

Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity

William Lane Craig

SUMMARY

A difficulty for a view of divine eternity as timelessness is that if time is tensed, then God, in virtue of His omniscience, must know tensed facts. But tensed facts, such as It is now t, can only be known by a temporally located being.

Defenders of divine atemporality may attempt to escape the force of this argument by contending either that a timeless being can know tensed facts or else that ignorance of tensed facts is compatible with divine omniscience. Kvanvig, Wierenga, and Leftow adopt both of these strategies in their various defenses of divine timelessness. Their respective solutions are analyzed in detail and shown to be untenable.

Thus, if the theist holds to a tensed view of time, he should construe divine eternity in terms of omnitemporality.

OMNISCIENCE, TENSED FACTS, AND DIVINE ETERNITY

Many theists in the Western tradition have held that God is timeless, and recently this doctrine has enjoyed something of a resurgence. [1] The objective reality of tense remains, however, problematic for the doctrine of divine atemporality. For if an A-Theory of time (in McTaggart's terminology) is correct, there exist tensed facts, of which God, as an omniscient being, cannot be ignorant. But since tensed facts can only be known by a temporal being, God must therefore be temporal.

The objection, then, is that

1. God is timeless.

2. God is omniscient.

and

3. A temporal world exists.

are broadly logically inconsistent, as is evident from the necessary truth of

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

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

Since (2) is essential to theism and (3) is evidently true, (1) must be false.

The B-theorist escapes this argument by denying that there are any tensed facts, so that (4) is false. The B-theorist holds that God knows all the facts there are about the temporal world in knowing tenseless facts. Thus, if one embraces a tenseless theory of time, he eludes the objector's snare.

Most defenders of divine timelessness, however, are eager to free their doctrine from dependency on the B-theory. The question, then, is how one may affirm the reality of tensed facts and yet maintain either that God knows them or that His ignorance of them does not impugn His omniscience.

Timeless Knowledge of Tensed Facts

Some atemporalists have attempted to argue that God does know tensed facts, thus denying the truth of (5). For example, Jonathan Kvanvig holds both to the objective reality of tensed facts and to God's timeless knowledge of all facts, which together imply that God has timeless knowledge of tensed facts. Kvanvig's defense of this position relies upon his analysis of propositions expressed by sentences containing personal indexicals. [2] In lieu of positing privately accessible propositions, he analyzes belief in terms of a triadic relation between an intentional attitude, a proposition, and a particular manner of accessing, or grasping, the proposition. Personal indexicals express individual essences, which are part of the propositional content of the sentence containing such indexical words. But this propositional content is differently accessed by different persons. When Kvanvig says, "I'm Kvanvig," he expresses the same proposition as I do when I say to him, "You're Kvanvig," but this propositional content is *directly* grasped by Kvanvig and *indirectly* grasped by me. Kvanvig suggests that the proposition is grasped through the meanings of the sentences involved; since these are different, [3] the propositional content is differently accessed by Kvanvig and me. Thus, an omniscient God has the same knowledge of the facts as we do with respect to the propositions we express through sentences containing personal indexicals, but we directly access those propositions involving our respective individual essences, while God accesses this same propositional content indirectly.

Kvanvig proposes an analogous solution for dealing with tensed facts expressed by sentences like "It is now 1 June 1984." He asserts that the demonstrative "now" expresses the individual essence of the time to which it refers. He maintains that "temporal demonstratives are just particular ways of referring to the essences of moments." [4] Such an interpretation of temporal indexicals permits us to hold that God grasps the same propositional content that we do when we use sentences like "It is now 1 June 1984." On Kvanvig's view the same proposition is expressed by the sentence "Today is 1 June 1984" uttered on that date as is expressed by the sentence "Yesterday was 1 June 1984" uttered on June 2. The difference in behavior resulting from these two beliefs is due to the meanings of the sentences

through which the identical propositional content is accessed. A person grasps a proposition containing the essence of a time directly only if that person grasps the proposition at that time, which issues in a present-tense belief; otherwise the proposition is grasped indirectly, which in the case of temporal persons will yield beliefs involving other tenses. Hence, "one can affirm the doctrines of timelessness, immutability and omniscience by affirming that God indirectly grasps every temporal moment, and directly grasps none of them." [5]

At face value, Kvanvig's analysis would not seem to be a defense of God's timeless knowledge of tensed facts, but the claim that tense in some way derives from the manner of accessing propositional content, which itself is tenseless. For the essences of the times picked out by temporal indexicals do not include their tensed properties (for example, presentness), or it becomes inexplicable how indexical expressions like "today" and "yesterday" could refer to the same individual essence and how God could timelessly grasp propositional content involving such essences. But Kvanvig denies that there is any temporal element expressed by tensed sentences which is not part of their propositional content. Referring to what he calls the "proposition"

1. It is now 1 June 1984.

and

1A. The essence of the moment picked out by the use of the demonstrative 'now' in (1) is mutually exemplified with the property of being 1 June 1984.

Kvanvig asserts,

. . . the apparent infection of propositions such as (1) by temporality is eliminated by noting that (1A) lacks this temporality and further contains all the same temporal elements as (1). If (1A) is not identical to (1), it is not because of some temporal dimension; it must be for some other reason. [6]

It is odd that Kvanvig refers to his (1) as a proposition, for on his own view propositions lack indexicality. Rather (1) is a sentence, and the question is whether the proposition expressed by (1) is infected by temporality, that is to say, whether that proposition is such that it cannot be expressed "without implying temporal indexicals." [7] Kvanvig's claim is that the propositional content of (1) can be expressed by sentences not implying temporal indexicals. His reason for this claim is that (1A) is not so infected (either it expresses the same proposition as (1) without the use of temporal indexicals or else it represents the propositional content of (1) and can be expressed other than by (1) through a sentence not implying temporal indexicals) and, moreover, contains *all the same temporal elements as (1)*. But (1A) is true only if the "is" in (1A) is tenseless. Otherwise (1A) is false, having been true only on 1 June 1984. If (1A) is tensed, the time of its truth is just the same as that of (1). Thus Kvanvig errs when he

says that if (1A) is not identical to (1) it is not because of some temporal element—on the contrary, it is precisely because of the absence of tense from (1A) that it is not identical to (1). If *all* the temporal elements of (1) are contained in (1A) and God's knowledge is of propositions expressible by sentences like (1A), then God knows no tensed facts nor, indeed, is tense any objective temporal element at all, either of the propositional content of (1) or of the way of accessing that propositional content. Tense is merely a feature of language and nothing more. Kvanvig's analysis thus miscarries: it implies that the propositional content of tensed sentences is tenseless and that such sentences imply no temporal element not described by their propositional content, which in turn implies the non-objectivity of tense. [8]

A somewhat similar, but crucially adjusted, account of divine omniscience is offered by Edward Wierenga, who considers tense to belong to the propositional content expressed by tensed sentences, so that God must, in virtue of His omniscience, know tensed facts. [9] In order to explain why such knowledge does not involve God in temporality, Wierenga appeals, like Kvanvig, to the analogy of propositions expressed by sentences containing first-person pronouns. [10] Adopting Plantinga's notion of an individual essence—a property which something can possess essentially and no other thing can possess at all—, Wierenga asserts that we should hold one of a person's essences to be special, namely, the one expressed by that person's use of the word "I." In my case this essence is the property of *being me*. Wierenga calls this special essence one's haecceity, and he claims that propositions expressed by sentences involving the first person pronoun entail the haecceity of the person using such expressions; such propositions he calls "first person propositions." Now Wierenga does not think that I am the only person who can grasp a proposition entailing my haecceity. Rather what is crucial is that I cannot believe such a proposition without having a *de se* belief, that is, a belief about me myself. A person *S* believes *de se* that he himself is *F* just in case there is a haecceity *E* such that *S* has *E* and *S* believes a proposition having *E* as a constituent and which attributes *being F* to whomever has *E*. Being omniscient, God also believes those propositions which have my haecceity as a constituent, but since the haecceity is mine, not God's, His believing them does not issue in *de se* beliefs for Him, as my believing them does for me.

On the analogy of personal haecceities, Wierenga asserts that moments of time also have special essences or haecceities. A proposition containing the haecceity of a time he calls a "present-time proposition." We temporal beings can only grasp present-time propositions at the time whose haecceity is contained in the proposition, not before or after. When a person believes a present-time proposition at its time, that person has a *de praesenti* belief. A person *S* believes *de praesenti* at a time *t* that it is then the case that *p* just in case there is a haecceity *T* such that *t* has *T* and at *t* *S* believes a proposition having *T* as a constituent and which attributes being such that *p* to whatever time has *T*. Wierenga analyzes the proposition expressed by A. N. Prior's "The 1960 exams are over" as a

proposition entailing the conjunction of the haecceity of the time of Prior's belief and the property of *being such that the 1960 exams have finished before then*.

Now Wierenga contends that there is no reason why God cannot believe all true present–time propositions, just as He believes all true first–person propositions. Just as His belief in a first–person proposition does not give Him a belief *de se* unless it is a belief in His own first–person proposition, so a belief in a present–time proposition does not give Him belief *de praesenti* unless He believes that proposition at its time. Being timeless, God did not have to wait, as did Prior, until August 29, 1960, in order to grasp the proposition Prior expressed by saying, "The 1960 exams are over." He grasps and believes the relevant proposition timelessly and so forms no *de praesenti* belief in so doing. Thus, a timeless God knows all present–time propositions, and so there are no tensed facts unknown to Him.

It seems to me that Wierenga's account of God's knowledge of propositions expressed by tensed discourse is multiply defective. To begin with, his account of what it is to have a *de praesenti* belief is implausible. Suppose I glance out the window and form the judgment, "It's raining." On Wierenga's account, what I actually believe is a proposition about a certain time which attributes to that time a peculiar property, *being such that it is raining then*. But surely I do not believe anything of the sort. [11] I may be utterly unconscious of the present time and certainly am not forming beliefs about its properties or its haecceity. Whatever plausibility attends Wierenga's analysis of *de se* beliefs derives from the fact that expression of such beliefs in English involves the use of first–person indexicals, so that *S* can be conceived to believe a proposition involving *S*'s haecceity and a property *F*. But the temporal analogue to such beliefs *de se* are beliefs involving present–tense indexicals like "now." When we have beliefs about what is going on now, then we do plausibly form a belief involving in some way the relevant time. Wierenga's analysis would most plausibly account for beliefs having similar form to a belief like "Now is when the meeting starts." In such a case we do seem to be ascribing a property to a tensed time. But not all beliefs *de praesenti* involve temporal indexicals, and the range of those doing so which also ascribe properties to the present is narrow, indeed. Wierenga might attempt to adjust his analysis, such that in having a belief *de praesenti* I grasp (even if I do not believe) a proposition such as he describes. [12] But if through my tensed beliefs I grasp information which essentially involves a certain time and its properties, why is there no necessary reference to that time in my conscious belief in the form of temporal indexicals like "now"? Just as first–person propositions must be expressed in English via first–person indexicals, so present–time propositions, as Wierenga conceives them, must seemingly be expressed via present–tense indexicals. The absence of temporal indexicals from most of our tensed beliefs renders implausible the idea that by means of them we grasp propositions which involve essentially the ascription of properties to a time.

Moreover, Wierenga's analysis of tensed beliefs is drastically incomplete, since it overlooks all but present–tense beliefs. How are beliefs like "John left at 8:00" or "John will come home at 3:00" to be

analyzed? It seems that Wierenga's analysis would require him to say that such beliefs express a proposition involving the haecceity of the time at which the belief is held and which attributes to that time properties specifying certain B–relations to events, for example, the time in question is such that John's leaving at 8:00 is earlier than then and his coming home at 3:00 is later than them. This analysis serves to bring out that the property attributed to the time must be tenseless, not only in past– and future–tense beliefs, but also in beliefs *de praesenti*, lest the propositional content of God's beliefs be constitutive of a past, present, and future for God. If God is to know tensed facts, then, such knowledge comes, not through the property *being such that p* which is attributed to the time, but through the haecceity which the relevant time has.

Does the haecceity of any time *t*, then, include its tense? If not, then the propositional content of God's beliefs is wholly tenseless, and all He grasps are the tenseless B–relations between times and events. Indeed, it might be argued that a time's haecceity *cannot* include its tense, since specific tense determinations are accidental to times. A haecceity is an individual essence; but since times are not essentially present, but acquire and lose presentness, their particular tense determinations cannot be part of their respective haecceities. Thus, the haecceity of a time must be a wholly tenseless property. Since the attribution to a tenseless time of a property involving tenseless B–relations of *earlier than*, *simultaneous with*, or *later than* does not serve to introduce tense, it turns out that what God knows are wholly tenseless propositions, not present–time propositions.

Wierenga could escape this conclusion by advocating an ontology of presentism, according to which past and future times do not exist. Since the only time that exists is the present time, presentness could be conceived to be essential to any time. Just as existence is essential to any thing, since a thing has existence in every possible world in which it exists, [13] so presentness is essential to any time, since a time has presentness at every time at which it exists. Since a time cannot exist without being present, presentness therefore belongs to its haecceity.

The analogy with first–person propositions clearly suggests that for Wierenga a time's haecceity involves its tense, indeed, its presentness. Just as first–person propositions are exactly those which entail one's haecceity, so present–time propositions are just those containing a time's haecceity. But then it becomes extraordinarily difficult to understand how God can grasp the haecceity of a time without that time's being present for Him, which entails God's temporality. Consider the analogy of first–person indexicals. If the individual essence which is my haecceity is not the property of *being William Craig*, but, as Wierenga maintains, the special property of *being me*, then how can God possibly grasp a proposition which includes this haecceity? [14] Such a proposition is a private proposition which God cannot grasp because He is not I. If He can grasp such a proposition, then I fail to see why someone who addresses me as "you" does not also grasp such a proposition—in which case we are not talking about first–person propositions at all. Analogously, if a haecceity involves more than a tenseless B–

determination, if it involves *being present*, then a timeless God cannot grasp a proposition containing such a haecceity. To grasp a proposition attributing a B–relation to some time which is objectively present entails one's being present. For example, in order to know the tensed fact expressed by Prior's utterance, "The 1960 exams are over," God must know more than the tenseless fact that the close of the exams is earlier than August 29, 1960; he must know of August 29, 1960 that it is present, or past in relation to the present. God's having such knowledge entails His temporality.

Wierenga's analysis fails to explain how God can grasp propositions involving haecceities which include the property of presentness without His being temporal. It therefore also fails as a defense of a timeless God's knowledge of tensed facts.

Finally, consider Brian Leftow's defense of God's timeless knowledge of tensed facts. The key to Leftow's solution is his distinction, inspired by the Special Theory of Relativity, between events' occurrence relative to various temporal reference frames and their occurrence relative to God's "reference frame" of eternity. Relative to eternity, all events are eternally present, even though relative to various temporal reference frames they may be past, present, or future respectively. Thus, relative to eternity there simply are no temporally tensed facts to be known. Leftow explains,

. . . all events are actual at once, *in eternity*. But it does not follow that time is not tensed. Events also occur in temporal reference frames, and the time of these reference frames may be tensed The reason a timeless God does not know the essentially tensed fact that (T) is that in His framework of reference, eternity, *this is not a fact at all*. (T), again, is the claim that a proper subset S of the set of temporal events, consisting of a, b, c, etc., now has present–actuality. In eternity this claim is false. In eternity *all* temporal events . . . have present–actuality at once. [15]

By (T) Leftow apparently means that the *members* of S, rather than S itself, now have present–actuality. But how is this claim false in eternity? Since *all* events have present–actuality in eternity, would not also the members of S? Perhaps the problem is that all events have present–actuality *at once* in eternity, whereas (T) states that the members of S have present–actuality *now*. But in eternity, the indexical "now" in (T) refers either to the eternal present or to the time of a, b, c. If it refers to the eternal present, then the members of S do have present–actuality along with all other events. If it refers to the time of a, b, c, then it remains in Leftow's view a fact in eternity that a, b, c have present–actuality then. So the problem does not reside in the contrast between now/at once. Perhaps the problem is that the present–actuality which a, b, c now have is temporal present–actuality, whereas in eternity they have eternal present–actuality. While this might seem to make sense, it sits ill with Leftow's insistence that

The same events that A–occur in our temporal present A–occur in God's eternal present. They are there 'in their presentness': the very A–occurrence that is B–simultaneous with certain events within

temporal reference frames is A-simultaneous with a timeless being's existence and with all temporal events within an eternal reference frame. Thus God can timelessly perceive, all at once, the very A-occurring that we perceive sequentially, under the form of change. [16]

Since, on Leftow's definitions, to A-occur is to occur now, [17] we face the same indexical difficulty as above. If an event A-occurs in eternity, the "now" refers either to the eternal present or to the temporal present. If it refers to the eternal present, then it is not "the very A-occurring that we perceive," since that occurring refers to the temporal now. But if we say that it refers to the temporal present, then since the very same A-occurring takes place in time and eternity, (T) is a fact in eternity after all. In order to bring consistency into his account, it seems to me that Leftow ought to say that for an event to A-occur is for that event to be present and that while the same events exist in time and eternity, they are not present in the same way with respect to these two "frames": events are temporally present only in time and eternally present only in eternity. Therefore, in eternity there are no temporally tensed facts; there are only eternally tensed facts, and these are all in the eternal present-tense. Accordingly, (T), referring as it does to the temporal present, is false in eternity, but it is also false that the very same A-occurring that transpires in time takes place in eternity.

It might be thought that by (T) Leftow actually means

T'. Only the members of a proper subset S of all temporal events have present actuality,

a claim which is true in time, but false in eternity, since in eternity all events have present actuality. But if by "present actuality" we mean, not merely tenseless metaphysical presence (which affords no knowledge of tensed facts), but present-tense actuality, then it is clear that in atemporal eternity events are not actual in that mode, for then eternity would be temporal. [18] Such an interpretation would also be inconsistent with Leftow's claim that in eternity God is presented with B-series of events relative to inertial frames. [19] In any case, such present-tense actuality would leave God completely in the dark as to past- and future-tensed facts; indeed, in having all events present to Him, God would either mistakenly believe that all events are present or else be ignorant of which subclass of events really is present and so have no knowledge of tensed facts.

Leftow's account thus seems to deny, not grant, God knowledge of (temporally) tensed facts. All He knows are the eternal present-tense facts. But Leftow maintains that God also knows the essentially tensed facts relative to temporal frames of reference. He writes,

A factually omniscient being can only be required to grasp directly such facts as are genuinely facts within that being's framework of reference. Thus the fact that a timeless being grasps directly only the essentially tensed facts of eternity does not count against His strict factual omniscience, provided that He has some other access to the essentially tensed facts of other reference frames. But . . . a timeless

God can know all the facts of simultaneity that obtain in other reference frames. Thus He can know what the essentially tensed facts of these other frames *are*, though He cannot be directly presented with these facts: it is just not true that the only way God can know facts is by some sort of direct presentation. [20]

Leftow's appeal to the distinction between direct and indirect grasping will not serve to provide God with a knowledge of tensed facts, however. At best God can know what are the simultaneity classes of events relative to any arbitrarily specified reference frame or hypothetical observer, but He cannot know what point on the world line of that observer or which simultaneity class of events is present in that frame. [21] When we realize that the "eternal present" is just a metaphorical description of a tenseless state of existence, then it is evident that on Leftow's account God knows no tensed facts. At the very least He knows no temporally tensed facts, which is what was to be proved.

Indeed, Leftow's account of what he calls "factual omniscience" implies that there really are no tensed facts. [22] According to Leftow a fact is either the existing of a subject or a subject's exemplifying of an attribute. The same fact can render a number of distinct propositions true. In Leftow's view the same fact that renders *It is then (i.e., at 3 P.M.) 3 P.M.* true also renders true what is expressed by the sentence token "It is now 3 P.M." These are distinct truths, different propositions, rendered true by the same fact. That fact is accessible at all times in varying ways and the various modes of access one can have to this fact generate distinctive truths that can only be known at various times. So even if God cannot be propositionally omniscient concerning events in time, He can still be factually omniscient in regard to them.

The above account makes it evident that Leftow is really a B-theorist in spite of himself, holding that there are no tensed facts. On his account a tensed fact would be a subject's exemplifying a tensed property like presentness or the subject's presently existing. But such a fact is not accessible at all times, but only at the time it obtains or exists. The proposition that *It is then 3 P.M.* does not serve to access such a present-tensed fact, for we do not know by it whether 3 P.M. is past, present, or future. The fact that renders such a proposition true must therefore be tenseless, even if that tenseless fact generates a tensed proposition at 3 P.M. Since there are no facts that escape God's omniscience and the only temporal facts God knows are tenseless facts, it follows that tensed facts do not exist.

Moreover, Leftow's account of God's factual omniscience seems untenable. For Leftow does not think that the propositional context expressed by tensed sentences is tenseless and that tense results from the mode of presentation to or access by language users. Rather he holds that there are tensed propositions which can be known only at certain times. But unless Leftow is prepared to reject a view of truth as correspondence, there must be facts corresponding to true tensed propositions, for example, that *3 P.M. is present*. If this proposition is true, then it states a fact about the world. Even if we agree

with Leftow that there are facts which are stated by no proposition, he has not given us any reason to doubt that every true proposition states a fact. Indeed, a view of truth as correspondence seems to require it. It follows, therefore, that a timeless God is not only not propositionally omniscient, but not even factually omniscient.

Omniscience Despite Ignorance of Tensed Facts

It seems evident, then, that if God knows tensed facts, He is temporal, so that a denial of (5) is untenable. What prospect is there then for escaping the present objection by a denial of (4)? Here it is not enough simply to assert that a timelessly existing being cannot be expected to know tensed facts, on the basis that this is to demand the logically impossible. [23] Of course, such a feat is logically impossible; that is the point of the necessary truth of (5). But so long as we retain the customary definition of omniscience

O: S is omniscient = *df.* For all p , if p , then S knows that p and does not believe that $\sim p$

and agree that tense is part of the propositional content expressed by tensed sentences, then it follows that God, in order to be omniscient, must know tensed facts. If such knowledge is precluded by His timelessness, then He is not omniscient.

The above suggests that the most promising strategy for the atemporalist will be either to revise the traditional definition of omniscience or to deny that tense, though objective, belongs to the propositional content of tensed sentences.

Generally speaking, the difficulty encountered in the first approach is that any adequate definition must be in accord with our intuitive understanding of the *definiendum*, so that we are not at liberty to "cook" the definition of omniscience in order to resolve the difficulty without the definition's becoming unacceptably *ad hoc*. [24] So what plausible alternative to O does the atemporalist suggest?

Wierenga, in a sort of second line of defense, is prepared to accept that some propositions are "perspectival," true at some perspectives and false at others. With respect to tense what this amounts to is the admission that propositions have their truth values relative to times and thus sometimes change their truth values. O would require God to know all such true propositions and, hence, to be temporal and changing. But Wierenga, observing that believing that a proposition is true at a perspective is different from believing at a perspective that a proposition is true, proposes the following re-definition of omniscience: [25]

O': X is omniscient = *df.* For any proposition p and perspective $\langle s, t \rangle$,

(i) if p is true at $\langle s, t \rangle$, then X knows that p is true at $\langle s, t \rangle$, and

(ii) if X is at $\langle s, t \rangle$ and p is true at $\langle s, t \rangle$, then at $\langle s, t \rangle$, X knows p .

According to O' God must know which tensed propositions are true at which times, but He need not know the tensed propositions themselves. Wierenga concludes, "if some propositions really do change their truth value over time, if propositions are thus 'perspectival,' then . . . an omniscient being is required to know a perspectival proposition only if the being is at a perspective at which the proposition is true"; thus, "it follows from the claim that God is omniscient that he is not eternal only on the assumption that he is at some temporal perspective" [26]

Wierenga's definition O' is, however, unacceptably contrived. For the ostensibly perspectival nature of truth is not a sufficient condition for exempting knowledge of a certain class of propositions from the concept of omniscience. In Wierenga's view, God has knowledge of propositions stating exclusively tenseless B-facts, such as that p is true at t , whereas temporal persons know a multitude of objectively true propositions which remain unknown to God. Persons located at t know not merely that p is true at t ; they know p *simpliciter*, an objectively true proposition of which God is ignorant. Wierenga re-defines omniscience in such a way that a being which does not know tensed propositions can nonetheless be declared to be omniscient. But in the absence of independent grounds for accepting O', such a procedure is unacceptably *ad hoc*. If we wish to include temporal perspectives in our definition of omniscience, then why not adopt Davis's following definition? [27]

O'': S is omniscient = *df.* For all p , if p at t , then it is true at t that S knows that p and does not believe $\sim p$.

On O'', unlike O', God would know *every* true proposition instead of just some; this intuitively commends O' as a more adequate definition of omniscience. [28] But O'' would require that God know tensed propositions, as (4) states.

Leftow also entertains the idea that omniscience be re-defined in such a way that God not be required to know all truths, including tensed truths. [29] He argues, in effect, that there are plausibly many sorts of truths that God cannot know, so what harm is there in admitting one more class of truths of which God is ignorant? But Leftow's strategy is misconceived. This reasoning does not constitute grounds for revising the concept of omniscience as such (which does not even involve reference to God), but rather for denying that God need be omniscient. That is a moot question to which we shall return.

A more plausible and independently motivated re-definition of omniscience would be to deny that God's knowledge is propositional in nature and therefore not adequately described by O, which gives a propositional account of omniscience. [30] God's knowledge may be construed as a simple intuition of reality which we finite knowers represent to ourselves in terms of discrete propositions. If facts are propositional in nature (a fact being a true proposition, [31] for example), then God could be said not to know facts as such, tensed or otherwise, though He is omniscient.

But I think that such a re-construal, while plausible and attractive, does not serve to avert the force of the present objection. The critic of divine timelessness will simply re-formulate (4) in such a way that the problem re-appears, for example:

4'. If a temporal world exists, then if God is omniscient, God knows what we cognize as tensed facts.

If God were ignorant of what we represent to ourselves propositionally as tensed facts, He would not deserve to be called omniscient.

No good reason has been given, then, for revising the definition of omniscience in such a way that omniscience does not encompass knowledge of (what we cognize as) tensed propositions.

Suppose, then, that the atemporalist tries the other route to a denial of (4), maintaining that tense does not belong to the propositional content expressed by tensed sentences. Like personal and spatial indexicals, temporal indexicals and tensed expressions could reflect features of the mode of presentation or the context of believing or the way of grasping the propositional content expressed by sentences containing such locutions. Or they could be analyzed in terms of our self-ascription of properties rather than, or in addition to, our believing propositions. Such analyses need not deny the objective reality of tense, but could simply exclude tense from the propositional content of tensed expressions, having it lodge somewhere else. Given the customary definition O, a timeless God would count as omniscient, even given the necessary truth of (5), because there are no tensed facts, where facts and true propositions are extensionally equivalent.

Again, it seems to me that such analyses are both attractive and plausible, but I doubt that they ultimately serve to avert the problem raised by the present objection. If tense is an objective feature of reality, then one might plausibly contend that there are non-propositional facts (for example, first-person facts) and that tensed facts are also among these. Since, according to Christian theism, God is not merely propositionally omniscient, but maximally excellent cognitively, He must know such tensed facts, just as He must possess non-propositional knowledge *de se*. His cognitive excellence would not require Him to possess everyone's knowledge *de se*, since it would be a cognitive defect for God to believe that He is Napoleon (not to mention His believing Himself also to be Washington and Reagan and . . .). Similarly, it would be a cognitive defect for God to believe that it is now 44 B.C. (not to mention His believing it also to be 1895 and 2020 and . . .). But it is a cognitive perfection to have a knowledge of what time it really is, of what episode in the history of the actual world is present. A being who is ignorant of all tensed facts is less excellent cognitively than one who knows all such facts. [32] The latter being knows infinitely more than the former and suffers no cognitive defect in so doing. On the contrary, it is only by the grace of such knowledge that God can act providentially in the temporal world at all. [33] Hence, (4) can be reformulated as

4*. If a temporal world exists, then if God is maximally excellent cognitively, God knows tensed facts.

With a similarly recast (2) the argument goes through as before. In case one still sticks at non-propositional facts, one may substitute in (4*) for "tensed facts" an expression like "what time it is" and revise (5) accordingly.

In short, the prospects for turning back the force of (4) seem no better than those for denying (5). Given the existence of the temporal world, an omniscient or cognitively perfect being must know tensed facts. Since omniscience is essential to theism and such knowledge is incompatible with divine timelessness, God must not be timeless.

Must God Be Omniscient?

Our discussion has assumed the truth of

2. God is omniscient,

but some defenders of divine timelessness, determined to preserve God's atemporality, are prepared to deny (2). Kvanvig, in response to the objection that "Just as we cannot hold the view that God is never intimately enough acquainted with himself to know himself as himself, so it would be a mark of imperfection were God never to be intimately acquainted with any temporal . . . location," observes that there are two options open. [34] First, one could reject divine timelessness. In order to exhibit maximal perfection, God must directly grasp whatever moment is present and so be constantly changing. According to Kvanvig, the traditional motivations for the doctrine of timelessness are not compelling, so that it can be sacrificed if found incompatible with omniscience or cognitive perfection. [35]

Such a verdict goes down hard with Leftow, who advocates rejecting (2) rather than (1) if these are incompatible. [36] He argues that God is ignorant of several classes of truth and that it is not a serious attenuation of divine omniscience to hold that He is also ignorant of tensed truths. It might be thought that we should construe God's knowledge as robustly as possible, so that even if there turn out to be some truths He cannot know, so that He is not omniscient, nevertheless that constitutes no justification for further eroding the extent of His knowledge by holding Him to be ignorant of tensed truths. But Leftow is so deeply committed to the doctrine of divine timelessness that he is prepared to jettison God's omniscience in order to preserve His timelessness. But does Leftow succeed in showing that God cannot know all true propositions? His example of something God cannot know is how it feels to be, oneself, a walker, a breather, or a sinner. [37] But such knowledge is not propositional knowledge at all and so fails to furnish examples of *truths* which God does not know; hence, on O God is omniscient even though He does not know how it feels to be oneself a sinner. Leftow recognizes the non-propositional character of such knowledge, but insists that God's lacking such knowledge entails His

ignorance of certain truths as well. If I arrange for a person to fail a test, I can say to him afterwards, "Being a failure oneself feels like *this*." According to Leftow,

This is a proposition we both grasp You and I can know that being a failure oneself feels like *this*, but if God cannot fail, God cannot (though He can know how failure feels *to you*). For if God cannot fail, God cannot have the kind of experience "*this*" picks out and so in a sense cannot even understand the proposition that 'being a failure oneself feels like *this*.' [38]

It seems to me that the defender of God's omniscience will very plausibly reply that "Being a failure oneself feels like *this*" is a sentence, not a proposition, as is evident from the presence of the demonstrative "*this*" (the italicizing of which does nothing to change its semantic content). Demonstratives serve to focus the hearer's attention on the referent and, like indexicals, are typically not construed to be part of the propositional content of the utterance involving them. The propositional content expressed by "*this*" in the example will be the feelings of humiliation, depression, and so forth that attend being oneself a failure. Leftow seems to think that because God cannot have such feelings, He cannot know the propositional content expressed by the utterance. But this is to confuse God's ability to have the non-propositional knowledge of *how* it feels to be a failure oneself with His ability to know *that* being a failure oneself feels like being humiliated, and so forth. Even in Leftow's own example, the referent of "*this*" is not the speaker's own feelings, since he did not fail, but rather the other person's feelings who did fail. Yet Leftow asserts that they both know the same proposition. Similarly God can know the same propositional content that we do when we make such utterances, even though He does not share our experiences and so does not know how it feels to be oneself a failure.

It might well be questioned whether preserving God's atemporality is worth the price of rendering Him ignorant of what state of the universe presently exists, as well as of all other tensed truths. But Leftow surmises that a God who is timeless but not omniscient with respect to tensed truths would be more perfect over all than a God who is temporal and possesses such knowledge. Leftow's many arguments for divine timelessness aim to extol the perfection accruing to God due to this attribute. Unfortunately, a discussion of these arguments takes us beyond the bounds of this paper. But I believe that all but one of his arguments can be shown to be unsound or inconclusive, as I have elsewhere tried to show. [39] The greatness of divine temporality, on the other hand, can be seen in the fact that, if time is tensed, God could not be creatively active in the world were He timeless. [40]

Leftow also attempts to cheapen the value of omniscience, arguing that it is not a necessary property of a perfect knower. He rightly points out that cognitive perfection involves many other qualities than the range of one's knowledge. But that does nothing to show that cognitive perfection should not also encompass knowledge of tensed facts. Leftow proceeds to attack the possibility of propositional

omniscience, appealing to private propositions expressed by sentences containing first-person indexicals. But we have already seen how such knowledge *de se* can be handled non-propositionally, not to mention the objections to private propositions. [41] In any case, positing one restriction on the range of God's knowledge hardly makes it a matter of indifference whether further restrictions are proposed. The fact that propositional omniscience and maximal cognitive excellence have not been shown to be impossible undercuts Leftow's response to what he calls the semantic argument against divine timelessness.

But what about Kvanvig's other alternative? He proposes that God be conceived to grasp *all* temporal moments directly. [42] Such an understanding, he claims, would be analogous to a plausible construal of omnipresence as the direct grasping of the essence of every spatial location. What this analogy would imply, however, is that all times are literally present for God, not in the metaphorical sense of the eternal present, but in the literal temporal sense of the term. That is simply incompatible with there being a temporal series of events ordered by relations of *earlier than/later than*. In order to rebut this objection, Kvanvig is forced to resort either to the device of ET-simultaneity of Stump and Kretzmann—which is explanatorily vacuous [43]—or to the suggestion that omniscient beings can grasp essences of moments directly without being in time—which is both *ad hoc* and self-contradictory. [44]

In conclusion, therefore, I think that we have good reason to believe that if a temporal world exists and an A-theory of time is correct, then divine timelessness is incompatible with divine omniscience and, moreover, that if, as I claim, the arguments for God's atemporality are at best inconclusive, it is divine timelessness which ought to yield pride of place to divine omniscience.

Footnotes

[1]

The revival of interest can be traced to the seminal article by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429–458; see also recent defenses by Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford Clarendon, 1988); John Yates, *The Timelessness of God* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1990); Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Hugh J. McCann, "The God beyond Time," in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Louis Pojman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).

[2]

Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), pp. 66–70.

[3]

The advance of the New Theory of Reference over Frege's view is its distinguishing linguistic meaning from propositional content. "I'm Kvanvig" and "You're Kvanvig" have different linguistic meanings due to the different personal indexicals employed, but in the appropriate context they express the same proposition. See John Perry, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical," *Noûs* 13 (1979): 3–21. The shortcoming of the New Theory of Reference, however, lies in its failure to further distinguish between linguistic meaning and cognitive significance, a defect whose importance for omniscience shall emerge in the sequel. On this shortcoming see Howard Wettstein, "Has Semantics Rested on a Mistake?" *Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1986): 195.

[4]

Kvanvig, *All-Knowing God*, p. 155.

[5]

Ibid., p. 159.

[6]

Ibid., p. 156.

[7]

Ibid., p. 154. Kvanvig erroneously assimilates all tensed expressions to temporal indexical expressions. A proposition which can be expressed without employing temporal indexicals but not without employing tensed verbs should still count as an essentially temporal proposition. It is also not clear what Kvanvig intends by "implying." Verbally tensed expressions need not imply temporal indexical expressions; e.g., the proposition that *No sentient creatures exist* can be expressed by the relevant present-tense sentence without implying the sentence "No sentient creatures now exist." Kvanvig should substitute "employing" for "implying" and "tensed expressions" for "temporal indexicals."

[8]

Kvanvig also erred (as he now acknowledges) in claiming that the linguistic meaning of indexical expressions serves to distinguish direct from indirect grasping of the propositional content. A similar weakness attended the Perry–Kaplan analysis of indexicals and demonstratives.

[9]

Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 179–185.

[\[10\]](#)

Ibid., pp. 47–54.

[\[11\]](#)

That is to say that Wierenga's analysis does not provide a plausible account of the cognitive significance of one's beliefs. I take it as obvious that when I judge "It's raining," I have no beliefs concerning a certain time and the ascription of a peculiar property to that time, even if the propositional content expressed by a statement of my belief does include such a time and property. Recall that Wierenga is offering an account of *de praesenti* belief, not the propositional content of belief.

[\[12\]](#)

Wierenga's notion of grasping a proposition is very obscure, but space but does not permit me to comment here.

[\[13\]](#)

See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 61.

[\[14\]](#)

Plantinga, who holds that one can grasp the individual essence or haecceity of another person, does not take a haecceity to be or include the property of *being me*, but takes it to be just an individual essence (Alvin Plantinga, "De Essentia," in *Essays on the Philosophy of Roderick M. Chisholm*, ed. Ernest Sosa, Grazer philosophische Studien 7/8 [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1979], pp. 101–106). By siding with Chisholm (Roderick M. Chisholm, "Objects and Persons: Revision and Replies," in *Philosophy of Chisholm*, p. 320) in taking a haecceity to be a special individual essence which involves the property of *being me*, Wierenga has forfeited the right to public graspability of a haecceity.

[\[15\]](#)

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 333.

[\[16\]](#)

Ibid.

[\[17\]](#)

Ibid., p. 239.

[\[18\]](#)

If all events have present-tense actuality in eternity, all the customary problems re-surface, e.g., why are not all events then simultaneous in eternity? How can God know which simultaneity class of events really is present? How can He know which events are earlier/later than other events? Why is eternity not fleeting in its existence?

[\[19\]](#)

Brian Leftow, "Eternity and Simultaneity," *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991): 170, 179.

[\[20\]](#)

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 334.

[\[21\]](#)

Cf. Leftow's explanation: "From any reference frame, one can extrapolate what judgments of simultaneity would be correct in other reference frames So . . . for every temporal now, God knows what is happening now (i.e., simultaneous with that now) . . ." (Ibid., p. 235).

[\[22\]](#)

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, pp. 335–336.

[\[23\]](#)

As asserted by Herbert J. Nelson, "Time(s), Eternity, and Duration," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 22 (1987): 18); cf. William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 159. Some of *Faith and Philosophy's* referees for this paper make the same mistake. They claim that in eternity there are no tensed facts, so that God cannot be expected to know them. But while it is true that it is impossible for a timeless God to know tensed facts, that does not imply that such a God still warrants being called omniscient. For if the propositional content expressed by tensed sentences is tensed, a timeless God *by definition* is not omniscient because He does not know all true propositions.

[24]

Some of the referees for this paper do not appreciate this point. They argue that given the assumption that God is timeless, it is natural to revise the definition of omniscience so as not to require God to know tensed propositions. But a definition of omniscience *per se* involves no reference to God or to timelessness, so that to revise the definition of omniscience on the grounds of God's timelessness is *ad hoc*. If we have good reasons for thinking that God is timeless, those constitute reasons for thinking that God is not omniscient, not for revising the definition of omniscience as such. The question will then become whether a perfect being must be omniscient, a question which we shall address in due course.

[25]

Wierenga, *Nature of God*, p. 189.

[26]

Ibid., pp. 198, 189.

[27]

Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 37.

[28]

assuming that there are no timelessly true propositions. If there are, then codicils have to be added to O' and O" alike to ensure that God knows these, too.

[29]

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, pp. 321–323.

[30]

See William Alston, "Does God Have Beliefs?" *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 287–306.

[31]

This would be a controversial assumption, as Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 318, notes, since there seem to be facts which are non-propositional in nature, e.g., that I am William Craig. If tensed facts are non-propositional in nature, then God's knowledge's being non-propositional does not undercut the necessary truth of (4). For an omniscient, non-propositional knower must know tensed facts.

[\[32\]](#)

So also the judgement of Richard M. Gale, "Omniscience–Immutability Arguments," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986): 332; cf. idem, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 90–91.

[\[33\]](#)

See my "The Tensed vs. Tenseless Theory of Time: A Watershed for the Conception of Divine Eternity," in *Questions of Time and Tense*, ed. Robin LePoidevin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 221–50.

[\[34\]](#)

Kvanvig, *Possibility of an All-Knowing God*, p. 159.

[\[35\]](#)

Ibid., p. 151.

[\[36\]](#)

Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, pp. 323–326.

[\[37\]](#)

Ibid., p. 322.

[\[38\]](#)

Ibid., p. 323.

[\[39\]](#)

See my "Timelessness and Creation," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996): 646–656; "Divine Timelessness and Necessary Existence," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1997): 217–224; "On the Argument for Divine Timelessness from the Incompleteness of Temporal Life," *Heythrop Journal* 38 (1997): 165–171; "On the Alleged Metaphysical Superiority of Timelessness," *Sophia* 37 (1998): 1–9.

[\[40\]](#)

See note 33.

[\[41\]](#)

On those objections see Kvanvig, *Possibility of an All-Knowing God*, pp. 48–56.

[\[42\]](#)

Ibid., p. 160.

[\[43\]](#)

For critiques, see Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God*, p. 20; Delmas Lewis, "Eternity Again: a Reply to Stump and Kretzmann," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984): 74–76; Helm, *Eternal God*, pp. 32–33; Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, pp. 164–166; Yates, *Timelessness of God*, pp. 128–130; Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, pp. 170–172.

[\[44\]](#)

Kvanvig more or less admits that this solution is *ad hoc*, making a bland appeal to divine omnipotence as its rationale. Ultimately, however, the solution is incoherent, since on his view tense arises precisely from direct grasping, tense not being part of a time's essence. If God directly grasps events as present and yet they are not really present, He does not in fact directly grasp them.