

# Divine Timelessness and Personhood

William Lane Craig

## SUMMARY

Detractors of the doctrine of divine timelessness argue that

1. God is timeless

and

2. God is personal

are broadly logically incompatible on the basis of the following necessarily true premises

3. If God is timeless, He does not exemplify properties  $x, y, z$
4. If God does not exemplify properties  $x, y, z$ , He is not personal

where  $x, y, z$  are replaced by certain specified properties.

For clarity's sake, consider God existing alone *sans* a temporal creation. Could He in such a state be timeless and exemplify the properties essential to personhood? I show that God could, in fact, do so, whether one adopts criteria for personhood based on states of consciousness, intentionality, or capacity for inter-personal relations. Thus, on a plausible construal of (4), it turns out that (3) is not necessarily true, and thus the argument fails.

## DIVINE TIMELESSNESS AND PERSONHOOD

It is frequently alleged by detractors of divine timelessness that the concept of a timeless person is incoherent, that the properties essential to personhood cannot be exemplified timelessly. Since it is essential to theism that God be personal, it follows that God cannot be timeless. Thus, if God exists, He is temporal.

In effect these opponents of divine timelessness are arguing that the following two propositions are broadly logically incompatible:

1. God is timeless.
2. God is personal.

In order to demonstrate this, these philosophers try to show that it is necessarily true that

3. If God is timeless, He does not exemplify properties  $x, y, z$ .
4. If God does not exemplify properties  $x, y, z$ , He is not personal

where  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$  are replaced by certain specified properties.

Debates on this issue are frequently muddled by the conflation of the question of the coherence of the notion of a timeless person with the question of whether such a timeless person could sustain relations with or interact with temporal persons. For example, when Grace Jantzen complains, "A timeless and immutable God could not be personal, because he could not create or respond, perceive or act, think, remember, or do any of the other things persons do which require time. Thus, within the framework of a theology of a personal God, the doctrines of divine timelessness and immutability cannot be retained," [1] the problems she raises with divine timelessness, apart from thinking and remembering, arise only in connection with a timeless God's relation to temporal entities and so do not demonstrate any incoherence in the notion of a timeless person as such. Since I have elsewhere discussed the objection to divine timelessness based on God's relation to the temporal world, [2] I shall for clarity's sake in the discussion of this objection consider God as existing timelessly alone without creation, whether this be conceived to be a state of affairs included in the actual world, as on an Ockhamist model of divine eternity, or whether it be taken to be a state of affairs constituting a non-actual possible world, as on the Thomistic model. The question, then, is whether God so conceived could be personal.

The answer to that question will, of course, depend on one's concept of personhood and the conditions laid down for something's being a person. Typically detractors of divine timelessness propose certain criteria which serve as necessary conditions of personhood and then seek to show that a timeless being fails to meet these standards. In his helpful survey of this issue, Yates observes that these criteria tend to fall into three broad groups: (1) criteria based on states of consciousness, (2) criteria based on intentionality, and (3) criteria based on inter-personal relations. [3] Defenders of divine timelessness might choose to challenge the adequacy of the proposed criteria by arguing that they are not necessary conditions of personhood, thus in effect undercutting (4)--a not unpromising strategy in light of the difficulty of defining personhood, which stirs debates in applied ethics over beginning and end of life issues and in the field of artificial intelligence. More often, however, proponents of timelessness have sought to show that God as they conceive Him can in fact meet the conditions stipulated, however incorrect they may be, thus undercutting (3). Let us consider these questions with respect to each of the three types of criteria proposed.

#### Criteria Based on States of Consciousness

In his article, "Conditions of Personhood," [4] Daniel Dennett discerns six different conceptions of personhood in the philosophical tradition, each laying down a necessary condition of an individual  $A$ 's being a person:

$A$  is a person only if:

- i. *A* is a rational being.
- ii. *A* is a being to which states of consciousness can be attributed.
- iii. Others regard or can regard *A* as a being to which states of consciousness can be attributed.
- iv. *A* is capable of regarding others as beings to which states of consciousness can be attributed.
- v. *A* is capable of verbal communication.
- vi. *A* is self-conscious; that is, *A* is capable of regarding him/her/itself as a subject of states of consciousness.

All of these criteria depend directly or indirectly on *A*'s having or being ascribed consciousness. As an initial foray into this first objection to divine timelessness, then, we may ask, is the concept of a timeless, conscious being incoherent?

J. R. Lucas is adamant that it is. He maintains that it cannot be up to God whether to create time or not, for God, as a personal being, is conscious and time is a concomitant of consciousness. Hence,

Time is not a thing that God might or might not create, but a category, a necessary concomitant of the existence of a personal being, though not of a mathematical entity. This is not to say that time is an independent category, existing independently of God. It exists because of God: not because of some act of will on His part, but because of His nature: if ultimate reality is personal, then it follows that time must exist. God did not make time, but time stems from God. [5]

In Lucas's view, then, whether or not the physical world exists, time exists if a personal God alone exists. Now Lucas is clearly correct, I think, in maintaining that a succession of contents of consciousness in God's mind would itself be sufficient to generate a temporal series, and his insistence on this score is a healthy antidote for the physical reductionism that too often poisons the contemporary philosophy of space and time. But what if God's mental life in the absence of any created world is not discursive, but changeless? Why could the contents of God's consciousness not be comprised of tenselessly true beliefs such as "No humans exist," "7+5=12," "In *W*\* Socrates drinks hemlock," "Anything that has a shape has a size," "If Jones were in *C*, he would write to his wife," "The atomic number of gold is 78," "God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect," and so on, and be such that He never acquires and never loses any of His beliefs? Would not such a changeless consciousness of truth be plausibly regarded as timeless? Short of a proof of the incoherence of all relational theories of time, we must grant that time would not be a concomitant of such a consciousness. What reason is there, then, to regard such a consciousness as impossible? Here Lucas has nothing to say; he confesses, "My claim . . . that time is a concomitant of consciousness, is of

course only a claim, and I have been unable to argue for it, except by citing poetry . . . arguments would be better." [6]

Indeed, so what arguments are there against atemporal consciousness? Richard Gale would make short work of the question: "the quickest and most direct way of showing the absurdity of a timeless mind is as follows: A mind is conscious, and consciousness is a temporally elongated process." [7] This way is certainly direct, and it is all too quick: Gale fails to show that being temporally extended is an essential property of consciousness. Given some relational theory of time, God's solitary and unchanging consciousness of tenseless truths would not be temporally extended. As various defenders of divine timelessness have pointed out, knowing is not necessarily an activity which takes time. [8] Gale's retort that it makes sense to ask questions like "How long have you known logic?" [9] does nothing to show that believing a tenseless proposition  $p$  or knowing  $p$  necessarily takes time, but only shows that there are senses of the word "know" in which it is appropriate to speak of knowing something over time. Gale fails to blunt William Mann's point that "it need not take any time at all to *know* something. Of course, one can know something for a period of years, but the point is that knowing is not a process whose fulfillment takes time, or an activity which entails the existence of earlier and later stages in the mental life of the knowing agent." [10] Gale counters that one cannot know that  $p$  without having dispositions to engage in temporal episodes, occurrences, or processes, in which case God cannot be pure actuality as Thomists claim. [11] But this objection, even if cogent, strikes only against God's being pure actuality, not His being timeless--unless Gale thinks that being pure actuality is a necessary condition of a person's being timeless. It is true that Aquinas held that any being with even the potentiality for change could not be eternal, but inhabits at best the mysterious *aevum*, which he thought of as a sort of quasi-temporality. [12] But it is difficult to see any reason to adopt this peculiar, modal view of time. So long as God is intrinsically changeless and extrinsically unrelated to changing things, then in the utter absence of change it is hard to see how the mere disposition to engage in temporal activities suffices to render God temporal, even if it were conceded that were He to actualize those dispositions to so engage, then He would be temporal. In any case, Gale's stipulation is clearly false. There is no reason to think that God cannot know that  $2+2=4$  without having a disposition to engage in temporal activities. Moreover, on the Christian view God is free to refrain from creating at all, and were He to have so abstained and remained changeless, then He would have had no disposition whatsoever to engage in temporal episodes, occurrences, or processes, and He would have known a true proposition precisely to that effect.

Thus, we have not seen any grounds for thinking that God could not fulfill condition (ii) above. The mention of modal properties also helps us to see how God might meet conditions (iii), (iv), and (v). Even in a state of existing changelessly alone, God is still capable of regarding others as conscious beings, since He is capable of creating such beings, thereby fulfilling condition (iv). Condition (iii) can be taken

to imply that even if no one in fact regards *A* as a conscious being, still there is a possible world *W* in which they do regard *A* as a being which can be conscious. Since God could create such persons, (iii) is met even in a world in which God exists changelessly alone. Even if in *W* God is temporal, that does not alter the fact that in the world or state we are envisioning He is such that possibly others regard Him as a being to which states of consciousness can be attributed. Similarly, even in the state we are imagining, God is capable of verbal communication, since He could create language users like us and communicate with them verbally by, say, causing sound waves in the air. Even if in such a case He would be temporal, that fact does nothing to detract from His timeless existence in the state of affairs we have pictured. Thus, no reason has been provided for thinking that a timeless being could not be a conscious being and, hence, on the above criteria a person. Thus, (3) is undercut. More than that, however; our thought experiment suggests more positively, I think, that a timeless being can be conscious and therefore can be a person. Could a timeless God be self-conscious? In order to be self-conscious a being must believe not merely propositions about himself *de re*, such as, in this case, "God exists necessarily" or "God knows that *p*," but he must have beliefs *de se*, which he would express from the first person perspective; for example, God must believe "I exist necessarily" and "I know that *p*." [13] If a timeless being can be conscious, there seems to be no reason remaining for denying to Him timeless knowledge *de se* as well. It takes no more time to believe truly that "I have no human company" or "I believe that if Jones were in *C*, he would write to his wife" than it does to believe that "No human beings exist" or "If Jones were in *C*, etc." Hence, if a timeless being can be conscious, it seems that he could be self-conscious as well and therefore by criterion (vi) personal.

As for being rational, that depends on whether *A* is within his epistemic rights or exhibits no defect in his noetic structure with respect to the bulk of his beliefs. [14] There seems to be nothing about timelessness which would entail *A*'s violating his epistemic duties or having a flawed noetic structure. In God's case He is surely within His rights in holding the beliefs He does, since it is broadly logically impossible for God to hold a false belief and He knows that fact. Moreover, it is plausible or at least possible that for God all His beliefs are properly basic, so that none of His beliefs is improperly founded or entertained. Being timeless has no inherent impact upon God's noetic structure or fulfillment of His epistemic duties (assuming that He even has such duties), so that by criterion (i) we ought to affirm that a timeless God can be personal.

Now some have denied that a timeless God can be a self-conscious, rational being because He could not then exhibit certain forms of consciousness which we normally associate with such beings (namely, ourselves). In an oft-quoted passage, Robert Coburn asserts,

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 inasmuch as their exercise by a being clearly requires that the being exist in time. After all, reflection and deliberation take time, deciding typically occurs at some time--and in any case it always makes sense to ask, 'When did you (he, they, etc.) decide?'; remembering is impossible unless the being doing the remembering has a past; and so on. Hence, no eternal being, it would seem, could be a person. [15]

Even if Coburn were correct that the capacity to exhibit the above-mentioned forms of consciousness were essential to a personal being, it still does not follow that a timeless being cannot be a person. For Coburn just assumes that timelessness is an essential property of any timeless being; but that assumption is dubious. Suppose that God is in fact temporal. Is it implausible to think that God is contingently temporal, but possibly timeless? Since according to the Christian doctrine of creation, God's decision to create is freely willed, there are possible worlds in which God exists alone, with no reality *extra se* (apart from any timeless abstract objects which Platonists among us might want to posit). If in such a world God is unchanging, then on any sort of relational theory of time God would be timeless in such a world. Indeed, there would be no time at all in such a world, since literally nothing happens; there are no events to generate relations of *before* and *after*. God as He exists in such an atemporal world would differ in respect to some of His properties which He has in the postulated actual world--such as *knowing what time it is, experiencing tense and temporal becoming, changing in His awareness*, and so forth--, but none of these differences seems so major as to preclude transworld identity. In short, apart from highly controversial claims concerning divine simplicity and pure actuality, I see no reason to think that God may not be conceived as contingently temporal or atemporal.

In fact we can conceive of a model of divine eternity along Ockhamist lines which would combine states of divine timelessness and temporality into a *single* world. On such a model God exists timelessly *sans* creation and in time subsequent to the commencement of the temporal series of events. On this view God in the eventless, changeless state of existing alone without creation is timeless, since time does not exist in the total absence of events. Time originates with the first event, the creation of the world, and God endures throughout time from the moment of creation on. On such a model, as Leftow points out, God's having a first moment of existence does not entail that God's existence has a limit or that He came into existence:

If God existed in time once time existed and time had a first moment, then God would have a first moment of existence: there would be a moment before which He did not exist, because there was no 'before' that moment. . . . Yet even if He . . . had a first moment of existence, one could still call God's existence unlimited were it understood that He would have existed even if time did not. For as long as this is true, we cannot infer from God's having had a first moment of existence that God *came into*

existence or would not have existed save if time did. [16]

On such a model, the past is finite, God exists atemporally without the world, and yet God exists temporally from the inception of the world and His creation of time. If such a model is coherent, then any objection that God is either essentially temporal or essentially timeless is nugatory.

If, then, timelessness is a contingent property of some timeless being, then that being might be quite capable of remembering, anticipating, reflecting, and so forth; only were he to do so, then he would not then be timeless. If he desists from such activities, he is timeless though capable of being temporal through engaging in them and so, by Coburn's own lights, personal.

If we modify Coburn's criterion such that in order to be a person a being must be not merely capable, but actually engaged in such activities, then it follows that we cease to be persons every time we fall asleep (at least a dreamless sleep) or are unconscious, which is absurd. We could perhaps say that a truly personal being must engage in some of these activities during its lifetime; to avoid begging the question, we could require that if *A* is personal, it must not be true of *A* that *A* never engages in such activities. But this criterion is still inadequate. Since memories and anticipations and intentions are not always veridical or fulfilled, a timeless being could still engage in such activities, so long as his memories, anticipations, and intentions never change. Remembering the past without having a past is not impossible, so long as one's memories are false; similarly with regard to anticipations and intentions and the future. What Coburn is really arguing is that a perfect being or God cannot be timeless and personal. If God is to be personal, it must not be true of Him that He never engages in the specified activities. But even this stricture would fail to preclude God's being personal and timeless on an Ockhamist view, according to which God is timeless *sans* creation and temporal subsequent to creation, for God exhibits the prescribed forms of consciousness subsequent to the moment of creation, even if He lacks them *sans* creation.

In any case, I think it is pretty widely recognized that the forms of consciousness specified by Coburn (with the exception of volitional activities, which I shall take up below) are not essential to perfect personhood. Indeed, it is not essential to perfect personhood even to be capable of them, so that even defenders of the non-contingent nature of timelessness need not be troubled by Coburn's objection. Take remembering, for example. Mental health requires that any temporal person remember his past. Persons suffering from *aphasia*, a mental disorder characterized by the disappearance of all memories within two or three seconds, are pitifully deranged; they are still persons, yet far from healthy persons. But if an individual is atemporal, why would being a healthy or perfect person require memories on his part? After all, he has no past. And he never forgets anything. Given God's status as an infallible knower, there is just no reason at all to think that His perfect personhood requires memory. Similarly with respect to anticipations: since He has no future, since his life is *tota simul*, there just is nothing to

anticipate. Only a perfect person who is temporal would need to have beliefs about the future or the past.

As for reflecting and deliberating, these are essential only for persons who are not omniscient. For a perfect knower reflection and deliberation in any temporal sense [17] are precluded, since he would already know the conclusions to be arrived at. This is the case for a temporal deity as well as for an atemporal God. Are we to think then that omniscience is incompatible with personhood? That would be a bizarre conclusion; I see no reason to think that an omniscient being could not be personal. [18] But if a temporal God can be personal and yet never reflect or deliberate, it is gratuitous to deny the status of *person* to an atemporal deity because He does not engage in these activities either.

With a little imagination, as R. C. S. Walker has shown, it is not difficult to conceive of a personal being existing timelessly. [19] Yet, it might be maintained that the life of such a person, lacking collectively the sorts of forms of consciousness specified by Coburn, could not be perfect, and this even if it were shown that no one such form of consciousness alone was essential to a perfect being. Walker himself seems rather ambivalent on the value of timeless life as he imagines it, commenting,

life would be very strange, and very limited, in a timeless world. There would be none of the pleasures of putting right someone who has made a mistake one recognizes as such; nor would there be the more dubious, or Platonic, pleasure of being put right oneself. Life would not be exciting; but at least it would not be boring either. For us pleasure resides very largely in getting things done, not in having done them, and none of this would be available in our imaginary world. Aristotle thought that such an existence would be fun all the same; this may be doubted, but at least one could entertain a great variety of thoughts and a great complexity of mathematical argumentation, so long as one did it all at once. And tastes, after all, do vary. [20]

Walker's misgivings about the value of a timeless life are based on an overgeneralization from the anthropomorphic timeless world he envisions. If the finite, timeless persons he imagines had their attention fixed upon the infinite God, riveted by His supreme goodness and love for them, then their experience could be a timeless moment of sheer ecstasy, to which the puny goods mentioned by Walker could not even be compared. They would have no need of the pleasure of correcting someone else or of being corrected by them. How much more so for God Himself, who, on the Christian perspective, enjoys a complete apprehension of His infinite goodness and the infinite, inter-personal love of the Blessed Trinity! For finite persons, true fulfillment and, hence, their greatest pleasure lie, not in getting things done, but in knowing God. Similarly, what John Piper calls "the pleasures of God" [21] reside primarily not in what He gets done, but in Himself, as the supremely worthy one. Life so conceived is not only not boring, it is enthralling. The reason that Aristotle --and his medieval progeny--thought that such a timeless life would be "fun" is because they conceived this life to be God's



life, perfect and complete and, hence, changeless in its apprehension of God's inexhaustible goodness. Once we conceive of timeless life as God's life, we can see that temporal forms of consciousness such as those mentioned by Coburn are not at all necessary in order for such a life to be supremely valuable and pleasurable.

In summary, then, it has not been shown that a timeless being, even a perfect timeless being, cannot meet the conditions necessary for personhood based on the possession of states of consciousness. Thus, no good reason has been given to think that

3'. If God is timeless, He does not exemplify the properties of self-consciousness and rationality

is necessarily true. On the contrary, our discussion suggests that God could be timeless and still fulfill all the proposed requisites of being personal. Thus, for any properties which are such that propositions of the form of (4) are plausibly taken to be necessarily true also seem to be such that propositions of the form of (3) turn out to be not necessarily true, so that no incompatibility has been demonstrated between (1) and (2).

#### Criteria Based on Intentionality

Some critics of divine timelessness have proposed volitional criteria such as intentionality and volition as essential to personhood and on that basis argued for the incompatibility of personhood with timelessness. Again Gale makes the point:

The necessity for a person to endure in time can also be seen from an analysis of what it is to be a rational agent. An agent performs intentional actions so as to bring about some goal or end. But to have a goal or end, the agent must have desires and values. But only a temporally incomplete being can have a desire or intention, since one cannot desire or intend what one already has. [22]

Unfortunately, here again old problems resurface. If we say that performing intentional activities is essential to personhood, then we are only sporadically persons. And this is not merely the case for a sleeping or comatose individual, but even for the couch potato passively watching television or the daydreamer whose mind is wandering. If we modify the criterion to state that persons must have the capacity for performing intentional activities, then a timeless God could possess such a capacity, even if it were true that, were He to realize that capacity by actually intending something, He would then be temporal. Again, we could modify the criterion to state that if *A* is personal, then it not be true of *A* that *A* never engages in intentional activity. But since intentions are not always fulfilled and the will is not inevitably efficacious, it is easy to imagine someone who has future-directed intentions and volitions without there being any future for that person; for example, a person who unbeknownst to him is about to be instantaneously killed. In a similar way a timeless being could possess unchanging future-directed

intentions and volitions which are never fulfilled. We might be inclined to modify the present criterion such that if *A* is a personal being, *A* must have efficacious volitions and fulfilled intentions. But then it is much less obvious that this criterion states a necessary condition of personhood. So long as a person *believes* that his intentions and volitions are efficacious, it does not seem to matter if that person should really be a brain in a vat or the dupe of a Cartesian evil genius whose willings turn out to be wholly inefficacious. He intends to lift his arm or drive to town or enjoy a day at the beach, and the Mastermind produces an appropriate illusory experience. Doubtless some acts of will (say, to concentrate on a certain idea) cannot be merely seemingly efficacious; but then there is no necessity that our hypothetical individuals should have such volitions or intentions. Once the condition of efficacy is added to intentionality and volition, the criterion no longer states a plausible necessary condition of personhood.

All this makes it evident that the issue once again is not whether a person can be timeless, but whether God can be timeless. It is plausible that necessarily God has desire and volition, since, as Aquinas held, God desires and wills His own goodness. So the question is: Can God possess intentionality and volition and yet exist timelessly? The answer to that question will depend on whether intentionality and volition are essentially oriented toward the future. Even on a purely human level, it is easy to find counter-examples to Gale's assertion that the objects of one's intentions or desires must be future rather than present goods. A man dangling from a cliff wills to hold on as tightly as he can; a person admiring the beauty of a statue intends his experience of aesthetic pleasure; a sunbather desires the feeling of relaxation which he presently enjoys. Of course, we could imagine further ends to which these ends are typically subordinated; but the point remains that intentionality and will need not be oriented toward the future. There is nothing about intentionality and will as such which renders them essentially future-directed.

But if that is the case, then why could God not will and intend what He does timelessly? God's desiring and willing His own goodness obviously is not an activity which consumes time. Similarly, existing changelessly alone *sans* creation, God may 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 will to create, but cannot be said, as God, to will to refrain from creating. In a world in which God freely refrains from creation, that abstinence is the result of a real act of the will, choosing between two available alternatives. But in such a world, as we have seen, God can be conceived to exist atemporally with a timeless intention to refrain from creation. The efficacy of God's will is evident from the fact that in no possible world in which God wills to refrain from creation does a world of creatures exist, whereas in every world in which He wills to create, creatures are produced.

Although God's timeless volitions are not the result of decisions taken at any point in time, nonetheless

they are freely willed, as is evident from the fact that there are worlds in which God does create a universe and in such worlds nothing external to God determines His volition to create. Thus, God can be truly said to have efficacious and free volitions timelessly. [23]

Therefore, although defenders of divine timelessness adhere to the necessary truth of

4". If God does not exemplify intentionality and volition, He is not personal,

we have seen no reason why they should accede to the necessary truth of

3". If God is timeless, He does not exemplify intentionality and volition.

Quite the contrary, our thought experiment suggests that (3") is not necessarily true, that it is possible for God to exist with timeless intentions and volitions.

#### Criteria Based on Inter-personal Relations

Certain philosophers have taken it as essential to personhood that one have the capacity to engage in inter-personal relations. But any number of thinkers have alleged that a timeless God is incapable of sustaining such relations with other persons and so cannot be personal. Pike's reservations are illustrative:

a timeless being could not be affected or prompted by another. It could not respond to needs, overtures, delights or antagonisms of human beings. There are two distinct issues connected with this last point: (1) A timeless being is immutable in the strong sense of 'immutable' . . . Such an individual could not be affected or prompted by another. To be affected or prompted by another is to be changed by the other. (2) The actions of a timeless being could not be interpreted as a *response* to something else. Responses are located in time after that to which they are responses . . . An individual that is (in principle) incapable of all of these things could not be counted as a person. [24]

Now if we are to disentangle this objection from the objection based on God's relations to the temporal world, we need to continue to consider God as He exists changelessly alone *sans* creation. In such a timeless state, would God have the capacity for inter-personal relations?

The answer to that question depends on what it is that constitutes the capacity to engage in such relations. It seems to me that it consists in precisely those sorts of attributes which we have been discussing; sufficient intelligence, self-consciousness, volition. But we have seen that all of these can be possessed by a timeless being and by God in particular. It therefore follows that a timeless God existing *sans* creation has the capacity, if not the opportunity, to engage human persons in inter-personal relations, even if, should He create and so engage such persons, He would not then be

timeless. Pike's appeal to immutability to bar this conclusion is nugatory. Even if a timeless God could not change, it does not follow that He could not have willed differently and chosen to be related to a temporal world and so been temporal. Pike gratuitously assumes that if God is timeless, He is so essentially rather than contingently. Moreover, Pike assumes that immutability is essential to a timeless being, rather than mere changelessness. But on some relational theory of time, the changelessness of a solitary God is sufficient for timelessness. That opens the door for an Ockhamist view according to which God exists timelessly *sans* creation and enters into time at the moment of creation in virtue of His relation to temporal things or events, including human persons. Thus, timelessness does not entail that God could not be affected or prompted by another or that He could not respond to any other persons He might choose to create.

It hardly needs to be said that it would be hopeless to modify the present criterion to require as a necessary condition of personhood that one actually be related to other persons in order to be personal, for then every marooned sailor, every prisoner locked in solitary, every reclusive hermit would no longer be a person. It would be more plausible to hold that if *A* is personal, then it must not be true of *A* that *A* never experiences inter-personal relations. Someone who lacks all contact with other human beings would fail to develop into a person. This criterion assumes a functional view of personhood, which is controversial; but let that pass. For a moment's reflection reveals the inadequacy of the proposal. What seems to be required for *A*'s personhood is merely that *A* *think* that he is engaged in inter-personal relations, even if it should turn out that *A* is a brain in a vat or an unwitting denizen of a world of wonderfully constructed simulacra. Of course, God could not be so deceived; but then why think that the infinite and eternal God is subject to the same sort of developmental restrictions as human beings?

In any case this whole discussion presupposes that if God is to enjoy inter-personal relations, it must be human persons to which He must be related. But on the Christian view, that is false. Within the fullness of the Godhead itself, the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit enjoy the inter-personal relations afforded by the Trinity which God is. As a Trinity, God is eternally complete, with no need of fellowship with finite persons. It is a marvel of God's grace and love that He would freely create finite persons and invite them to share in the love and joy of the inner Trinitarian life of God. But would the existence of these Trinitarian inter-relationships necessitate that God be temporal, as Pike implies? I see no reason to think that the persons of the Trinity could not be affected, prompted, or responsive to one another in an unchanging and, hence, timeless way. Pike is mistaken when he asserts that to be affected or prompted by another is to be changed by the other. To use a mundane example, think of iron filings clinging to a magnet. The magnet and the filings need not change their positions in any way in order for it to be the case that the filings are stuck to the magnet because the magnet is affecting them and they are responding to the magnet's force. Of course, on a deeper level change is going on constantly in this case because the magnet's causal influence is mediated by finite velocity electro-

magnetic radiation. Nonetheless, the example is instructive because it illustrates how on a macroscopic level action and response can be simultaneous and, hence, involve neither change nor temporal separation. How much more is this so when we consider the love relationship between the members of the Trinity! Since intra-Trinitarian relations are not based on physical influence chains or rooted in any material substrata, but are, as it were, purely telepathic, the response of the Son to the Father's love entails neither change nor temporal separation. Just as we speak metaphorically of two lovers who sit, not speaking a word, gazing into each other's eyes as "lost in that timeless moment," so we may speak literally of the timeless mutual love of the Father, Son, and Spirit for one another.

In his imaginative construction of a timeless world, Walker agrees that there could be a timeless society of inter-related persons, though with limitations which we might think incompatible with divine life:

The social life of these timeless beings would, it is true, be a trifle limited; limited in particular by the fact that they could not converse or argue with one another, for these things take time. They could, however, at least be aware of each other's existence. It is even perhaps conceivable that they might have a sort of language (of rather limited usefulness)--though of course they could never have learned it. [25]

But again Walker's world is a society of finite timeless persons, not the divine society of the Trinity, which has no use of conversation or argument. The ancient doctrine of *perichoreisis*, championed by the Greek Church Fathers, expresses the timeless interaction of the persons of the Godhead. [26] According to that doctrine, there is a complete interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity, such that each is intimately bound up in the activities of the other. Thus, what the Father wills, the Son and Spirit also will; what the Son loves, the Father and Spirit also love, and so forth. Each person is completely transparent to the others. There is nothing new that the Son, for example, might communicate to the Spirit, since that has already been communicated. There exists a full and perfect exchange of the divine love and knowledge, so that nothing is left undone which needs to be completed. In this perfect inter-penetration of divine love and life, no change need occur, so that God existing alone in the self-sufficiency of His being would, on some relational view of time, be timeless.

Thus, I think it is evident that God can enjoy inter-personal relations and yet be timeless. So even if we conceded that God is essentially timeless, that timelessness entails immutability, and that *de facto* inter-personal relations are essential to personhood--all of which are moot--, it is still not necessarily true that

3". If God is timeless, He does not stand in inter-personal relations.

## Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, then, the objection to divine timelessness that a personal being or God cannot be

timeless must be deemed unsuccessful. Detractors of divine timelessness have failed to show that a timeless God cannot exemplify properties which are a necessary condition of personhood. On the contrary, we have good reason to think that a timeless God can fulfill the stipulated necessary conditions of personhood. An atemporal, divine person can be a self-conscious, rational individual endowed with volition and engaged in relations with other like persons. But this leads on to a stronger conclusion. For surely these conditions are jointly sufficient for personhood. If any individual exemplifying these properties does not deserve to be called a person, then that word is simply not being used in its ordinary sense. But then the proposition

5. God is a self-conscious, rational being endowed with volition and engaged in inter-personal relations is compatible with

1. God is timeless,

as we have seen, and entails

2. God is personal,

so that the broadly logical compatibility of (1) with (2) has been demonstrated, thus fully vindicating the position of the defender of divine timelessness.

#### **Footnotes:**

[\[1\]](#)

*A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1983), s.v. "Time and Timelessness," by Grace Jantzen.

[\[2\]](#)

"The Tensed vs. Tenseless Theory of Time: a Watershed Issue for the Conception of Divine Eternity," in *Theories of Time and Tense*, ed. Robin LePoidevin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[\[3\]](#)

John Yates, *The Timelessness of God* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1990), pp. 169-171.

[4]

Daniel Dennett, "Conditions of Personhood," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 175-196. Dennett's criteria were first used in defense of divine timeless personhood by William E. Mann, "Simplicity and Immutability in God," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1983): 267-276.

[5]

J. R. Lucas, *The Future: An Essay on God, Temporality, and Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 213; cf. p. 212.

[6]

Ibid., p. 175. Nor does Lucas have anything more to add in his essay "The Temporality of God," in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature*, ed. Robert J. Russell, Nancey Murphy, and C. J. Isham (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1993), pp. 235-236. He argues that time can exist without change and that it is possible to have a subjective awareness of time's passage even if nothing is happening, so that even a changeless and solitary deity, if He is conscious, must be temporal. At best, Lucas only shows that a temporal consciousness must experience time's flow; he never shows that consciousness entails temporality, that there could not be an atemporal consciousness (whether in an atemporal world or in a temporal world) which fails to experience the passage of time.

[7]

Richard M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 52.

[8]

Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness*, Studies in Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 124; Mann, "Simplicity and Immutability," p. 270; Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 64-65; Yates, *Timelessness of God*, pp. 173-174; Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, Cornell Studies in Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 285-290

[9]

Gale, *Nature and Existence of God*, p. 52.

[10]

Mann, "Simplicity and Immutability," p. 270.

[\[11\]](#)

Gale, *Nature and Existence of God*, pp. 52-53.

[\[12\]](#)

Thomas Aquinas *Summa theologiae* 1a.10.5. Cf. Leftow's espousal of a modal conception of time (Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 236).

[\[13\]](#)

Mann takes (vi) to require only second-order beliefs about oneself *de re*, e.g., *A* believes that *A* knows that *p* (Mann, "Simplicity and Immutability," p. 270). But this is not a full-blooded interpretation of self-consciousness, which is normally understood to involve beliefs about oneself *de se*. Whether God's beliefs *de se* are to be accounted for in terms of private propositions (Richard Swinburne, "Tensed Facts," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27 [1990]: 127), or the mode of presentation of a proposition *de re* (Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* [New York: St. Martin's, 1986], pp. 66-70), or His self-ascription of properties (David Lewis, "Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*," *Philosophical Review* 88 [1979]: 513-543) is a fascinating question which need not occupy us at this juncture.

[\[14\]](#)

On such a characterization of rationality, see Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 29-34, 48-53.

[\[15\]](#)

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

[\[16\]](#)

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 269; cf. p. 201. Such a model serves to undercut McCann's argument that a temporal deity cannot be the Creator of time (Hugh J. McCann, "The God beyond Time," in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Louis Pojman [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993], p. 233). Senor has dubbed such a model "accidental temporalism" (Thomas D. Senor, "Divine Temporality and Creation *ex Nihilo*," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 [1993]: 88). The accidental temporalist agrees that God exists at all times, but denies that God's existence is always at a time ("always" understood to mean here "without



exception"). Senor, who acknowledges Leftow's influence, worries about the arbitrariness of maintaining that the act of creation temporalizes, but does not spatialize, God. But I have elsewhere criticized the claim that God's temporality entails His spatiality (William Lane Craig, "Divine Timelessness and Necessary Existence," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37 [1997]: 218-22); moreover, the reason that creation would not spatialize God, even if it temporalized Him, is that creating is not itself a spatial act, though it be, on tensed theories of time, a temporal act.

[\[17\]](#)

I add this qualifier because Molina conceived of God's decrees to be based on His deliberation over the content of His middle knowledge logically prior to His decision to create a world.

[\[18\]](#)

See the discussion in William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 19 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), pp. 222-225. Unless we are prepared to say that machines can have beliefs, omniscience actually seems to entail personhood.

[\[19\]](#)

Ralph C. S. Walker, *Kant, The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 34-41.

[\[20\]](#)

Ibid., p. 41.

[\[21\]](#)

John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1991).

[\[22\]](#)

Richard M. Gale, "Omniscience-Immutability Arguments," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986): 333; cf. William Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61 (1960-61): 99; Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum* (London: Duckworth, 1984), p. 257; cf. p. 7.

[\[23\]](#)

See also discussions by Walker, *Kant*, p. 40; Helm, *Eternal God*, pp. 61-63; Yates, *Timelessness of*

God, pp. 174-177; Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, pp. 295-297.

[\[24\]](#)

Pike, *God and Timelessness*, p. 128.

[\[25\]](#)

Walker, *Kant*, p. 41.

[\[26\]](#)

See St. John Damascene *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 2. 1 (*St. John of Damascus: Writings* [New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958], p. 204).