

Divine Timelessness and Necessary Existence

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SUMMARY

Brian Leftow argues that if God is temporal, He is essentially temporal; and that since He is a necessary being, time therefore exists necessarily, but that since time is in fact contingent, God is therefore atemporal. Leftow's arguments for time's contingency are, however, ineffective against the Newtonian, who holds that time and space are emanative effects of God's being. An untenable reductionism vitiates Leftow's claim that God cannot be temporal, yet non-spatial. Leftow's argument that God cannot be contingently temporal is undermined by the coherence of suggested scenarios illustrating such a state of affairs.

One of Brian Leftow's most important arguments for divine atemporality is his argument from God's necessary existence. [1] According to Leftow, necessary existence entails timelessness, and, since God must have the perfection of necessary existence, He must therefore be timeless.

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Formulation of Leftow's Argument

Unfortunately, Leftow's paragraph-length statement of this proof is a summary of reasoning scattered throughout the book which is only vaguely referenced by Leftow. I was unable to find any straightforward argument that whatever exists necessarily is timeless. So far as I am able to reconstruct his argument, Leftow appears to reason that if God is temporal, He is essentially temporal; and that since He is a necessary being, time therefore exists necessarily; but that since time is in fact contingent, God is therefore not temporal. Leftow's argument may be formulated as follows:

1. God exists necessarily. P
2. Time exists contingently. P
3. If God is temporal, God is essentially temporal. P
4. If God exists necessarily, then if God is essentially temporal, time exists necessarily. P
5. If God is essentially temporal, then time exists necessarily. 1,4 (MPP)
6. God is temporal. P

7. God is essentially temporal. 3,6 (MPP)

8. Time exists necessarily. 5,7 (MPP)

9. Time exists contingently and time exists necessarily. 2,8 (Conj.)

10. If God is temporal, then time exists contingently and time exists necessarily. 6-9 (CP)

11. God is not temporal. 10 (RAA)

The crucial premisses in the reasoning are (2) and (3), since we take (1) for granted. Let us examine Leftow's reasons for thinking each to be true.

The Contingency of Time

Premiss (2) is not uncontroversial. Isaac Newton held that time exists necessarily precisely in virtue of God's existence. In Newton's view, time (like space) is an emanative effect of God's being. He explains,

No being exists or can exist which is not related to space in some way. God is everywhere, created minds are somewhere, and body is in the space that it occupies; and whatever is neither everywhere nor anywhere does not exist. And hence it follows that space is an [emanative] effect arising from the first existence of being, because when any being is postulated, space is postulated. And the same may be asserted of duration: for certainly both are dispositions of being or attributes according to which we denominate quantitatively the presence and duration of any existing individual thing. So the quantity of the existence of God was eternal, in relation to duration, and infinite in relation to the space in which he is present; and the quantity of the existence of a created thing was as great, in relation to duration, as the duration since the beginning of its existence, and in relation to the size of its presence as great as the space belonging to it. [2]

Newtonian absolute time and space are thus rooted in the divine attributes of eternity and omnipresence, as Newton explains in the General Scholium to his *Principia*:

He is eternal and infinite . . .; that is, his duration reaches from eternity to eternity; his presence from infinity to infinity He is not eternity and infinity, but eternal and infinite; he is not duration or space, but he endures and is present. He endures forever, and is everywhere present; and, by existing always and everywhere, he constitutes duration and space. Since every particle of space is *always*, and every indivisible moment of duration is *everywhere*, certainly the Maker and Lord of all things cannot be *never* and *nowhere*. [3]

Thus, a theist of Newtonian stripe would deny that God's necessary existence entails His atemporality, since (2) is false.

What justification, then, does Leftow offer for (2)? He presents three brief arguments for time's contingency, [4] but it is doubtful that these would convince a theist of Newtonian stripe, who believes that time is a concomitant of God's existence and therefore necessary. To take his arguments in reverse order: (i) *Time is a physical reality, and a physically empty world is conceivable.* Newton would have agreed that a physically empty world is conceivable, but disagreed that time is merely a physical reality. God's time, absolute time, would continue to flow even in a physically empty world. He wrote, "although we can possibly imagine that there is nothing in space, yet we cannot think that space does not exist, just as we cannot think that there is no duration, even though it would be possible to suppose that nothing whatever endures." [5] So long as God exists, space and time could no more fail to exist than God's ubiquity and eternity, even in a physically empty world. (ii) *The propositions "no time exists" and "no temporal things exist" seem to be possibly true.* This assertion would not impress the Newtonian, however, since he connects the existence of time (and space) necessarily to the being of God as emanative effects of God's existence and therefore regards these propositions as impossible. (iii) *Space-time has a beginning and so must be contingent. If it is rejoined that since time exists at every moment of time and therefore can exist necessarily even though it has a beginning, one may reply that possibly there is a moment prior to the beginning of our time series T, so that possibly there is a time at which T does not exist.* Again, however, the beginning of physical space-time would not in the least faze the Newtonian, who holds that God's metaphysical time preceded any creation on His part of physical space-time. Moreover, even Leftow's answer to the rejoinder is unsatisfactory. Anything that begins to exist within time in a world W cannot be necessary because there will be a possible world W^* exactly similar to that segment of W 's history during which that thing does not exist. But, paradoxically, no matter how brief its existence, there is in no world a time during which time does not exist and so no means of pointing thereby to a world comprising such void time. Leftow's reply only shows that there are worlds in which T --the actual series of times--does not exist, not that there are worlds in which time does not exist. Even if every time series is contingent, it does not follow that time itself is contingent, just it does not follow from the contingency of every shape of an object that it is contingent that the object have a shape. It does seem bizarre to say that time can be necessarily existent and yet have a beginning, but Leftow needs to say more than he has to refute this position. In sum, Leftow's arguments for time's contingency are ineffectual against the Newtonian position which regards time as a necessary concomitant of God's existence. What is wanted here is some sort of critique of the view that God's existing entails the existence of time (and space).

Leftow does have something relevant to say on this score. [6] He argues that a temporal God must also be spatial, and he rejects God's spatiality as incompatible with orthodox theism. Since God must

be spaceless, it follows that He must be timeless as well. Hence, time cannot be necessary in virtue of God's existence.

Leftow's appeal to the argument from divine spacelessness is curious because that argument constitutes a quite independent justification for divine timelessness which is brought into play here only to rescue the argument from necessary existence. In any case, the appeal to God's spacelessness is ineffectual with respect to the classical Newtonian, since he holds that God does exist in infinite space as well as time. Leftow's rejection of the Newtonian position on the grounds of its incompatibility with orthodox theism appears somewhat Janus-faced, since he himself advocates a theory of divine eternity which seems to be incompatible with orthodox Christian theism. [7]

But never mind; even if we do reject divine spatiality as incompatible with Christian orthodoxy, what reason is there to think that divine temporality entails divine spatiality? Leftow responds,

something is located in one dimension of a geometry if and only if it is located in all. So if it is correct to represent time as another dimension, it follows that whatever in [*sic*] time is also in space: *only spatial things are temporal* . . . if God is in the time of our world, God is also in space. Any object with a space-time location is a physical object. Hence if the time in which God exists is the same physical time in which we exist, then God is a physical object with a spatial location. [8]

Since God is not a physical object, He is timeless and, hence, necessarily timeless.

This argument is, however, unsound. In the first place, one could dispute the argument on purely physical grounds alone in that it fails to take sufficient cognizance of the difference between coordinate time and parameter time. It is true that insofar as time plays the role of a coordinate, it is connected with a system of spatial coordinates, so that anything to which a temporal coordinate can be assigned is such that spatial coordinates are assignable to it as well. But insofar as time functions as a parameter, it is independent of space, and something which possesses temporal location and extension need not be held to exist in space as well as time. In Newtonian mechanics time plays the role of a parameter, not a coordinate, and, interestingly, the same is true of Einstein's formulation of the Special Theory of Relativity (STR)--the now familiar space-time formulation derives later from Minkowski. STR can be validly formulated in either way. Moreover, since STR is a local theory only, we must, in order to achieve a global perspective, consider time as it functions in cosmological models based on the General Theory of Relativity (GTR), on which matter Leftow is silent. While time is defined in the standard Friedman models by means of spatial hypersurfaces, the time parameter in the Robertson-Walker line element which describes the space-time metric is distinguished precisely by its independence of space. Moreover, spatio-temporal coordinates in GTR are purely conventional and have no physical significance. Thus, it is not obvious that a being could not exist at a certain moment

of cosmic time without being spatially located as well.

But Leftow's argument suffers from a far more serious shortcoming than this. The argument appears to rest upon a crucial presupposition which will affect fundamentally one's theories of time and eternity and which I believe to be profoundly mistaken, namely, the reductionistic equation of time with *physical* time, that is to say, with time as it plays a role in physics. That this equation is mistaken is obvious from the simple fact that whereas physical time came into existence after the Big Bang singularity, time itself may well have existed prior to the initial cosmological singularity. A succession of mental events in God's mind, His counting, for example, would alone suffice to generate a temporal series in the absence of any physical objects whatsoever. [9] Thus, it is plainly not the case that something is in time if and only if it is in space--and that metaphysical truth is not negated by the fact that in some physical theories an event which is assigned a temporal coordinate in space-time also has spatial coordinates as well.

Leftow attempts to come to grips with the objection that time as such is not to be equated with time as it plays a role in physics. This objection, Leftow figures, is most plausibly construed to mean that STR does not tell us "the literal truth about the nature of time." [10] Fair enough; but the anti-reductionist would also deny that the various definitions of time in GTR, Quantum Theory, Quantum Cosmology, and so on, represent the literal truth about time either.

Leftow's response is two-fold. First, one can say that space and time do possess objectively just the structure described in STR. We can generalize Leftow's claim to include other physical theories as well. But clearly this response fails to turn back the force of the objection: at best the response only shows that it is epistemically possible that the structure of space and time is literally described by such theories. But that does not show that it actually *is* literally described by those theories. Indeed, we have seen what I consider to be a knock-down argument that these theories do not give us the literal truth about time: it is impossible to extend physical time through the Big Bang singularity, but God could have created time itself prior to the initial cosmological singularity simply by generating a sequence of mental events. It seems clear then that to be in time is not also to be in space. Now perhaps in fact the physical quantities representing time in scientific theories contingently coincide with or provide accurate measures of time itself. But to claim that whatever is in time is therefore also in space is to confound time and space with their measures.

Leftow's second response to the anti-reductionist objection is that the very fact that the defender of divine temporality is driven to deny the literal truth of STR confirms Leftow's argument that if STR is true, then a spaceless God is timeless. This response is just misconceived. Leftow labors under the misimpression, apparently communicated to him personally by William Hasker, that "What forces us, in our Einsteinian universe, to regard time as a fourth dimension is the relativity of

simultaneity." [11] This, as I have mentioned, is inaccurate, since in Einstein's original formulation of STR time is a parameter, not a coordinate. Nothing in the theory itself requires us to say that whatever is temporal is *ipso facto* spatial. Moreover, we need to keep clearly in view that when Leftow says that he assumes that STR is true, he means much more than the theory's admitted empirical adequacy or even its accuracy in describing physical space and time; he means that physical space and time, as these are defined in that theory, are literally space and time themselves, which is an enormous metaphysical assumption which begs some justification.

It seems to me, therefore, that Leftow has failed to provide any plausible grounds for inferring divine spatiality from divine temporality. The appeal to God's spacelessness thus proves to be unavailing as a demonstration that God cannot be necessarily temporal and so time itself necessary in virtue of God's necessary existence. Hence, the truth of (2) is not justified on the basis of God's spacelessness.

A more thorough analysis of time and space will be necessary to refute Newton's heterodox view of necessary divine temporality. Such a critique would most plausibly appeal to some sort of relational theory of time, according to which time would not exist in the total absence of events. One could then conceive of a world in which God refrains from creation and exists changelessly. Such a static, eventless world would be timeless; hence, it follows that time does not exist necessarily. Given that time exists, it therefore exists contingently, *Q.E.D.* If one finds relational theories of time attractive, then Christian theists, at least, have good reasons to regard (2) as true.

The Essentiality of Divine Temporality

But that takes us to the more controversial premiss (3). In support of this premiss, Leftow appears to argue that a timeless God could not possibly be temporal because "temporal and timeless beings will have to have properties so radically different as to make transworld identification of such beings implausible." [12] What shall we make of this claim?

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems to me that Leftow's argument for divine timelessness based on God's necessary existence does not succeed. He fails to provide a convincing case for premiss (2), and the most plausible reason for taking (2) to be true, namely, the possibility of God's existing changelessly alone and, hence, timelessly, turns out to undermine the truth of (3), since a temporal God could have refrained from creating and so existed timelessly. Therefore, there is no reason to think that a necessary being could not exist temporally.

Footnotes:

[1]

Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, Cornell Studies in Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 270-71.

[2]

Isaac Newton, "On the Gravity and Equilibrium of Fluids," in *Unpublished Scientific Papers of Isaac Newton*, ed. and trans. A. Rupert Hall and Marie Boas Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 136-37. Hall and Hall's translation of the phrase *entis primario existentis effectus emanativus* conceals the bracketed word I have inserted in the text. Space and time are not voluntary creations of God, but, as it were, displacements in being resulting from His existence.

[3]

Isaac Newton, *Sir Isaac Newton's 'Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy' and his 'System of the World,'* trans. Andrew Motte, rev. with an Appendix by Florian Cajori, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 2: 545.

[4]

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, pp. 32-34. Cf. Robert Oakes, "Temporality and Divinity: an Analytic Hurdle," *Sophia* 31 (1992): 11-26, who, though espousing the same general argument as Leftow, admits that he cannot prove time's contingency in the face of a Newtonian opponent. Instead Oakes alleges that making time necessary in virtue of God's existence either compromises the Christian doctrine of God's unique aseity or else divinizes time into an aspect of God. Newton would have regarded this as a pseudo-dilemma. As an emanative effect of God's being, time does not exist *a se*, even though it exists necessarily. What Newton said of space applies also to time: "it is not absolute in itself [per se], but is as it were an emanative effect of God" (Newton, "On the Gravity and Equilibrium of Fluids," p. 99). Nor should time be thought of as a divine attribute. When Samuel Clarke asserted in his correspondence with Leibniz that "space is a property, in like manner as duration is," of infinite substance or God (Samuel Clarke and G. W. Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, ed. with an Introduction and Notes by H. G. Alexander [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956], p. 121), an alarmed Newton intervened in the publication of the Des Maiseaux edition of the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence by writing anonymously an *Avertissement au Lecteur* in which he advised that when Mr. Clarke referred to space and time as qualities or properties, this was due to "an inevitable imperfection of language" and should be understood to mean that space and time are "modes of

existence" and "consequences of the existence of a substance which is really, necessarily, and substantially all-present and eternal" (see Alexandre Koyre and I. Bernard Cohen, "Newton and the Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence," *Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences* 15 [1962]: 63-126). Though God has the properties of being omnipresent and eternal, space and time themselves, as effects of God, are not themselves properties or attributes of God.

[5]

Newton, "On the Gravity and Equilibrium of Fluids," pp. 137-38.

[6]

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, pp. 35-36.

[7]

Leftow admits that if only spatial things are temporal, then non-spatial entities such as changeable angels or disembodied souls do not exist (Brian Leftow, "Eternity and Simultaneity," *Faith and Philosophy* 8 [1991]: 163). This is by no means insignificant. The doctrine of the intermediate state of the soul after death may prove to be essential to the coherence of the Christian doctrine of eschatological resurrection and final judgement, due to the need to preserve personal identity between earthly and resurrected human beings. Doctrines pertinent to angelology/demonology may have important practical ramifications for Christian spirituality (Eph. 6.12).

[8]

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 36.

[9]

Thus, I agree with Grace Jantzen when she says,

"Time is more basic than space. For instance, the theory of relativity does not of itself solve the problem of whether disembodied persons are possible, persons who, if they had conscious processes . . . would clearly be temporal even though *ex hypothesi* not spatial. The theory of relativity applies to the relationship and measurement of space and time in the physical contents of the universe; it does not address itself to the question whether non-spatial entities might exist, nor whether they would be temporal or non-temporal if they did . . . it might not be possible for us to *measure* the duration of a non-spatial entity or event, but this is not the same as saying that whatever is temporal must be spatial" (Grace M. Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body*, with a Foreword by John MacQuarrie [London: Darton,

Longman, and Todd, 1984], p. 44).

See also the remarks of W. Norris Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University, 1979), p. 94, for a time based on "the pure succession of contents of consciousness" in the mind of God, in contrast to the temporal succession based principally on "*the continuous physical* motion going on in our world."

[\[10\]](#)

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 272.

[\[11\]](#)

Ibid. (Leftow's citation from personal correspondence with William Hasker).

[\[12\]](#)

Ibid., p. 44.