute time, grounded in God's sempiternal duration, exists independently of our physical measures of it and may or may not be accurately registered by them. With the demise of verificationism, the philosophical underpinnings of STR have collapsed. In short, there is no reason think that (8) is true.

But what about (9)? The difficulty with this premiss is that it fails to take into account the fact that STR is a *restricted* theory of relativity and therefore is correct only within prescribed limits. It is a theory which deals with uniform motion only. The analysis of non-uniform motion, such as acceleration and rotation, is provided by the General Theory of Relativity (GTR). STR cannot therefore be expected to give us the final word about the nature of time and space; indeed, within the context of GTR a new and important conception of time emerges.

GTR serves to introduce into Relativity Theory a cosmic perspective, enabling us to draft cosmological models of the universe governed by the gravitational field equations of GTR. Within the context of such cosmological models, the issue of time resurfaces dramatically. All contemporary cosmological models derive from Russian physicist Alexander Friedman's 1922 model of an expanding, material universe characterized by ideal homogeneity and isotropy. Although GTR does not itself mandate any formula for how to slice up space-time into a temporally ordered foliation, nevertheless certain models of space-time, like the Friedman model, have a dynamical, evolving spatial geometry whose natural symmetries guide the construction of a cosmic time; in order to ensure a smooth development of this geometry, it will be necessary to construct a time parameter based on a preferred slicing of space-time. Now as a parameter independent of spatial co-ordinates, cosmic time measures the duration of the universe as a whole in an observer-independent way; that is to say, the lapse of cosmic time is the same for all observers.

Based on a cosmological, rather than a local, perspective, cosmic time serves to restore the classical notions of universal time and absolute simultaneity which STR denied. The defender of divine temporality may accordingly hold that God exists in cosmic time. [10] Hence, contrary to (9), it does not follow from the correctness of STR that if God is in time, then He is in the time of one or more inertial frames. Because space itself is expanding, there is no universal inertial frame with which God can be associated, even though there does exist a preferred foliation of spacetime and so a cosmic time in which God can be conceived to exist. [11]

***Argument from the Incompleteness of Temporal Life.*** An important argument in favor of divine timelessness is based on the incompleteness of temporal life. Brian Leftow, as well as Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, argues that the fleeting nature of temporal life is incompatible with the

life of a most perfect being such as God. A temporal being is unable to enjoy what is past or future for it, possessing only the fleeting present. The passage of time thus renders it impossible for any temporal being, even God, to possess all its life at once. By contrast a timeless God lives all His life at once because He literally has no past or future and so suffers no loss. Therefore, since God is the most perfect being, He is timeless.

We can formulate this argument as follows:

13. God is the most perfect being.

14. The most perfect being has the most perfect mode of existence.

15. Therefore, God has the most perfect mode of existence.

16. Temporal existence is a less perfect mode of existence than timeless existence.

17. Therefore, God has a timeless mode of existence.

The key premiss here is (16), which rests on very powerful intuitions about the irretrievable loss that arises through the experience of temporal passage, a loss which intuitively should not characterize the experience of a most perfect being. Some philosophers of time might try to avert the force of this consideration by adopting a tenseless view of time according to which things and events do not in fact come to be or pass away. The difference between past, present, and future is a subjective illusion of consciousness. On this view of time no temporal being ever really loses its past or has not yet acquired its future; it (or its temporal parts) just exists tenselessly at its various temporal locations. A temporal God would exist at all temporal locations without beginning or end and so would not lose or acquire portions of His life.

The problem with this escape route is that it fails to appreciate that the argument is based on the *experience* of temporal passage, rather than on the objective reality of temporal passage itself. Even if the future never becomes and the past is never really lost, the fact remains that for a temporal person the past is lost *to him* and the future is not accessible *to him*. For this reason, it would be futile to attempt to elude the force of this argument by postulating a temporal deity in a tenseless time.

Perhaps, however, the realization that the argument is essentially experiential in character opens the door for a temporalist alternative. When we recall that God is perfectly omniscient and so forgets nothing of the past and knows everything about the future, then time's passage is not so tragic for Him. His past experiences do not fade as ours do, and He has perfect prescience of what the future holds. So it is far from obvious that the experience of temporal passage is so melancholy an affair for an omniscient God as it is for us. Moreover, the life of a perfect person may have to be characterized by



the incompleteness which would in other contexts be considered an imperfection. There is some evidence that consciousness of time's flow can actually be an enriching experience, as in music appreciation. [12] Timelessness may not be the most perfect mode of existence of a perfect person. All this goes to call into question (16). Still, this last argument, like the argument from divine foreknowledge, does have some force and so needs to be weighed against whatever arguments can be offered on behalf of divine temporality.

### Arguments for Divine Temporality

***Argument from the Impossibility of Atemporal Personhood.*** What arguments, then, might be offered for divine temporality? One argument frequently raised in the literature is that timelessness and personhood are incompatible. Some philosophers have denied that a timeless God can be a self-conscious, rational being because He could not exhibit certain forms of consciousness which we normally associate with personal beings (namely, ourselves). For example, Robert Coburn has written,

Surely it is a necessary condition of anything's being a person that it should be capable (logically) of, among other things, doing at least some of the following: remembering, anticipating, reflecting, deliberating, deciding, intending, and acting intentionally. To see that this is so one need but ask oneself whether anything which necessarily lacked all of the capacities noted would, under any conceivable circumstances, count as a person. But now an eternal being would necessarily lack all of these capacities in as much as their exercise by a being clearly requires that the being exist in time. . . . Hence, no eternal being, it would seem, could be a person. [13]

Since God is essentially personal, He therefore cannot be timeless.

We can formulate this argument as follows (using  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$  to represent certain properties allegedly essential to personhood):

18. Necessarily, if God is timeless, He does not have the properties  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$ .
19. Necessarily, if God does not have the properties  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$ , then God is not personal.
20. Necessarily, God is personal.
21. Therefore, necessarily, God is not timeless.

The defender of divine timelessness may attempt to turn back this argument either by challenging the

claim that the properties in question are necessary conditions of personhood or by showing that a timeless God could possess the relevant properties after all. With respect to the second strategy, even if Coburn were correct that a personal being must be capable of exhibiting the forms of consciousness he lists, it does not follow that a timeless God cannot be personal. For God could be *capable* of exhibiting such forms of consciousness but be timeless just in case He does not *in fact* exhibit any of them. In other words, the hidden assumption behind Coburn's reasoning is that God's being timeless or temporal is an essential property of God. But that assumption seems dubious. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that God is in fact temporal. Is it logically impossible that God could have been timeless instead? Since God's decision to create is free, we can conceive of a possible world in which God alone exists. If He is unchanging in such a world, then on any relational view of time God would be timeless. In such an atemporal world God would lack certain properties which we have supposed Him to have in the actual world—for example, the property of *knowing what time it is* or the property of *co-existing with temporal creatures*—and He would have other properties which He lacks in the actual world—for example, the property of *being alone* or of *knowing that He is alone*—, but none of these differences seems significant enough to deny that God could be timeless yet still be the same being. But then it seems that there are possible worlds in which God exists temporally and possible worlds in which He exists timelessly. God's temporal status is thus plausibly a contingent rather than essential property. So (apart from highly controversial claims on behalf of divine simplicity or immutability) there seems to be no reason to think that God is either *essentially* temporal or *essentially* timeless.

So if timelessness is a merely contingent property of God, He could be entirely capable of remembering, anticipating, reflecting, and so on; only were He to do so, then He would not be timeless. So long as He freely refrains from such activities He is timeless, even though He has the *capacity* to engage in those activities. Thus, by Coburn's own lights God must be regarded as personal.

At a more fundamental level, it is in any case pretty widely recognized that most of the forms of consciousness mentioned by Coburn are not essential to personhood—indeed, not even the capacity for them is essential to personhood. Take remembering, for example. Any temporal individual who lacked memory would be mentally ill or less than human. But if an individual exists timelessly, then he has no past to remember. Similarly with regard to anticipation: since a timeless individual has no future, there just is nothing to anticipate. Nevertheless, given His omniscience, God would still know what takes place (tenselessly) at every time.

As for reflecting and deliberating, these are ruled out not so much by God's timelessness as by His omniscience. An omniscient being cannot reflect and deliberate because He already knows the conclusions to be derived. Even if God is temporal, He does not engage in reflection and deliberation. But He is surely not impersonal as a result.

What about deciding, intending, and acting intentionally? All of these forms of consciousness are exhibited by a timeless God. With respect to deciding, again omniscience alone precludes God's deciding in the sense of making up His mind after a period of indecision. Even a temporal God does not decide in that sense. But God does decide in the sense that His will inclines toward one alternative rather than another and does so freely. It is up to God what He does; He could have willed otherwise. This is the strongest sense of libertarian freedom of the will. In God's case, because He is omniscient, His free decisions are either sempiternal or timeless rather than preceded by a period of ignorance and indecision.

As for intending or acting intentionally, there is no reason to think that intentions are necessarily future-directed. One can direct one's intentions at one's present state. God, as the Good, can timelessly desire and will His own infinite goodness. Such a changeless intention can be as timeless as God's knowing His own essence. Moreover, in the empty world we have envisioned, God may timelessly will and intend to refrain from creating a universe. God's willing to refrain from creation should not be confused with the mere absence of the intention to create. A stone is characterized by the absence of any intention to create but cannot be said to will to refrain from creating. In a world in which God freely refrains from creation, His abstaining from creating is a result of a free act of the will on His part. Hence, it seems that God can timelessly intend, will, and choose what He does.

In short, the argument for divine temporality based on God's personhood cannot be deemed a success. On the contrary, a timeless God can be plausibly said to be a self-conscious, rational individual endowed with freedom of the will and therefore a person.

***Argument from Divine Action in the World.*** In our thought experiment above, we abstracted from the actual existence of the temporal world and considered God existing alone without creation and asked whether He could exist timelessly. But, of course, the temporal world does exist. The question therefore arises whether God can stand in relation to a temporal world and yet remain timeless. It is very difficult to see how He can. Imagine once more God existing changelessly alone without creation, but with a changeless determination of His will to create a temporal world with a beginning. Since God is omnipotent, His will is done, and a temporal world comes into existence. Can God remain untouched by the world's temporality? It seems not. For at the first moment of time, God stands in a new relation in which He did not stand before (indeed, there was no "before"). Even if in creating the world God undergoes no *intrinsic* change, He at least undergoes an *extrinsic* change. For at the moment of creation, God comes into the relation of *sustaining* the universe or at the very least, of *co-existing with* the universe, relations in which He did not stand before. Since He is free to refrain from creation, God could have never stood in those relations, had He so willed. But in virtue of His creating a temporal world, God comes into a relation with that world the moment it springs into being. Thus, even if it is not the case that God is temporal prior to His creation of the world, He nonetheless

undergoes an extrinsic change at the moment of creation which draws Him into time in virtue of His real relation to the world. So even if God is timeless without creation, His free decision to create a temporal world also constitutes a free decision on His part to exist temporally.

The argument can be summarized as follows:

22. God is creatively active in the temporal world.

23. If God is creatively active in the temporal world, God is really related to the temporal world.

24. If God is really related to the temporal world, God is temporal.

25. Therefore, God is temporal.

This argument, if successful, does not prove that God is essentially temporal, but that if He is a Creator of a temporal world—as He in fact is—, then He is temporal.

One way to escape this argument is to deny (23). This might not appear to be a very promising strategy, since it seems obvious that God is related to His creatures insofar as He sustains them, knows them, and loves them. Remarkably, however, it was precisely this premiss that medieval theologians like Aquinas denied. Thomas agrees with (24). On his view, relational properties involving God and creatures, like God's *being Lord*, first begin to exist at the moment at which the creatures come into being (*Summa theologiae* 1a. 13. 7). Hence, if God stands in real relations to His creatures, He acquires those relational properties *de novo* at the moment of creation and thus undergoes change. And anything that changes, even extrinsically, must be in time. Thomas escapes the conclusion that God is therefore temporal by denying that God stands in any real relation to the world. Since God is absolutely simple, He stands in no relations to anything, for relations would introduce complexity into God's being. Aquinas holds, paradoxically, that while creatures are really related to God, God is not really related to creatures. The relation of God to creatures exists only in our minds, not in reality. On Aquinas's view, then, God undergoes no extrinsic change in creating the world. He just exists, and creation is creatures' coming into existence with a real relation to God of being caused by God.

This is certainly an extraordinary doctrine. Wholly apart from its reliance on divine simplicity, the doctrine of no real relations is very problematic. God's sustaining the world is a causal relation rooted in the active power and intrinsic properties of God as First Cause. Thus, to say the world is really related to God by the relation *is sustained by*, but that God is not really related to the world by the relation *is sustaining* seems unintelligible. It is to say that one can have real effects without a real cause—which seems self-contradictory or incomprehensible.

Moreover, God is surely really related to His creatures in the following sense: in different possible worlds, God's will, knowledge, and love are different than they actually are. For example, if God had not chosen to create a universe at all, He would surely have a different will than that which He has (for He would not will to create the universe); He would know different truths than the ones He knows (for example, He would not know *The universe exists*); He would not love the same creatures He actually loves (since no creatures would exist). It is the implication of Aquinas' view, however, that God is perfectly similar in every possible world: He never wills differently, He never acts differently, He never knows differently, He never loves differently. Whether the world is empty or chock-full of creatures of every sort, there is no difference in God. But then it becomes unintelligible why this universe or any universe exists rather than just nothing. The reason cannot lie in God, for He is perfectly similar in all possible worlds. Nor can the reason lie in creatures, for we are asking for some explanation of their existence. Thus, on Thomas's view there just is no reason for why this universe or any universe at all exists. Therefore, Thomas's attempt to evade the present argument by denying (23) is implausible.

Recent defenders of timeless eternity have turned their guns on (24) instead. They have tried to craft theories of divine eternity which would permit God to be really related to the temporal world and yet to exist timelessly.

For example, Eleonore Stump and the late Norman Kretzmann attempted to craft a new simultaneity relation, which they believed would allow a timeless God to relate to His creation. [14] They propose to treat modes of existence as analogous to reference frames in STR and to construct a definition of ET-simultaneity in terms of two reference frames (timelessness and temporality) and two observers (one in eternity and one in time). Their basic idea is as follows: Take some eternal being  $x$  and some temporal being  $y$ . These two are ET-simultaneous just in case relative to some hypothetical observer in the eternal reference frame  $x$  is eternally present and  $y$  is observed as temporally present, and relative to some hypothetical observer in any temporal reference frame  $y$  is temporally present and  $x$  is observed as eternally present. [15]

On the basis of their definition of ET-simultaneity, Stump and Kretzmann believe themselves to have solved the problem of how a timeless being can be really related to a temporal world. For relative to the eternal reference frame, any temporal entity which exists at any time is observed to be present, and relative to any moment of time God is observed to be present. The metaphysical relativity postulated by ET-simultaneity implies that all events are present to God in eternity and therefore open to His timeless causal influence. Every action of God is ET-simultaneous with its temporal effect.

Unfortunately, as many critics have pointed out, the language of observation employed in the definition is wholly obscure. [16] In STR very specific physical content is given to the notion of observation through Einstein's operational definitions of distant simultaneity. But in the definition of ET-

simultaneity, no hint is given as to what is meant, for example, by *x*'s being observed as eternally present relative to some moment of time. In the absence of any procedure for determining ET-simultaneity, the definition reduces to the assertion that relative to the reference frame of eternity *x* is eternally present and *y* is temporally present and that relative to some temporal reference frame *y* is temporally present and *x* is eternally present—which is only a restatement of the problem! Worse, if *y* is temporally present to God, then God and *y* are not ET-simultaneous at all, but temporally simultaneous. Thus, God would be temporally simultaneous with every temporal event, which is to sacrifice divine timelessness.

To their credit, Stump and Kretzmann later revised their definition of ET-simultaneity so as to free it from observation language. [17] Basically, their new account tries to define ET-simultaneity in terms of causal relations. On the new definition, *x* and *y* are ET-simultaneous just in case relative to an observer in the eternal reference frame, *x* is eternally present and *y* is temporally present, and the observer can enter into direct causal relations with both *x* and *y*; and relative to an observer in any temporal reference frame, *x* is eternally present and *y* is at the same time as the observer, and the observer can enter into direct causal relations with both *x* and *y*.

The fundamental problem with this new account of ET-simultaneity is that it is viciously circular. For ET-simultaneity was originally invoked to explain how a timeless God could be causally active in time; but now ET-simultaneity is defined in terms of a timeless being's ability to be causally active in time. Our original problem was to explain how God could be both timeless and yet creatively active in the world. That is hardly explained by saying that a timeless God is ET-simultaneous with His effects in time and then defining ET-simultaneity in terms of the ability of a timeless being to be causally related to temporal effects. This amounts to saying that God can be causally active in time because He can be causally active in time. Since their first definition was explanatorily vacuous and their second definition viciously circular, Stump and Kretzmann must be judged to have failed in their attempt to undercut (24).

Leftow has offered a different account of divine eternity in order to refute (24). [18] On the Stump-Kretzmann model, there is no common reference frame or mode of existence shared by timeless and temporal beings. As a result, Stump and Kretzmann were unable to explain how such beings could be causally related. The essence of Leftow's proposal is to remedy this defect by maintaining that temporal beings do exist in eternity; they share God's mode of existence and so can be causally related to God. But, he insists, this does not imply that time or temporal existence is illusory, for temporal beings also have a temporal mode of existence.

How can it be shown that temporal beings exist in timeless eternity? Leftow's argument is based on three theses:

I. The distance between God and every thing in space is zero.

II. Spatial things do not change in any way unless there is a change of place (a motion involving a material thing).

III. If something is in time, it is also in space.

On the basis of these theses Leftow argues as follows: there can be no change of place relative to God because the distance between God and everything in space is zero. But if there is no change of place relative to God, there can be no change of any sort on the part of spatial things relative to God. Moreover, since anything that is temporal is also spatial, it follows that there are no temporal, non-spatial beings. The only temporal beings there are exist in space, and none of these changes relative to God. Assuming, then, some relational view of time, it follows that all temporal beings exist timelessly relative to God. Thus, relative to God all things are timelessly present and so can be causally related to God.

The problem with this reasoning is that all three of its foundational theses seem false, some obviously so. (I), for example, rests pretty obviously on a category mistake. When we say that there is no distance between God and creatures, we do not mean that there is a distance and its measure is zero. Rather we mean that the category of distance does not even apply to the relations between a non-spatial being like God and things in space. What about (II)? This thesis is false if time is "tensed." For then spatial things can change even if there is no spatial motion by changing in their temporal properties. For example, some spatial object can change by being one year old and then becoming two years old, even if no change of place has occurred. Even most relationalists are today willing to admit that time can go on during periods of spatial changelessness. So even if the entire universe were frozen into immobility, there would still be change relative to God, namely, change of temporal properties. Thus, if time is tensed—and Leftow allows that may be—, then his theory is nullified. Finally, consider (III). Leftow needs this thesis, lest someone say that there are non-spatial, temporal beings like angels which are changing relative to God. Such beings would (on Leftow's analysis) have a zero distance from God and yet not be changeless relative to God. Thus, they would not exist in eternity. So in order to sustain his claim that temporal beings exist in eternity, Leftow has to get rid of such beings. But we have every reason to reject this radical thesis. Even in the absence of a physical universe, God could choose to entertain a succession of thoughts or to create an angelic being which experiences a stream of consciousness, and such a series of mental events alone is sufficient for such entities' being in time. Thus, all of Leftow's key theses are at least dubious, if not clearly false. We have little choice but to conclude that he has given no good grounds for thinking that temporal beings exist in timeless eternity.

In summary, it seems that we have here a powerful argument for divine temporality. Classical attempts like Aquinas's to deny that God is really related to the world and contemporary attempts like those of Stump, Kretzmann, and Leftow to deny that God's real relation to the world involves Him in time all appear in the end to be less plausible than the premisses of the argument itself.

***Argument from Divine Knowledge of Tensed Facts.*** We have seen that God's action in the temporal world gives us good grounds for concluding God to be temporal in view of the extrinsic change He undergoes through His changing relations with the world. But the existence of a temporal world also seems to entail intrinsic change in God in view of His knowledge of what is happening in the temporal world. For since what is happening in the world is in constant flux, so also must God's knowledge be in constant flux. Defenders of divine temporality have argued that a timeless God cannot know certain tensed facts about the world—for example, what is happening now—and therefore, since God is omniscient, He must be temporal.

We can formulate the argument as follows:

26. A temporal world exists.

27. God is omniscient.

28. If a temporal world exists, then if God is omniscient, God knows tensed facts.

29. If God is timeless, He does not know tensed facts.

30. Therefore, God is not timeless.

Again, this argument does not prove that God is essentially temporal, but, if successful, it does show that if a temporal world exists, then God is temporal.

Defenders of divine timelessness have attempted to refute this argument either by arguing that a timeless God can know tensed facts or by arguing that God may still qualify as omniscient even if He is ignorant of tensed facts.

Let us look first at the plausibility of denying (29). Can a timeless God know tensed facts? Although Jonathan Kvanvig, Edward Wierenga, and Leftow have all argued that God can know the facts expressed by tensed sentences, an analysis of their respective positions reveals that in the end they all embrace the view that the factual content expressed by tensed sentences is tenseless. [19] Despite first appearances to the contrary, they all accept the truth of (29). Kvanvig, Wierenga, and Leftow's accounts are the most sophisticated attempts to explain how a timeless God can know the facts expressed by tensed sentences, yet they all finally deny that God knows tensed facts. Thus, (29)



seems secure.

The defender of divine timelessness has no recourse, then, but to deny (28). He must deny that omniscience entails a knowledge of tensed facts. He can do this either by revising the traditional definition of omniscience or else by maintaining that tense, while an objective feature of time, does not strictly belong to the factual content expressed by tensed sentences. Let us examine each strategy in turn.

The general problem with the strategy of revising the traditional definition of omniscience is that any adequate definition of a concept must be in line with our intuitive understanding of that concept. We are not free simply to "cook" the definition just to solve some problem under discussion. According to the traditional definition, a person is omniscient if and only if, for every fact, he knows that fact and does not believe its contradictory. On such a definition, if there are tensed facts, an omniscient person must know them. What plausible alternative definition of omniscience might the defender of divine timelessness offer?

Wierenga offers a revised account of omniscience which would not require an omniscient person to know tensed facts. Some facts, he says, are facts only from a particular perspective. They must be known to an omniscient being only if he shares that particular perspective. Thus, a person is omniscient if and only if, for every fact and every perspective, if something is a fact from a certain perspective, then that person must know that it is a fact from that perspective, and if that person shares that perspective, then he must know the fact in question. Wierenga treats moments of time as perspectives relative to which tensed facts exist. So while a temporal person existing on December 8, 1941, must (if he is omniscient) know the fact *Yesterday the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor*, a timeless person must know only that from the perspective of December 8, 1941, it is a fact that *Yesterday the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor*. On this definition God's being omniscient does not require that He know the tensed fact, but only the tenseless fact that from a certain perspective a certain tensed fact exists.

Wierenga's revised definition of omniscience seems to be unacceptably "cooked." Wierenga is not denying that there are tensed facts. Rather he wants to allow that there really are tensed facts but to maintain that an omniscient being need not know them. This claim seems quite implausible. On Wierenga's view temporal persons know an incalculable multitude of facts about the world of which a supposedly omniscient being is ignorant. Temporal persons know that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is over; God has no idea whether it has occurred or not. Since He does not know what time it actually is, He does not know any tensed facts. This is an unacceptably limited field of knowledge to qualify as omniscience.

Leftow also entertains the idea of revising the definition of omniscience in such a way that omniscience does not entail knowledge of all truths. He argues, in effect, that there are many sorts of truths which God cannot know, so there is no harm in admitting one more class of truths (namely, tensed truths) of which God is ignorant. But, again, such a consideration should not affect the definition of "omniscience" as such. Besides, should it turn out that there are truths God cannot know, that is no reason for further eroding the extent of His knowledge by denying Him knowledge of tensed truths. In any case, does Leftow succeed in showing that there are truths which God cannot know? It seems not. His examples of things God cannot know include how it feels to be oneself a failure or a sinner. But Leftow has confused *knowing how* with *knowing that*. *Knowing how* does not take truths as its object. God can know such truths as *Being a failure feels lousy, Sinners feel guilty and hopeless*, and so on. God's not knowing how it feels to be Himself a failure or a sinner is not an example of truths He fails to know and so does not constitute a restriction on His omniscience. Leftow furnishes no example of any truth which might be conjoined with "knows that" such that we cannot say, "God knows that \_\_\_\_\_," where the blank is filled by the truth in question. Therefore, he has not adequately motivated denying that knowledge of tensed truths properly belongs to omniscience.

It seems, therefore, that no adequate grounds have been given for thinking that someone could be omniscient and yet not know tensed truths. The traditional definition of omniscience requires it, and we have no grounds which do not involve special pleading for revising the usual definition.

So what about the second strategy for denying (28), namely, maintaining that tense does not, strictly speaking, belong to the factual content expressed by tensed sentences, even though tense is an objective feature of the world? Tense might be analyzed as a feature of the mode in which the factual content is presented to someone expressing it, or of the way in which a person grasps the factual content, or of the context of someone's believing the factual content. Alternatively, tense could be understood in terms of a person's ascribing to himself in a present-tense way the property of being such as the factual content expressed by the sentence specifies. On such analyses, an omniscient being could be timeless because omniscience is traditionally defined in terms of factual knowledge and tense is not part of the factual content of tensed sentences. Tense is an objective feature of the world, but since it does not belong to the factual content of a sentence, a being which knew only tenseless facts could on the traditional definition count as omniscient.

Even though such analyses are plausible and attractive, they do not ultimately save the day for the defender of divine timelessness. For as the greatest conceivable being, God is not merely factually omniscient, but also maximally excellent cognitively. On the theories under discussion a merely factually omniscient God would know such things as *God is omnipotent, God loves His creatures, God created the universe*, and so on. But He would not have to possess any first-person indexical beliefs like "I am omnipotent," "I love my creatures," "I created the universe," and so forth. A machine could

count as omniscient under such analyses. But such a God or machine would clearly not have maximum cognitive excellence. In order to qualify as maximally excellent cognitively, God would have to entertain all and only the appropriate, true first-person beliefs about Himself. This would furnish Him with knowledge *de se* (first-person self-knowledge) in addition to mere knowledge *de re* (knowledge of a thing from a third-person perspective). In order to be maximally excellent cognitively, God would not have to possess all knowledge *de se* in the world, but only such knowledge *de se* as is appropriate to Himself. It would be a cognitive defect, not a perfection, for God to have the belief "I am Napoleon," though for Napoleon such a belief would be a perfection. The point is that omniscience (on these theories) is not enough for perfect being theology; God must be maximally excellent cognitively.

Now in the same way, it is a cognitive perfection to know what time it is, what is actually happening in the universe. A being whose knowledge is composed exclusively of tenseless facts is less excellent cognitively than a being who also knows what has occurred, what is occurring, and what will occur in the world. This latter person knows infinitely more than the former and is involved in no cognitive defect in so knowing. On the analogy of knowledge *de se*, we can refer to such knowledge as knowledge *de praesenti* (knowledge of the present). A being which lacks such knowledge is more ignorant and less excellent cognitively than a being which possesses it. Accordingly, if we adopt views according to which tense is extraneous to the factual content expressed by a tensed sentence, we should simply revise premiss (28) to read

28'. If a temporal world exists, then if God is maximally excellent cognitively, then God has knowledge *de praesenti*

and, with appropriate revisions, the argument goes through as before.

The attempt to deny (28) thus seems to fare no better than the effort to refute (29). If God is omniscient, then given the existence of a temporal world, He cannot be ignorant of tensed facts. It follows that God is not timeless, which is to say, He is temporal. So in addition to the argument from divine action in the world, we now have a second powerful argument based on God's changing knowledge of tensed facts for thinking that God is in time.

### **Eternity and the Nature of Time**

On the basis of our foregoing discussion, we have seen comparatively weak grounds for affirming divine timelessness but two powerful arguments in favor of divine temporality. It would seem, then,

that we should conclude that God is temporal. But such a conclusion would be premature. For there does remain one way of escape still open for defenders of divine timelessness. The argument based on God's action in the world assumed the objective reality of temporal becoming, and the argument based on God's knowledge of the temporal world assumed the objective reality of tensed facts. If one denies the objective reality of temporal becoming and tensed facts, then the arguments are undercut. For in that case, nothing to which God is related ever comes into or passes out of being, and all facts exist tenselessly, so that God undergoes neither extrinsic nor intrinsic change. He can be the immutable, omniscient Sustainer and Knower of all things and, hence, exist timelessly.

In short, the defender of divine timelessness can escape the arguments for divine temporality by embracing the tenseless theory of time. It is noteworthy, however, that almost no defender of divine timelessness has taken this route. Virtually the only proponent of timeless eternity to embrace consciously the tenseless theory of time in defending God's timelessness is Paul Helm. [20]

It seems, then, that in order to adjudicate the question of the nature of divine eternity and God's relationship to time, philosophical theologians have no choice but to grapple with a further question, one of the most profound and controverted issues of metaphysics: Is time tensed or tenseless? This is difficult and mysterious territory. But we have no choice: if we are to understand eternity, we must first understand time.

#### **Footnotes:**

##### [\[1\]](#)

For an analysis of what it means to be permanent, see Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 133; cf Quentin Smith, "A New Typology of Temporal and Atemporal Permanence," *Noûs* 23 (1989): 307-30. According to Leftow an entity is permanent if and only if it exists and has no first or last finite period of existence, and there are no moments before or after it exists.

##### [\[2\]](#)

James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 149.

##### [\[3\]](#)

An intrinsic change is a non-relational change, involving only the subject. For example, an apple changes from green to red. An extrinsic change is a relational change, involving something else in relation to which the subject changes. For example, a man becomes shorter than his son, not by undergoing an intrinsic change in his own height, but by being related to his son as his son undergoes

intrinsic change in his height.

[4]

See discussion in Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), pp. 98-123; Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God*, Cornell Studies in Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[5]

I take for granted that there are contingent events such as human free acts; see the article in this volume on divine providence. See also my *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Bookhouse, 1987.

[6]

See my *The Tenseless Theory of Time: A Critical Examination*, Synthese Library 294 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

[7]

Notice, however, that if we think of statements or facts as with in God's perceptual purview, then even on a perceptualist model, God must know the future, so long as the Principle of Bivalence holds for future-tense statements. For He perceives which future-tense statements presently have the property of truth inhering in them or which future-tense facts presently exist. Thus, by means of His perception of presently existing realities He knows the truth about the future.

[8]

See especially Gerald J. Holton, "Mach, Einstein and the Search for Reality," in *Ernst Mach: Physicist and Philosopher*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 6 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1970), pp. 165-99; idem, "Where Is Reality? The Answers of Einstein," in *Science and Synthesis*, ed. UNESCO (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1971), pp. 45-69; and the essays collected together in idem, *Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought*. See also Lawrence Sklar, "Time, Reality, and Relativity," in *Reduction, Time and Reality*, ed. Richard Healey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 141.

[9]

Verificationism proposed a criterion of meaning that was so restrictive that it would consign vast tracts of apparently perfectly intelligible discourse to the trash heap of nonsense; moreover, the criterion seemed to be self-refuting. See the excellent discussion in Frederick Suppe, "The Search for

Philosophical Understanding of Scientific Theories," in *The Structure of Scientific Theories*, 2d ed., ed. F. Suppe (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 3-118.

[\[10\]](#)

Unless there exists a multiverse in which our observable universe is but one domain, in which case God exists in the global time of the multiverse.

[\[11\]](#)

Cosmic time is related to the local times of a special group of observers called "fundamental observers." These are hypothetical observers, associated with the galaxies, who are at rest with respect to the expansion of space itself. As the expansion of space proceeds, each fundamental observer remains in the same place, though his spatial separation from fellow fundamental observers increases. Cosmic time relates to these observers in that their local times all coincide with cosmic time in their vicinity. Because of their mutual recession, the class of fundamental observers do not serve to define a global inertial frame, technically speaking, even though all of them are at rest. But since each fundamental observer is at rest with respect to space, the events which he calculates to be simultaneous will coincide locally with the events which are simultaneous in cosmic time. One could say that God exists in the time of the inertial frame of every fundamental observer; but then there is no problem, since all their local times fuse into one cosmic time.

[\[12\]](#)

See the very interesting piece by R. W. Hepburn, "Time-Transcendence and Some Related Phenomena in the Arts," in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, 4th series, ed. H. D. Lewis, Muirhead Library of Philosophy (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), pp. 152-173.

[\[13\]](#)

Robert C. Coburn, "Professor Malcolm on God," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 41 (1963): 155.

[\[14\]](#)

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429-58.

[\[15\]](#)

A word of clarification: by "eternal" Stump and Kretzmann mean "timeless," and by "temporal reference frame" they mean "moment of time." It is also worth noting that this definition is not really analogous to simultaneity in STR at all. A better analogy would be to say that x and y are ET-simultaneous just in

case they both exist at the same eternal present relative to the eternal reference frame and both exist at the same moment of time relative to the temporal reference frame. But then God would be temporal relative to our mode of existence, which Stump and Kretzmann do not want to say.

#### [\[16\]](#)

Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 20; Delmas Lewis, "Eternity Again: A Reply to Stump and Kretzmann," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984): 74-6; Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 32-3; William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 164-6; John C. Yates, *The Timelessness of God* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990), pp. 128-30; Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, Cornell Studies in Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 170-2; Garrett J. DeWeese, *God and the Nature of Time*, Ashgate Philosophy of Religion Series (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004), p. 164.

#### [\[17\]](#)

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 477-8.

#### [\[18\]](#)

Brian Leftow, "Eternity and Simultaneity," *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991): 148-79; cf. idem, *Time and Eternity*, chap. 10.

#### [\[19\]](#)

Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), pp. 150-65; Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes*, Cornell Studies in Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 179-85; Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, pp. 312-37 See also Jonathan L. Kvanvig, "Omniscience and Eternity: A Reply to Craig," *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2003): 369-76; Edward R. Wierenga, "Omniscience and Time, One More Time: A Reply to Craig," *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004): 90-7.

#### [\[20\]](#)

Paul Helm, "Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of the Two Standpoints," in *The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), pp. 42-3; Helm, *Eternal God*, pp. 25-7, 44, 47, 52, 79.